

There is a lot that painting cannot do. Yet this exhibition brings together paintings that aspire to *do something* even as they acknowledge their own limits.

The title “Just Painting” refers to the casual contingencies of a thing in the world, but also asks whether an object can have ethical qualities or aspirations. Can paintings be generous, selfish, humble, jealous, patient, greedy, or kind? How do they coexist with each other? What might they teach us about how to live together in the world?

For the artists in this exhibition, work and life—how they make, what they make, and how they live—are intimately connected. The *what* and *how* of the work is inherently linked to the *why*. On the surface, the works in these rooms are not marked by any particular taste or style: some are precise, others roughshod; a few are representational, many are abstract; most were made recently, though others are decades or over a century old. At stake, on the one hand, is the materiality of painting. On the other is the question of how to live.

Here, American identity is both a question and a statement. Some of these artists are expatriates, or formerly undocumented, or have worked in the same basement studio for five decades. In “Notes of a Native Son,” James Baldwin wrote, “I am what time, circumstance, history, have made of me, certainly, but I am, also, much more than that. So are we all.” The meaning of a work is linked to the life it comes from and the life embedded in it, but identity is not a skeleton key.

The artists in this exhibition are all models of integrity and grit. Their work reflects earnest searching, but also radical self-questioning—to paraphrase Barbara Kruger, they are full of wishful thinking even as they know better. The work here makes modest claims and acknowledges its own limits. Yet in so doing, it maintains high aspirations.

These artists have chosen painting as their method of argumentation: the grounds on which they argue with themselves, with others, and with the world. Beginning in their studios, they build a vision of the world that they want to see and live in. After all, painting is both an object and an illusion. It can change the world even though it obviously can’t.

—Leah Pires and Ezra Tessler

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