

# animal house\*

**Florence**  
**Benjamin Barretto**

**29.8.25**  
**- 20.9.25**

*clockwise from left*

Benjamin Barretto  
*Untitled*  
2025  
oil on linen  
183 x 306 cm

Benjamin Barretto  
*Untitled*  
2025  
oil on linen  
183 x 153 cm

Benjamin Barretto  
*Untitled*  
2025  
oil on canvas  
92 x 122 cm

Benjamin Barretto  
*Florence (auto-tune)*  
2025  
looped video, iMac, iPhones, bricks, glass, speakers,  
auto-tune app, Bluetooth, chain, motor, wood, metal, enamel,  
projector & power supplies  
dimensions variable

Benjamin Barretto's paintings make themselves. He mixes colours directly onto prepared grounds and then presses the equal sized canvases against each other to generate nearly identical images on paired canvases. He does this using a frottage technique that becomes ever more athletic as the work's size increases. The history of modernism is filled with the recurring fantasy of paintings, like these, that are self generating. They tend to extend from a desire for the author to be so entirely absent from the work of art that it is as if the work came into existence *sui generis*, outside of human intervention, akin to a natural phenomenon like rainfall. It is no surprise, then, that Barretto, in other aspects of his diverse practice captures found sounds or tracks a singular action, such as when he sets phones to photograph one another's screens, or makes a film of what is recorded on a phone's camera when it is thrown.

László Moholy-Nagy's paintings ordered over the telephone are a historical example of this impulse. The smooth machined lines of the factory produced enamel plates betraying only the idea of the work and nothing of the artist's hand. This emphasised the status of the artwork as an object of knowledge, which is to say a painting that can be measured by its materials and means of production, just as the meteorologist takes account of a storm when they measure its effects. As Daniel Buren wrote in 1972, "The impersonal or anonymous nature of the work/product causes us to be confronted with a fact (or idea) in its raw form; we can only observe it without reference to any metaphysical scheme, just as we observe that it is raining or snowing. Thus we can now say, for the first time, that 'it is painting,' as we say, 'it is raining.' When it snows we are in the presence of a natural phenomenon, so when "it paints" we are in the presence of an historical fact."

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, when Buren wrote this, the spectre of mass industrialisation hung over the production of art like his that was largely untouched by human hands, such as the commercially available striped awning fabric Buren used for his in situ paintings. However, in the present age of Artificial Intelligence, anyone can make a painting at the level of an image, and fully automated, thinking computers have replaced workers on the factory lines that once made Buren's fabrics or Donald Judd's boxes. Further, there is perhaps nothing better suited to AI's data driven outputs than the clear logics of minimal and conceptual art, even if we are currently fascinated with trying to replicate the more effusive extremes of the creative act. When paintings can fully emerge from nonhuman sources a production logic internal to the physicality of painting becomes interesting again.

Barretto engages with this in his paintings produced via a frottage technique. Essentially the compositions are generated blind. While he has an idea of the result, the actual frottage that generates the image is done with the canvases pressed together and thus the act of making is not visible to the artist. As Savanna Szelski notes, the process is more akin to photographic ones of developing an image, or of copying it, than traditional painterly means. As Szelski describes, the composition is not inscribed, but rather emerges. It is developed through the frottage technique, just as the photographic print reveals the image in the darkroom.

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Key to the development of these works has been the way that they both operate as a singular composition with attendant formal properties of colour and form, as well as provoke conceptual questions based on notions such as doubling. For Barretto's paintings are not simply diptychs of two works made to look like each other, as in Robert Rauschenberg's seminal *Factum I* and *Factum II* (1957), which were painted individually, while Barretto's pairings emerge simultaneously. Nor are they just mirrors of each other, something that Barretto is now further emphasising by making it so that the stripes do not lie on the same part of each canvas. Thus there is both repetition and difference, as if we are seeing two frames in a cinematic sequence, implying both a singular instant and a potentially endless extension that we are only glimpsing a small part of.

Barretto's frottage technique blurs the surface of his work, an effect that is also physical in that the pigment is raised and stippled from the pressing action, which lends the whole painted field a sense of vibration as well as introducing little idiosyncrasies that belie the hand that guides the process. He is thus able to shift the notion of the stripe that interrupts each of his fields from being reducible to just a referent to Colour Field painting. In a sense the stripe appears in Barretto's work only as the most minimal introduction of a compositional element, such as it was in Giorgio Griffa's *Obliquo* paintings of the early 1970s, where they signal a process of making that is never complete. Barretto has narrowed his decision making to size, format, placement of the stripe, and the colours of the ground and the stripe. In this sense it suggests Lawrence Weiner's early removal paintings (1967), where the collector decided on the size and placement of the notch that was removed.

As with the single painted stripe on one of Buren's awning fabrics, Barretto's stripe is a sign of "painting," of the fact that a painting has been made, more so than a metaphysical statement like in Barnett Newman, or an entreaty to optical play like in Kenneth Noland. That said, it also happens to establish a visual experience, especially with the gradations of colour that Barretto's stripes often have, the chiaroscuro effect of the pressing leads to fuzzy stripes that cause the monochrome grounds they pierce to bend, warp, and snap as the eye moves across the painted field. The sensation is not unlike the introduction of a singular burst of noise into an otherwise quiet situation. Operating in a different historical moment than Buren there is no need to cancel or negate the history of painting, falling at a different point in the arc of history, Barretto signals the act of painting, but also suggests that a formal experience is not something to be completely foreclosed from the work, implying that perhaps the reserve of beauty inherent in even such a reduced human action must be valued today.