

## **Turner (On the Work of Cornelia Baltes)**

A silhouette of a modest dining chair. A bulbous blue form. The nominal outline of a bird. Cornelia Baltes' new paintings play games with images. The content of her work is the iconography of the everyday, yet objects remain alluded to rather than explicated. The abstract and anecdotal collide. Typically painted with an extreme economy, the paintings turn the diminutive into something more monumental by simplifying common motifs. A gigantic outline of a hand takes over the whole wall. The outline of a shaggy dog is implied by a few lines with two dots for eyes. Taken collectively, the component works form an abridged visual narrative, full of playful detail.

For her new exhibition, *Turner*, at the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, Baltes presents a series of new paintings displayed horizontally on wheels. The work can be moved around the gallery floor, with each image losing its native composition — top becomes bottom, landscape becomes portrait. This strategy turns the floor into an animated space where new configurations can be conjured. As a starting point, Baltes responded to the low ceiling by focusing her attention on the floor as much as the walls. It is a recurrent motif within Baltes practice to expand the arena of painting. Content spills out of the frame and onto the architecture. Previously, canvasses have been molded and cut, lent against the wall and propped up, becoming sculptural elements.

One can draw parallels to artists such as Frank Stella who similarly amplified the objectness of the painting by undermining the privileged status of the picture frame. For painters such as Stella, it was important that abstraction dissolved the hierarchy between the center and the periphery, every single part of the canvas was as important as any other. By putting the paintings on wheels and placing them on the floor, Baltes wittily confounds any specific vantage point. The installation forces us to walk around the paintings; what we see depends on where we are standing. Baltes takes a holistic approach to the exhibition, as each discrete part operates as part of a greater whole.

Alongside the paintings Baltes has made a series of murals throughout the building. Their bold graphic qualities are in contrast to the busy detail of the space that surrounds them. The artist takes us through the Arts Centre, offering oblique clues to the exhibition on the top floor. Like the title of the exhibition, the paintings offer a productive miss-step. Turner is both the name of Britain's most famous painter, yet also a literal German translation of the word 'gymnast' (one can also infer the notion of 'turning' the floor based works). Painting is, like the act of translation, an active process between intention and perception. Baltes belongs to a lineage of painters such as Mary Heilmann and Raoul De Keyser whose work is characterized by a commitment to formal abstraction alongside something more personal or biographical. In the gymnast, we can see a figure that creates new formal possibilities for the body. Baltes similarly engages in a type of mental pirouette with the world around her, turning the commonplace into something altogether more exceptional.

*George Vasey*