

GAGOSIAN

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NEIL JENNEY DRAWINGS & PAINTINGS

EXTENDED!
Through Saturday, February 3, 2018

Park & 75
821 Park Avenue
New York, NY 10021

I had two striking realizations: one, that even if I produced the worst paintings possible, they would not be good enough; and two, that idealism is unavoidable.
—Neil Jenney

Gagosian is pleased to present drawings and paintings by Neil Jenney.

A maverick in twentieth century American art, Jenney shifted his focus from abstract painting and sculpture in order to pursue a new type of realism, adopting the binary of “bad” and “good” paintings. He began to make the *Bad Paintings* in the 1960s, referring to them as such after Marcia Tucker’s exhibition “Bad Painting” at the New Museum in 1978. These purposefully sketchy, gestural works poked at preconceptions of taste and connoisseurship, and, according to Jenney, were “good concepts painted badly.” With them, he sought to indicate narrative truth through the depiction of elementary relationships between people and things. The *Good Paintings*, ongoing since the 1970s, pursue this same goal, but through an opposite approach. Using oil paint on wood panel, Jenney produces flawless, heavily stylized studies of the North American landscape, each surface so detailed that it seems to surpass reality. And most recently, in the *New Good Paintings*, he has expanded his scope to include other geographic locations, creating vistas that are as disorienting as they are clear.

The current exhibition, his third with Gagosian since joining in 2011, includes one painting from each of these three key phases in Jenney’s career, as well as a selection of drawings, which further reveal his social and artistic concerns. First, in *Moms and Kids* (1969)—a dichotomous title typical of the *Bad Paintings*—children play on swings and a seesaw while their mothers watch from a bench nearby. A fence separates the children from a black road, and the larger area of the canvas is filled in with fresh green acrylic paint, thinly applied in wayward, untidy strokes. Next is *Ozarkia* (2014), a late *Good Painting*, which shows, in smoothly blended oil paint, a long branch, rocks, and the gleaming surface of water, a horizonless view so crisp that one can almost feel the cool mountain air of the American Midwest to which the title refers. Lastly, a *New Good Painting* titled *Modern Africa* (2016) evokes the dry climate of northern Africa, depicting a staircase and a ramp-like fragment surrounded by sand, with footprints and a long shadow suggesting human presence. All of the paintings are displayed in heavy black wooden frames, designed and made by Jenney. The frames recall the crown moulding often used on window trims, alluding to Leon Battista Alberti’s metaphorical window, which has guided artists’ understanding of single-point perspective since the Renaissance. Jenney’s frames, concurrent with the *Good* and *New Good Paintings*, and added to the *Bad Paintings* retrospectively, serve as theatrical foregrounds, while their respective titles, stenciled on in a capitalized serif font, help place the viewer by referring to specific locations.

In the *Good Paintings* and the *New Good Paintings*, “good” is both a formal and a conceptual label; Jenney’s refined use of paint and color recalls that of the Hudson River School painters, whose natural vistas presented the virgin landscape as a spiritual, utopic realm. Similarly, Jenney’s work addresses themes of universal significance, such as the artist’s cultural role, climate change, and notions of societal progress. He communicates these topics in his drawings as well; in *Liberty Contemplating the Nuclear Age* (2003), a woman wearing a crown and holding a stone tablet, like the Statue of Liberty, sits in front of a curtain, staring into the future of the nation.

Neil Jenney was born in Torrington, CT, and raised in Westfield, MA. Collections include the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA); Louisiana Museum, Humlebæk, Denmark; and Tate, London. Solo institutional exhibitions include “Paintings and Sculpture 1967–1980,” University of California Art Museum, Berkeley (1981, traveled to Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Louisiana Museum, Denmark; and Kunsthalle Basel,

Switzerland); “Collection in Context—Neil Jenney: Natural Rationalism,” Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (1994); and “North America,” Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, CT (2007). Jenney’s work has been featured in major group shows and biennials, including the Whitney Biennial (1969, 1973, 1981, 1987); “Representations of America” (1977–78, organized by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco for the Pushkin Museum, Moscow; the Hermitage, Saint Petersburg; and The Palace of Art, Minsk, Belarus); “New Image Painting,” Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (1978); and “Bad Painting,” New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York (1978).

Image: Neil Jenney, *Modern Africa*, 2016, oil on canvas in artist's frame, 74 × 101 × 3 inches (188 × 256.5 × 7.6 cm) © Neil Jenney.

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Gagosian | T. +1.212.744.2313 | www.gagosian.com
Contact: press@gagosian.com