

Jesse Willenbring

It Is A Bed of Belief

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A bed of belief - what is it, what does it do, what is its goal, what might it be asking - is not so easy to describe or define. Quite unlike painting, which, although continually poked and prodded, formally and conceptually pushed back and forth between abstraction and representation, is more or less settled terrain as a visual language involving a fluid and a surface. The hardcore painters and art historians may scoff at such a pithy distillation. Yet maybe this is what Jesse Willenbring is getting at with the title of the exhibition and the paintings within it. Whether his or the paintings of others, and regardless of what they look like or are made of, that the objects of this language and their significance for both the maker and beholder are all resting upon this bed of belief. This might be a type of radical uncertainty, or what philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge referred to when he coined the phrase 'a suspension of disbelief' as the path that favors poetic faith. On the other hand, the cliché is seeing is believing, and while at times it may be that simple, painting tends to ask for much more.

Without getting morbid, the origin of the word 'bed' appears to be about 1500 years old and to come from the verb 'to dig' as it pertained to the deceased, such that their eternal resting place would be dug out of the ground. The concept grew new meaning when it became associated with gardening, as the plot in which one would plant their vegetables, and in good times, flowers. Going beyond that sends one into an etymological rabbit hole that isn't particularly germane to Willenbring's exhibition, but I won't stop you. The other element of this exhibition, 'belief,' gets more epistemological. Look up the various types of beliefs and you can see why: experienced, influenced, intuitive, behavioral, rational, emotional, conscious, unconscious, each implying a personal narrative difficult to dispute. Truth and knowledge are yesterday's news, impotent, if not altogether obsolete. This isn't an endorsement; but take a look around and it's easy enough to see that subjectivity is the headline above the fold.

Veering away from any such cynicism, Willenbring invites us to play along. The artist has created three manuals that embrace difference and offer the opportunity to draw one's own bed, a tree letter, and belief. Indeed, four distinct groups of people - friends, family, students and squads - have done just that, making individual drawings that comprise a large, communal work that the artist has installed in the front window. In the gallery, the paintings of the exhibition take the "How to Draw a Tree Letter" prompt beyond pen and paper, creating a suite of eight paintings. There are two large, four medium, and two small pieces each revolving around a letter that is abstracted from a tree-like form. The letter gives way to a construction of painted space that leans heavily on the optical properties of color. When looked at together, the eight paintings of branches and stumps form the sentence, "iT is A BED." That doesn't sound too complicated, but then again, many questions may remain. Depending on how you orient it, belief might be the tool that deciphers this uncertainty by allowing the uncertainty to exist.

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