

# MAKING SENSE: Painting Today

Rochelle Feinstein, Deborah Grant, Iva Gueorguieva, Dona Nelson

Maggie Nelson

What unites the work of these four artists? First off, they're geniuses, straight up. Geniuses who work really, really hard—a dogged, implacable, investigative type of labor, which stands utterly unopposed to joy, or to the kind of wreckage such work by legend leaves in its wake. They're also whipsmart, acerbic, surprising, profoundly impatient with cliché or stasis. I'd say insouciant, too, if the word conveyed ferocity rather than nonchalance. They're strong, both mentally and physically (Gueorguieva's osteopath calls her "the David Beckham of painting;" just look at the size, kinetics, and canny installations of Nelson's work, or at the intricate density of Grant's, or the intense layering of "text chatter and painterly noise" in Feinstein's). They peruse past and present. take what they want, churn it up, make it theirs. As Feinstein says, with a disobedient. take-no-prisoners attitude shared, albeit distinctly, by all four artists: "I may appear permissive and respectful at first, but I'm often puzzled, grabby, and mean-spirited in stealing subjects and materials." They're out to make great, probing art, not to please. "Is the artist taking charge of their position or are they getting in line to get paid?," Grant asks. "I always thought being an artist was about questioning the world." And question they do—with irreverence, tenacity, and a certain fearlessness that one rarely finds clustered in a single group show (not to mention outside the museum walls). They're experts at following their interests, their intuition, their eccentricities, to the very end of the line, with a confidence that alchemizes their idiosyncrasies into art that feels inevitable — imperative, even. When one of them (Nelson) insists, "I just want to wander around in my garden," I'm not fooled. These artists know how to blow shit up (figuratively speaking, of course).

To wander in these gardens is to tour an electric, dense, blissfully chaotic universe of references, inspirations, materials, methodologies, and provocations. Jean Michel Basquiat. Lucio Fontana, Pablo Picasso, Francis Bacon, Bill Traylor, Debbie Kravitz, William H. Johnson, Jacob Lawrence, Mary A. Bell, Divine, Marina Abramovic, W. J. T. Mitchell, Valerie Harper, Nancy McKean, Sylvia Plath, Sarah Palin, Sterling Ruby, Asger Jorn, Paula Rego, Jackson Pollock, Chris Marker, Will Self, Julian Schnabel, Frederick Nietzsche, Richard Diebenkorn, the Situationists, Sadie Benning, Trenton Doyle Hancock, Julie Mehretu, Jean Dubuffet. Amy Sillman, W. G. Sebald, Nan Goldin, Richard Wright, Shana Moulton: These are just some of the names that bubbled up over the course of my engagement with the artists. A few more hours with them would surely have produced dozens more. All of which is to say: whether it's Grant's Random Select method, by which she performs acts of voracious appropriation and unexpected juxtaposition; Gueorguieva's symphonic, dystopic layering of strata and story to create what she calls "existential lasagna;" Nelson's intimate knowledge of art history, which she pairs with an astounding ability to "work blind" ("I feel that the room is dark where I'm painting, and I am touching my painting as I would a wall or furniture as I move around a room in the dark"); or Feinstein's shrewd aperture for our culture's linguistic detritus, her perseverance on and visual distortion of "enigmatic" phrases such as "In Anticipation of Women's History Month" or "The Abramovic Method"—these practices are guided by the keenest of antennae, be it for our language, our history, our image repertoire, or the formidable forces that animate each.

Laying waste to binaries has been de rigueur for some time now. But surveying the work of these four artists together makes the generative power of such destruction feel newly clear and hot. On the most material of levels, the work on exhibit here poses serious questions about the paradoxical, productive relationship between accretion and excavation—the rage to include, to layer up, on the one hand, and the rage to reveal, clarify, or expose, on the other. I’m thinking in particular of Gueorguieva’s titanic force of a painting, *Ghost of Water* (2014), in which accumulation leads to the revelation of conflict, or of Feinstein’s prints, in which word constellations are both mined and nullified via repetition, fog, and “color events.” Then there are Nelson’s two-sided paintings—*March Hare* (2014), *Division Street* (2013), *Rain* (2013), and *Shoe Painting* (2011)—which quite literally decimate the front/back binary, and offer in its place a kind of jubilant balance between two images which are both separate from each other and also constitutive of each other’s existence. Meanwhile, Grant performs a full-force assault on the borders between originality and appropriation, the personal and the political, folk art and conceptual art, individual and universal symbologies.

