

A WAY THROUGH THE MIDDLE

GUY AMADO

Taken as a work of Art, the work belongs uniquely within the domain that it itself has opened up

MARTIN HEIDEGGER

Let there be no mistake: it takes a lot of hard work to attain simplicity.

CLARICE LISPECTOR

Sometimes it could be right there before our eyes and we don't see it. Or rather, we do see it, but just don't glean its true relevance; it can take a while before what was overlooked finally flowers into view, as if revealed out of nothing. Maybe it's because what mixes with the air we breathe or is simply offered up to us in the daily reading of things tends to go unnoticed precisely because it is right there in front of us, close at-hand; or, perhaps more reasonably, because at that moment in time we just don't have the wherewithal to grasp the relevance or urgent meaning that escapes us.

One way or another, there is this whole movement around something we know is fundamental, something we seek, but eludes us, and there is a moment of fixity in which that "something" crystallizes, unveiling qualities that prove decisive to the unfolding of a course. Such events are recurrent in artistic endeavor, when it is not the very description of the nature or essence of that process. What we hope to approach here is, therefore, something rather more earthly: the experience that gives rise to anything that will have determinant consequences as a driving impulse behind the creative act. That "anything" could be understood as the mental process by which the subconscious is triggered by some insight, an impulse, whether sudden or nurtured, that invariably becomes a breakthrough moment in a given activity. Perhaps we could also understand it as an idea of crisis - or crises, if you prefer - , as avoided as they are inevitable, as classical milestones along the human adventure. Yet whatever the most adequate terminology may be, it is less important than the events that lend it animus and are generated by it.

Well, when it comes to the work of Newman Schutze, it seems we find ourselves before one more classic case of such a point of inflection. After nearly two decades of development, his work now acquires an axis of strength through submission to one such moment of suspension, just a few years after the turn of the millennium.

Since the beginning of his career, back in the 1980s, the artist has made various forays into the realms of abstraction and figuration, eager to marry the vitality of the fledgling and still

developing painter newly arrived in the metropolis with the growing visual repertoire this new context was affording him – or imposing upon him -with dizzying speed. On the effervescent art scene of the São Paulo capital during that decade, these incursions saw him assimilate striking themes and references extracted from the epic, imposing materiality and ambiguously seductive symbolism of an Anselm Kiefer, for example (and other emerging German artists), as well as from the organicity and sheer thickness of the “crust of paint” – Newman’s own words – deposited by Iberê Camargo, which impressed him greatly. On another level, but in similar form, he was also taken with the expressiveness young artists like the Casa 7 group had derived from a physical stance toward painting. And there were other influences besides.

As such, and as is only natural, an interest in technical experimentation (oils, tempera, introduction of cuttings into his paintings) and the search for a style clearly predominate in Newman’s production throughout the period culminating in the late 1990s and turn of the millennium, when these rising concerns, the foreshocks of an internal crisis within the work itself, began to haunt him. Up until then, his painting had developed in an active manner assured of its own qualities, but still lacking something that could infuse it with a meaning beyond unity alone, some vital element that could lend his praxis a core around which to unspool an identity of its own, so to speak.

This period of relative drift, in terms of the lack of a leitmotif in the broadest sense, seems to be firmly bound to the fact that the artist was, at that time, moved to paint as per, shall we say, an idea of painting, as opposed to by a “painting of his own”. In other words, he was painting under the influx of the kind of production that predominated at the time – and we’re talking about the painting in São Paulo and the world in the 1980s -, picking his affinities, searching for a possible style and practice unimpeded by the pictorial possibilities (though mindful of his own skills and limitations, which is important) that presented themselves in the light of his chosen references. These are aspects that constitute elements inherent to any process of development and formation, certainly, and which in this case indicate a stage in which the artist’s repertoire is broadened and the groundwork of his practice is laid¹. Of course, there is no suggestion here of any neglect or irresponsibility on the part of the artist, or that he was unaware of what was going on in his painting, only that his spectrum of interests and priorities at the time saw all this relegated to the background. So much so that the term “drift”, used at the beginning of this

¹ It is important to clarify here that Newman has had contact with painting since a very young age; he was attracted to this world as a youngster in the countryside, where he learned the basics and garnered technical knowledge from his master. His work was already underway when he made the move to São Paulo (around 1985), which compounded his interest and constituted a factor of his greater permeability to new influences.

paragraph, is maybe not the best word to describe this period of Newman's activity. Perhaps "cabotage" would be a more apt turn of phrase: moving from point to point, in short bursts, from here to there, in familiar territory, without risking any longer spells at sea.

