

# GREENE NAFTALI

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## David Diao *On Barnett Newman, 1991–2023*

November 17, 2023 – January 13, 2024  
8<sup>th</sup> Floor

Over the past six decades, David Diao has become a vital figure in the history of painting and a touchstone for fellow artists, known for his formally rigorous works that challenge the tenets of modernism from within. *On Barnett Newman, 1991–2023* marks his debut exhibition at Greene Naftali, and attests to Diao’s abiding fascination with the Abstract Expressionist master. Accompanied by a forthcoming catalog with an original essay by Jeffrey Weiss, this focused survey confronts the modernist legacy with a potent blend of reverence and doubt, tracing the identities of abstraction—and of painting itself—through the life and work of one key practitioner.

Born in China’s Sichuan Province in 1943, Diao fled with his family to Hong Kong before immigrating to the U.S. in 1955, and that experience of displacement has informed his career-long reckoning with the levers of power that govern the art world. The Newman paintings serve as a fitting introduction to his practice as a whole: as acts of homage that also question the canon—who it admits and who is excluded.

Diao’s admiration for Newman was forged through an early encounter: as a recent college graduate working as an art handler to make ends meet, Diao installed Newman’s *Stations of the Cross* at the Guggenheim in 1966. He credits that signal event with setting his own course as a painter, and by the early 1990s he returned to Newman’s example in exacting (if oblique) terms. The cycle began at a moment of deep distrust in painting as a critical art form, but Diao is unwavering in what Weiss calls “his conflicted faith in the medium,” using the tools of abstraction to express his ambivalence toward the painterly ideals Newman professed. That tradition was both ingrained and seemingly irretrievable from Diao’s vantage at the height of postmodernism, and he has refined an arm’s-length approach that melds skepticism and wry humor.

The Newman works shift abstract painting to a more data-driven register, reducing Newman’s singular achievement to a finite set of metrics—titles, dates, and dimensions of paintings, drawn from published resources like the catalogue raisonné. Diao acts as an unofficial archivist of Newman while subtly channeling his signature style: in the lateral splay of his paintings’ proportions that gestures toward Ab-Ex scale, or the columnar alignment of information that riffs on Newman’s “zip.” Diao’s tabulations are crisp and orderly yet betray a human touch—through the weave of the canvas that occasionally peeks through the even layers of acrylic, or stray pencil marks that rupture tightly regulated fields of straight lines and sharp corners. The paintings are stringent in conception but surprisingly supple in their execution, their lush monochrome surfaces honed with a palette knife that leaves faint traces of the artist’s hand. Each work is hyperrational on its face but driven by more wayward desires, shot through with a tacit longing for the absent originals it recalls but can never yield. “There is something utterly moving about the sheer facticity of names and dates,” Diao has said, and the paintings challenge us to square their cool, administrative logic with an act of such untrammelled devotion. The Newman sequence exemplifies Diao’s broader take on painting’s past: treating the history of abstract form not as grand narrative or fixed convention, but as an ongoing process of citation and reference, index and selection.

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David Diao lives and works in New York. Institutional solo exhibitions of his work have been held at Gund Gallery at Kenyon College, Gambier, Ohio (2017); Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing (2015); The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, Connecticut (2014); The Glass House, New Canaan, Connecticut (2014); École National d’Arte de Dijon, France (1992); and Musée d’Art Moderne, Saint-Étienne, France (1989). Notable group exhibitions include San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2023); M+, Hong Kong (2021); Le Consortium, Dijon (2019); Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia (2014); and the 2014 Whitney Biennial. Diao’s work is in the collections of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; Blanton Museum of Art, Austin; Brooklyn Museum, New York; Le Consortium, Dijon; Fonds national d’art contemporain, Paris; Fonds régional d’art contemporain, Brittany, France; M+ Collection, Hong Kong; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Taipei Fine Arts Museum; Vancouver Art Gallery; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, among others.