

# LUBOV

## ***The Happiness Project: Episode 1: Acquaintance***

**Linda Daniels, Marilyn Lerner, Jill Levine**

**Organized by José Freire**

THE HAPPINESS INDUSTRY is a 2015 book by William Davies whose subtitle, “How Government and Big Business Sold Us Well-Being,” exposes the author’s suspicions about his subject. Among other things, Davies posits that our culture’s focus on happiness, and the way that it’s been defined by the mechanics of merchandizing, has led to greater amounts of mental health problems, particularly alienation. On the way to “winning” this argument, Davies historicizes the way in which the science of economics has been tied to a great ineffable: integers and emotions mated. The author stitches together such diverse topics as economy, individual well-being, marketing, and aesthetics, umbrellaing them under the rubric of Happiness.

But how do we recognize this Happiness? And where is our definition of the concept born? We live in a state of mental clutter, a bombardment of goods and services, information, careerism, goal-orientation. Where is the space of contemplation? The complexifying issue becomes less the monetizing of happiness than the fact that for industry to achieve its goal, Happiness had to be conceived in a manner that would be universally understood. And it is that very universality that is the killing thing. Happiness, as a concept, has been writ as little more than the sum of consumption.

I’ve decided to use Davies’ book as a loose scaffolding for THE HAPPINESS PROJECT, a group of ten curated exhibitions to be held at a diverse group of galleries over the next five years. It seems like an appropriate framing device for the space of the contemporary gallery: an amalgam of commerce and the forever shifting, volatile values of art. Each episode will strive to remain an individual utterance, with little artist overlap, and each of them will be tailored to the program of the host gallery, either working with, or against, the public’s perception of such. Each show will carry a subtitle — among them “Nostalgia,” “Power” and “Tristesse” — amplifying the opportunity for every iteration to maintain an air of autonomy within the overall project. The result will be a group show released in installments, like Marvel movies or prestige television. THE HAPPINESS PROJECT will remain unfixed until its final episode, allowing for self-correction throughout: fan service, if you will.

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For the inaugural iteration, EPISODE ONE, I’ve chosen the subtitle ACQUAINTANCE. The show will be installed at Lubov Gallery in New York from 28 June to 17 August 2025. It juxtaposes work by three artists: Linda Daniels, Marilyn Lerner and Jill Levine, and is my first contemporary art venture since the closure of Team Gallery five years ago.

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A reasonable question at an art exhibition might be, “Are you acquainted with the work of such- and-such?” One searches for recognition in another — the shared acknowledgement of a line, a gesture, some sensation — manufacturing from the inanimate a human connection, a familial experience. In this exchange, the viewer not only identifies an artistic practice, they bond with a kindred spirit.

Acquaintance also sits alongside friendship, its easier comrade. It remains jovial, incandescent, avoiding the dramatic pitfalls of its more serious neighbor. Handshakes and kisses are exchanged but hardships are avoided. In this way, people come together, move apart, come together again. ACQUAINTANCE, as

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an exhibition, functions as a reunion for its three artists and its curator as they had worked together extensively in the late 80s and early 90s.

Linda Daniels is represented by three of her recent abstractions, which begin with the dissection and cobbling together of circular forms that end up as mysterious shapes rendered in pulsating colors on sensuous white grounds. Her art making displays the traces of its bi-coastal development. Having worked in New York during the 1980s, Daniels' paintings wear the considerable influence of the Pattern & Decoration movement, albeit coupled with a rigid control akin to artists like Agnes Martin and Max Cole. However, ten years ago Daniels returned to the central Californian coast and her work got hot. The aloof color palettes of her New York years were replaced by vibrant color, her tight mark-making simplified. Her new paintings continue to show an abiding commitment to formalism but deliver their all with Pop/Op flavorings.

Marilyn Lerner will include three of her tight, geometric fantasias, organized around dynamic tensions between color and form. Like outpourings of code and data, they appear highly calculated, for as much as Lerner's paintings may call to mind such vaunted art historical antecedents as Hilma af Klint, one might also recall a console glimpsed on an episode of BLACK MIRROR or the eye of the HAL 9000. Lerner always seems to squeeze herself, and her audience, between her cryptic structures and the gentle fallibilities encased therein, highlighting a visual elegance crafted from the balance between a kind of mathematical precision and the delicate traces of the human hand.

Jill Levine's palette is always chosen intuitively, however, it's clear that a folkloric sensibility is at work here: Mexican textiles, Southwestern blankets, Ndebele house painting repeatedly evoked. Here, Levine presents her painted sculptures of interlocking, puzzle-like geometric shapes where line, color and form are shared by the applied paint and the shapes on which it rests. Levine will also show paintings rendered on prepared panels not much larger than smart phones. Alongside her sculptural practice, for which she's best known, Levine has always made two-dimensional work in the form of gouaches and small, hand-made books. But five years ago, inspired by the iconography that marks gender outside the restrooms at the Tamayo Museum, she began to work on what she calls "Tablets". In these small paintings, rendered on prepared panels, the paint soaks into the surface exactly as it does in her sculptures, creating a specific kind of luminosity.

Any group exhibition is an opportunity to encourage comparisons, however, these three artists, while having so much in common, are each mining a distinctive strain of abstraction. To varying degrees, they each use color and pattern to entice viewers to break the hermetic seal on their art works. For all their shared DNA, this is a group of highly iconoclastic figures, their individuated approaches precise and distinct.

Daniels, Lerner and Levine have been actively exhibiting their work for nearly five decades. One can find them represented in numerous public collections, including the Whitney Museum of American Art and The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. They have been the subject of articles and reviews in most major art publications, among them Art in America, Artforum, FlashArt, Artnews, Sculpture Magazine, and The New Art Examiner. Locally, one has been able to read about their exhibitions in The New York Times, The Brooklyn Rail, The New Yorker, Time Out New York, Hyperallergic, and Bomb.

Daniels' most recent solo was held at Five Car Garage in Santa Monica, CA, Lerner's at New York's Kate Werble Gallery and at Sprüth Magers in London, Levine's at High Noon Gallery in New York City.

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EPISODE TWO: PLAY will take place at Dialogue Gallery in Lisbon, Portugal in November of 2025. It will pair the work of Helena Almeida and Carina Brandes.

EPISODE THREE: HEARTH & HOME will take place at Zero Gallery in Milan, Italy in April of 2026. Artist list in formation.

– José Freire, June 2025.

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