

# frieze

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REVIEW

## Rochelle Feinstein

Centre d'Art Contemporain, Genf, Switzerland

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Rochelle Feinstein,  
*Love Vibe*, 1999-  
2014, Installation  
view, , 6 paintings  
/ Oil on canvas,  
188 x 188 cm each,  
photo: Adam  
Reich, courtesy:  
the artist & On  
Stellar Rays, New  
York

The oft-quoted line 'Try again. Fail again. Fail better', is usually taken as a rare bit of positivism, coming from Samuel Beckett, but it can also be read as an emphasized negative. You might 'fail better' by figuring failure in a successful work of art. Is that exacerbating failure or vindicating it? There's a tradition of this ambiguity that peaked with early-1970s Conceptualism, when John Baldessari burned his early paintings and framed it as a performative rejection of art's objecthood in the name of conceptual dematerialization, or when Susan Hiller stuffed her shredded paintings into test tubes and called them sculptures. Perhaps when Van Gogh painted himself with a bandaged ear he was taking up an equivalent conceit for his own era.

A defining moment in *In Anticipation of Women's History Month*, the American painter Rochelle Feinstein's first institutional exhibition, in her late 60s, comes in *The Estate of Rochelle F.* (2009–11): a row of collage/drawings hung underneath a row of paintings on which they comment. Feinstein has had a distinguished career as an art professor (at Yale University) and she is an inveterate commenter on (and in) her own work. The horizontal hang of the drawings narrativizes the visual, as the sequenced, syntactical hang of the paintings signifies their being ushered into the brackets of that narrative. Three drawings explain the paintings' gestation: how, in 2010, Feinstein 'consolidated' two New York storages into one, capitalizing on necessity by distilling instead of destroying work. *The Estate* is the result. In a characteristic turn, her flowery, fountain-penned handwriting has pretensions to 'finished' drawing, despite her claim that the piece was determined by practical expediency: 'This, plus pens, ink, charcoal, adhesive cost \$213'. She proposes her use of 'at-hand materials' as a metaphor for 'her fellow citizens' having to 'consolidate surplus' in the wake of the 2008 economic crash.

The defining moment I was referring to is another turn: her 'despair' at career stagnation is qualified, made

successful on market terms (and those are the terms implied by her 'wanting to stop wanting to show'), by one of the last drawings: an ink representation of an invite to a presentation of *The Estate* at a New York commercial gallery in 2011. The current exhibition keeps turning on this retroactive opportunism, a reappraisal of her own art that falls queasily between the reinventive second-look and a willingness to belie original statements by using them as material for a more theatrically-managed take on the theme of the neglected painter at the mercy of an indifferent culture. This dynamic tends to demote the paintings to abject props for a narrative from which they are largely excluded.

In the same tradition of postmodern self-reflexivity, there is Martin Kippenberger's *Lieber Maler, Male Mir* (1981) series – painterly commentaries on his public identity – or René Daniëls' *Spring Blossom* series (1987), in which titles of his previous paintings are inscribed as the 'blossoms' on diagrammatic word-trees. But although Kippenberger employed a commercial painter to execute his series, the results do not denounce themselves within the context of his oeuvre. In her series *Verbatim Hoc Moda/The Abramovic Method* (2013–15), Feinstein gets a Chinese commercial painter to copy one of her works and juxtaposes original and copy, in conjunction with another collage narrative documenting the email exchange that led to the commission. The result is a plodding disquisition on the iniquities of global art production.

This exhibition appears to have been enabled by Feinstein's realization (confirmed by curators and gallerists) that framing her painting as a commentary on the beleaguered position of the painter in an artistic rat race 'works' better – fails/succeeds better – than pitching less self-conscious paintings into the breach. But the contrast proves jarring. The pre-self-reflexive works are expressionistically earnest, the later ones cynically ironic. Failure has gone from an abiding condition

to a functional conceit. *I made a Terrible Mistake* (2002–5) is an arrangement of paintings on makeshift hoardings. The spurious pathos (the title's remorse is Michael Jackson's) of coloured spotlights and the roaming dapple of a disco ball are projected onto compositions that assimilate the treatment ambivalently. It is one thing for a painting to evoke pathos and another for it to be an object of pathos. *Love Vibe* (1999–2014) portrays large green monochromes overwritten by a speech bubble proclaiming 'Love Your Work'. The sequenced sprawl of six two-metre-square canvases allows the individual paintings to abstract, to become the kind of large-scale modernist-style painting installation that they picture at the mercy of a phrase epitomizing artworld and professional insincerity. Feinstein both has her cake and eats it, because the sprawl is also, with conscious irony or not, a symptom of the kind of gallery-targeted, spatial self-indulgence from which she artfully exempts herself in *The Estate*.

A wall of gesturally abstract paintings from the early to mid 1990s, sometimes featuring collaged textual addenda, shows the kind of paintings Feinstein made before she began annotating her own role, and paintings inclined to solve every problem by throwing more information at it. To me, the paintings are crabbed, turgid, rife with grids and network structures, and personal in a way that feels inappropriately overbearing. Their salon hang now generalizes them – à la *The Estate* – as a conglomerated sign for their chasing of their own tails. The extent to which that generalization redeems or betrays their confusions remains an open question.

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