None of these four artists has much time for old school debates over figuration vs. abstraction, either—another binary left in the dust by Gueorguieva’s closely narrative-rich paintings, or Nelson’s tactile forms, be they color clots or shoe-shapes. (When pressed by an interviewer as to whether she identified as a representational or abstract painter, Nelson replied: “I am a person who works with canvas and cardboard boxes and rubber hoses and fluid acrylics and cheesecloth and string and acrylic gel mediums.”) Gueorguieva says that if you closely inspect her paintings, “what appeared as an elegant abstraction would in fact describe a genital or an exploding airplane. That matters, because to ridicule a cop or a body is to confront through absurdity the overwhelming force of power or of bodily desire.” That matters, indeed—for beyond musty distinctions re: abstraction and figuration lie more invigorating, often unsettling realms of art-making, thinking, feeling, and acting—ones in which serious forces of power or desire are at stake. You can feel the press of such forces in Grant’s ransacking of religious, racial, and art history; in the vacant yet potentially nefarious political phrases and euphemisms set into play by Feinstein; and in the sometimes gendered, often cataclysmic swells of Gueorguieva’s landscapes. You can feel it in Nelson’s work, even if it’s mostly the press of her indefatigable desire for the physical, sensory experience of making and beholding innovative paintings.

Which brings me to the show’s stated focus on the artists’ “contributions to contemporary painting.” If the work here is any indication, “painting today” must also include “drawing today,” “sculpture today,” “collage today,” “silk-screening today,” and so on. No surprise there. But this multifaceted, multidisciplinary showing should not elide the fact that each of these artists maintains a fascinating, specific relationship to painting. In Grant’s case, she was trained as an oil painter (Nelson was her teacher, at Tyler; Gueorguieva was a classmate), but turned away from painting because she “did not want to smell the fumes from mediums and paints over a long period.” (After reading “a Chicago study that proved a connection between the paint medium Japan Dryer, Abstract Expressionist painters, and alcoholism,” she decided she “didn’t want to take any chances.” I hear her.) Instead, she set to work with paint pens and cut ups, deconstructing the likes of *Guernica* along the way. Nelson and Feinstein, who are a bit older than Grant and Gueorguieva, evidence deep investments in the medium. “It’s very important to actually consider what a painting is,” Nelson says. “I don’t think it’s done enough.” As for Feinstein, she says: I can’t have been doing this for so long without a charged relationship to painting ... I am emotional about painting culture,” even as she ... expresses a profound distrust of repetitiveness or immotility vis a vis her materials: “Painting isn’t enough for me, it really isn’t.”



UNDONE MAN, 2014  
Reclaimed Steel, Epoxy, Linen and Cotton Fabric  
66 1/2" H X 29" W X 24" D

When I spoke with Gueorguieva about the activity of painting, she described to me—with irresistibly contagious wonder—how, at its most basic, painting is the creation of space out of a flat surface. “Every time the brush hits the canvas, it makes a space,” she said. “And even though I know it’s going to do this, every single time I put brush to canvas, I am surprised: It made a space!” As she was telling me this, one of my favorite formulations by Hannah Arendt sprang to mind: “The one essential prerequisite of all freedom ... is simply the capacity of motion which cannot exist without space.” Likely I thought of the Arendt because I’ve never spent time with four artists who struck me as more free. I don’t mean free from societal pressures, cultural or natural forces, the burdens of history, the vicissitudes of the art world, the caprice of its market, the insidious reaches of racism and/or sexism, individual neuroses or hauntings, and so on. I mean that each has set herself astonishingly free to pursue her vision, be it over the past twenty years or the past forty, no matter what may have threatened or impeded its full expression along the way. I stand impressed and inspired, not to mention newly committed to following suit.

As for the show’s title, “Making Sense,” the artists with whom I spoke took pains to distance themselves from any implied enterprise of logic-making. I doubt they would feel the same way, however, were the title interpreted to mean something like “inventing sensation.” For while these artists are very smart—in some cases downright brainy—their work never substitutes interesting ideas for material exploration or visceral effect. Perhaps Feinstein speaks for them all when she talks about her desire to make something more complex, more visually compelling—be it via bewilderment, seduction, overwhelm, impudence, or affliction—than “sense-making” or intellectual proposal alone achieves. “How could I make what was an already complicated condition into even a slower read, making it a more vexing experience than it already was?,” she asks. “By trying to engage with the question visually. Who am I to make a painting about this? Agency is the answer to this: I am the artist.” They are the artists, indeed. What luck to have them not only gathered together for this blast of a show, but also leading the way with such audacity, curiosity, and virtuosity into the unknowable, often unnerving future of both art and human history.

Sources: “Rochelle Feinstein,” by Justin Lieberman, *Bomb Magazine*, Issue 114, Winter 2010; “In Conversation: Rochelle Feinstein with Phong Bui,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, April 5, 2011; “In Her Own Time: A Conversation with Deborah Grant,” by Stacy Lynn Waddell, <http://nasher.duke.edu/2012/05/deborah-grant-on-appropriation>, May 29, 2012; “Where to Find Beautiful Monsters: Iva Gueorguieva in Conversation with David Louis Norr•” Iva Gueorguieva. *Ameringer | McEnery | Yohe*, 2014; “Interview with Dona Nelson,” by Elana Rubinfeld *ArtSlant.com*, May 22, 2008; Conversation [with Dona Nelson], 03/19/14,” *Thomas Erben Gallery*. 2014; Dona Nelson, by Richard Whelan. *Bomb magazine*, Issue 46, Winter 1994; personal correspondence & conversations with the artists.