

Sean Crossley

Liberalism

Harlan Levey Projects

65 Rue Isidoor Teirlinckstraat, 1080 Brussels, Belgium

Opening: Saturday, September 12, 2026, 11:00 - 18:00

September 12 - October 24, 2026



Sean Crossley's *Liberalism* transforms the logos of political parties into large-scale paintings, asking what becomes possible when images designed for instant recognition are remade in a medium whose purpose is not communication, but attention.

Ask ten people what "liberal" means and you may get ten different answers. At its root, the word points to freedom, but over the past two centuries it has accumulated a remarkable range of political meanings. It can refer to civil rights, free markets, social democracy or limited government; in one country a liberal party may occupy the centre-left, in another the centre-right. Safer, perhaps, to define it away from politics: a liberal interpretation of the rules may get you in trouble; a liberal serving of drink may have you stumbling.

In his third solo exhibition with Harlan Levey Projects, Crossley presents a new series of large scale two-by-two-metre paintings built from the visual identities of liberal political parties from around the world. Working with logos, colours and slogans as painterly material rather than ideological statements, he layers and compresses four identities into each canvas. Each painting is developed through continual rotation, with the composition advancing equally from all four sides of the square so that no orientation becomes definitive. The works refuse a privileged point of view, asking instead to be encountered through movement, duration and repeated looking.

Seen from a distance, the paintings register as dense abstractions whose colours and geometries pulse against one another. Only gradually do fragments of recognisable symbols emerge before dissolving again into rhythm, surface and form. Crossley transforms political graphics into paintings that continually oscillate between legibility and abstraction. Their source material never disappears, but neither does it resolve into a singular message.

The exhibition begins from an analogy that has become central to Crossley's thinking: that the histories of liberalism and painting unfolded alongside one another, each shaped by ideas of freedom, individual judgment and public life. Rather than advancing this as a historical argument, *Liberalism* uses the parallel to ask a different question: what does painting make possible that other image forms do not?

This question has animated Crossley's practice for more than a decade. Across bodies of work examining systems of representation, he has consistently turned to images that already circulate in the world — not to explain them, but to discover what painting does to them. If graphic design, advertising and political communication seek immediacy, clarity and persuasion, painting operates differently. It slows the image down. It suspends certainty. It asks viewers not simply to recognise what they are looking at, but to remain with it long enough for meaning to become something negotiated rather than delivered.

That distinction matters. A logo succeeds by fixing identity. A brand compresses meaning into an instantly recognisable sign. Painting does the opposite. It expands meaning. It destabilises identity. It resists immediate recognition in favour of sustained attention. In *Liberalism*, political logos become the material for that transformation. Detached from their original function and reconstructed through procedures of repetition, overlap and rotation, they cease to operate primarily as instruments of persuasion. They become colour, rhythm, texture and form without ever fully relinquishing their political associations. Not every encounter will be a free one. A viewer who recognises a particular logo may find that recognition forecloses rather than opens — the image snapping shut around a single meaning before painting has had time to do its work.

But the works operate at another level still. In their scale, their openness, their refusal of a fixed viewpoint, the paintings do not merely depict a liberal sensibility — they attempt to perform one. The encounter they orchestrate is itself an exercise in liberal subjectivity: the viewer is asked to hold multiple positions simultaneously, to resist the pull toward a single reading, to remain with uncertainty as an active rather than a passive state. This is also what serious painting has always demanded. And it is what liberal political

philosophy, at its most rigorous, has always required of the citizen. In this sense *Liberalism* brings content and form into genuine alignment — not as illustration, but as enactment. It is a work of institutional critique and political art that refuses to announce itself as either.

The square format is central to this enquiry. Its symmetry continually draws the eye toward the centre, making equilibrium both inevitable and elusive. Crossley embraces that tension rather than resolving it. The centre becomes less a fixed point than a field of negotiation in which competing visual languages remain active without any one becoming dominant. It is difficult not to recognise a resonance with the contemporary political imagination, where the very idea of "the centre" has itself become increasingly unstable. The paintings do not illustrate that condition; they think through an analogous problem in painterly terms.

Each canvas proposes a world rather than an argument. Multiple positions occupy the same pictorial space without being reconciled, inviting sustained attention rather than immediate interpretation. Their common ground is pictorial rather than programmatic.

The exhibition title reinforces this openness. Before "liberal" became a political identity, it belonged to the liberal arts: the education of a free person through the cultivation of judgment, attention and sensibility. That earlier meaning lingers beneath the contemporary one. To look carefully — to attend to colour, relation, scale and form — is itself an exercise of freedom. In this sense, *Liberalism* asks not simply what a liberal politics might be, but what a liberal painting might look like: open rather than closed, generous rather than prescriptive, capable of holding contradiction without demanding resolution.

At a moment when images are increasingly valued for the speed with which they communicate, *Liberalism* proposes painting as a medium that does something else entirely. It neither competes with nor resists the image economy from which it draws its material; instead, it transforms that material into an experience of sustained attention. Meaning is no longer communicated. It is negotiated — not through explanation, but through looking. In this sense, form and content are not parallel — they are the same thing.

BIO

Sean Crossley's painting practice investigates what happens when images designed to communicate are transformed into paintings. Working through processes of accumulation, repetition and revision, his works begin with familiar visual forms—faces, objects, political symbols and everyday spaces—which are gradually woven into layered compositions. Through the buildup of surfaces and the revelation of pentimenti, individual images lose their fixed identities and enter into new relationships, treating painting not as a vehicle for illustration but as a space where meaning remains open to negotiation.

*A formative residency at WIELS Contemporary Art Centre culminated in a series of one hundred paintings, later published as the artist book *Excess/Support* (MER. Books, 2024). The project established an approach that continues to underpin his practice: using painting to explore what becomes possible when images are slowed down, destabilised and remade through the material and temporal conditions of painting.*

Crossley has presented solo exhibitions at WIELS Contemporary Art Centre (Brussels), Orpheus Institute (Ghent), Campus Biotech (Geneva), Harlan Levey Projects (Brussels) and FUTURES Gallery (Melbourne). His work has been included in group exhibitions at Flux Laboratory (Geneva), Emergent (Veurne) and nGbK (Berlin), among others. He has undertaken residencies at WIELS Contemporary Art Centre (Brussels, 2019), the Embassy of Foreign Artists (Geneva, 2021) and Cité Internationale des Arts (Paris, 2025).

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