The fact is that, over the course of this process, with the artist intensely involved with his work and beginning to establish himself and gain visibility, the question as to what actually lay at the pith of his art was somewhat sidelined, waiting in the wings for another opportunity to impose itself naturally. This opportunity would only surge in the early 2000s, when that pivotal moment came that saw Newman look back to the latent demands in his work and embark on a reflection that was, at once, retroactive and projective. However, it was never a case of wiping the slate clean or getting to the crux of the language within which he operated; what was at play was the need for analysis of the structural aspects and factors of his field of work, that is, the set of processes that govern pictorial activity – and which could be applied to his practice from then on. It was not a matter of *recovering* anything that might have been lacking in the work, but of identifying which first-order constitutive elements of his media the artist felt were particularly key to his poetic and how he could explore them more actively and at will.

More than a mere interlude during which the artist allows himself to experiment in something different or flirt with some theme rarely broached in his work, this pause enabled Newman to reach an important conclusion: after all those years committed to his *métier*, his pictorial development had perhaps orbited too closely around styles, techniques, procedures and so forth, and lacked the weight conferred by a definitive *subject*.

Sean Scully, one of the great exponents of world painting, affirms that he "paints abstract" because of the need to "paint everything, rather than anything or something [...]. I'm always trying to paint the whole thing, the whole world"². In this beautiful image, the Irish artist suggests an unavoidable vocation toward abstract painting – which alone would be capable of rendering account of such absurd totality -, as the compunction to assume, from the outset, an impossibility as the driving force behind one's work. Scully's affirmation both holds true for and finds a counterweight in Newman's output. On one hand, Schutze is not an "abstract painter", in the strict sense of the term. There is no specific identification with, or tacit commitment to, this line, even if his work does dispense with the figure; in fact, his non-figuration can occasionally present traces of, or allusions to, a figurative referential. On the other hand, here is a man who *has already painted everything*, or almost everything, especially in terms of thematic inspiration.

² Três pintores contemporâneos: Paulo Pasta/Sean Scully/Luc Tuymans. Trad. Ana Calzavara. *Revista ARS*, São Paulo, v. 6, n. 12, Jul./Dec. 2008.

Perhaps Newman's problem was precisely the opposite, a *surplus* of possibilities. His work continued to lack a strong core element, one that could articulate the resources made available by his language and process it through the rational/intuitive apparatus of creation in such a manner as yields consistency and coherency. Or, if you prefer, a "subject" – understood here as a structural factor in the artist's production, one that gives body to the work and assures it of its power to know *what it is not* and give it room in which to take risks. "Subjects" should not be confused with "themes", which can come and go, with varying levels of influence on a career – as was indeed the case with Newman. The subject alone contains within itself the raw material, the touchstone of the creative process. Subject dispenses with all affirmation, as it may lie hidden in some corner of language, simply awaiting an invitation, present there in the structuring, but without enunciation. A subject can contain (or not) themes that expand the artist's universe of questions, though it alone can forge the underlayer upon which these incursions along a poetic path can be properly inscribed, or at least cohesively so – a subject that, as we shall see in Newman's case, presents itself independently of the artistic work itself.

Here we arrive at the aforementioned mo(ve)ment of suspension, begun by his *modus operandi*, that would translate into a structural realignment of Newman's poetic. In this process, what would set a new course for his research was an internalization of that research, a turning-in on itself. Newman knew that one way of dealing with this hurdle was to reflect on the formal aspects that underpinned his painting. This shift itself implied a revision of procedures, which became re-foundational factors in his poetic. Fundamentally, this was everything, or almost so: the essence of his craft. This was when Newman would truly revitalize and reinvent himself by adopting a certain restraint toward the primordial aspects of the constitution of his plastic language – paint, gesture, support, expression. Normal and essential components, surely, but which, duly reconsidered in the service of an inner logic of the work, are also all that is needed to open up a whole array of new approaches in a production that has come dangerously close to an impasse. As such, the artist took a leap forward on the back of a reductionist logic applied to his own procedures and a pared-back formal vocabulary, employing solutions that were more economical in terms of style and based on both intuition and reason.

This new attitude of austerity and honing of the constitutive elements of his work affirmed, secondarily, the need to attain a level of simplicity that could provide some counterweight to the earlier mannerisms and conditionings. The pictorial production that resulted was non-figurative, for want of a better term, and characterized by this general whittling, both on the visual level and in terms of technique, material and style. At the onset of this "new work front", the artist adopted a

modular structure as an informal template, or rather, a modular understanding of composition, filling the support with wide, thick strokes. There are echoes of constructive procedures in this approach, though such affiliation was hardly sought; in the end, the handling of paint and the gestures by which it was applied put paid to any further approximations in this sense.

Initially, these were bands, rectangles and quadrangles in simple, mellow arrangements, often superposed in layers in which the incisive imprint of the brushstroke, reiterated by the organicity of the thickened paint, is offset by the geometric nature of the compositional schema. The palette is more somber, full of dark tones – ochre, warmer browns and greenish grays. There is obvious discipline in this restraint, except for when it comes to the paint itself, which is generously applied.

As things progressed, Newman began to invest in variations on the structural schemas of his paintings, which tended to acquire new elements, until, in his more recent work, he arrived at the stripes and canvases crammed with little squares. In these, there is a perceptible use of a more intense and sophisticated chromatic device, in which a color-light operates in the optical field in such a way as insinuates (non) figure/background relations. In general, his is a painting based on modest premises – to explore the possibilities that underlie his own medium in conjunction with ballast provided by the artist's own personal expression – and it became increasingly fine-tuned and sophisticated the more at ease the artist became about affirming his own issues.

This new take also resulted in expansions and broadenings in his creative process, as in the drawings he never ceased to make and which not unusually announce new steps and discoveries in his poetic. “Faster” and more graphic, his one-movement drawings and “whole brushstrokes” walk shoulder-to-shoulder with his pictorial production and give vent to what happens not to fit in that sister form; they give hearty welcome to the brevity of action and the conviction of the broad and incisive gesture his more recent paintings had to abandon in favor of restraint. Newman throws himself eagerly into this production. His drawings, which have grown larger and larger, share the same status as the pictorial activity from which they emanate and which they feed in return. In his pursuit of the scale and stability it takes to produce the single, fluid gestures of which his drawings are made, Newman has even devised rudimentary but effective technical mechanisms out of lashed together household squeegees and other such implements.

And so his painting became its own subject, sourcing in its base procedures a new route toward consistent reinvention. By bringing the imprints and marks of their making into the foreground – what the artist calls their “literality”, suggesting a capacity for communicative clarity and objectivity which he considers important to his work – these paintings do not relinquish their

plastic potency, but reaffirm an inclination towards the aesthetic dimension that has always been present in Newman's production.

The result is a self-referential and auto-defined painting, a condition largely obtained through intuition and about which one or two things need to be said in relation to the work of Newman Schutze. Both terms suggest identification with, and possible analogies to, artistic lines with which there are no genuinely plausible associations. Auto-definition is associated with the vocabulary of later modernism, where such characteristics were synonymous with adjusting to the canon of the much-touted specificity of means in the service of an autonomy of language – which converges upon a Greenbergian “purity”. Here, however, this auto-definition makes more sense if thought of only in its ontological and affirmative bent, its revalidation of its own condition as painting. For its part, the self-referentiality might, fundamentally, approximate Newman's work to minimalism. Another error, especially because, for the artist, this process of linguistic *découpage* definitely does not mean relinquishing aesthetic meaning in his work (as mentioned above), a fact that automatically excludes any possible associations with approaches or influences from this movement.

On the subject of this reiteration of the aesthetic dimension in Newman's painting, a brief parenthesis might be in order for some considerations of Robert Motherwell. For the North-American artist, the function of the aesthetic element is associated with a route by which we might arrive at feeling (what interested him) in such a way as to allow us to condense it as a perceptible object, which would effectively be the ultimate end of artistic activity. The aesthetic function therefore converted into a means toward accessing feeling (or sensation). Motherwell also claimed that it was a mistake to confuse the medium in which one worked with the end in itself, rather than as a means towards that end³.

³ TERNIZIO, Stephanie (Ed.). Beyond the aesthetics. In: *The collected writings of Robert Motherwell*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999., p. 35-39.

While both artists share a will to endow their paintings with some capacity for immediatism and objectivity, Newman Schutze's mature production signals a movement that is almost the opposite of that sought by the North-American painter. After a long period of stylistic experimentation, technical honing and a conceptual deepening, the medium of painting is once again summoned, in its most essential aspects, to assume a starring role in his practice, and Newman places it less in the service of an a priori expressiveness than of the imperatives of the inner logic of pictorial language. And lest there be any confusion: orientation, in Newman's case, does not mean any aspiration toward underscoring an idea of "purity" or any specific quality of the medium in which he works; rather it means simply managing to extract, from the pith of whatever it is that lies before you, and which constitutes your craft, the power to surmount all impasses and challenges that language might present.

In this sense, the medium ends up becoming, in a way, "an end in itself", insofar as it (re)finds an artistic trajectory, laying the ground for a painting that now sees itself, nearly ten years after first surveying this new horizon of possibilities and at a mature stage, walking with confidence. An end and – why not? – a path in itself; which does not necessarily mean to say "a middle road", one of equilibrium as ancestrally preached by Buddhism, but certainly a new way *through the middle*. After nearly three decades of production, the artist takes his own medium as his plumb-line, and reinvents it silently - if, that is, such a term can be applied to Newman.

Matisse used to say that the medium employed by each artist tends to derive from his temperament, an assertion that, in the case of our painter, proves spiritually apt. The painting process discussed here is a faithful translation of the extrovert, frank, no-nonsense, straight-talking, expansive – or "rude", as Newman prefers to call it – and broad-gestured personality of this subject/protagonist. It's an objective painting in the sense of not pretending to be anything beyond what it is, with no fuss. Yet it is also the man behind the work – an oeuvre that may or may not, at

some future date, be shaken to the ground and forced to rethink itself, but which, nonetheless, had the wherewithal to see that there was a medium in the middle of the road.

May/June 2011