

Conversation/s

Let us make a special effort to stop communicating with each other, so we can have some conversation.

– Mark Twain

I must begin with an acknowledgement of three generous spirits – Günter Umberg, James White and their shared gallerist Thomas Zander. I have known Günter Umberg for many years now – he is a painter whose clarity and rigour has inspired me both personally and professionally. It was Günter who introduced Emma and I to the paintings of James White when his work was presented at Art Basel by their gallery, Galerie Thomas Zander. The exhibition *Conversation* was to be staged some months later at Zander's Köln gallery and was in its planning stages. So enthusiastic were we about this idea and James White's paintings, that we resolved to meet James as soon as the opportunity arose.





Of course I want to thank Thomas Zander especially who has kindly and collegially allowed us to re-stage this adaption of his exhibition. It should be stated clearly that Thomas Zander's version was considerably more extensive than this iteration. The breadth of work and the space given to it was generous in every sense. I would like to think however that this slimmer version captures something of that spirit and clarity. Of course whilst we are mindful to install the works with the consideration that Günter, James and indeed Thomas bring to all their exhibitions, I am conscious that we are working from a tasting menu of sorts – one where less is indeed less but absolutely worthy, nonetheless. What I will say is that seeing the group of eight paintings together that we have used in this exhibition - whilst it makes me yearn for the larger rendition - there is so much potency in this redacted presentation that I am deeply grateful to all parties for agreeing to support this and it feels more than justified.



Above: Günter Umberg and Andrew Jensen, Art Basel Hong Kong 2018

Opposite: James White studio, London 2021

George Bernard Shaw's assertion that "she had lost the art of conversation but not, unfortunately, the power of speech," can sadly be applied to a great deal of art... monologues about monotheism. Umberg's position as one of the late 20th centuries most resolute "monochrome" painters has at times I'm sure, risked having his work being co-opted into the preachy rhetoric often associated with the monotheistic. I have long felt that Umberg's paintings push right through this flimsy defence, shedding any fundamentalism 'en route' to a truly ecumenical and open dialogue with the very best painting.



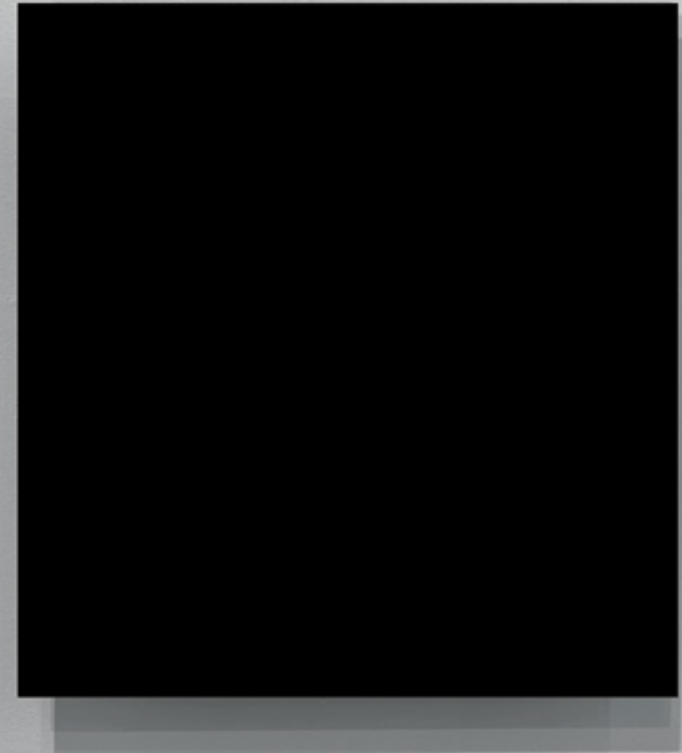
Above: Günther Umberg studio, Corberon, France, 2017

Opposite: Günther Umberg

Ohne Titel / Untitled, 2010

poliment, pigment, dammar on wood

38 x 36 cm



Though they may appear to occupy polar positions, my sense was that Sandback and Umberg end up in close conversation. Sandback's 'immaterial materiality' and Umberg's 'material immateriality.'
 – Andrew Jensen



Truman Capote quipped “a conversation is a dialogue, not a monologue. That’s why there are so few good conversations: due to scarcity, two intelligent talkers seldom meet”. Here it is the case that two considered painters have met. Even so, at first sight one might assume that a conversation between the most abstract of abstractionists and a painter dedicated to the resuscitation of certain traditions associated with realism might be short or at least a little contended. But rather than being adversarial one starts to realise that there may only be three degrees of separation here rather than six, and that image and space, material and support, intention and vision are simply elements in the service of a startling and cohesive proposition.

So what might this proposition be? In 2009 we made an exceptional exhibition $E=MC^2$ that brought the work of Günter Umberg together with Fred Sandback and Callum Innes. The collision of such profound materiality in Umberg and such weightlessness in Sandback was poetic. Innes’s delicate undressing of body and form served as an elegant analogy of transition but the apparent contradiction between Umberg and Sandback underpinned the potency of $E=MC^2$ as a visual experience.

Fred Sandback

Untitled (Sculptural Study, Three Part Construction), 1987/2009

black acrylic yarn, ceiling height x 274.3 x 91.4 cm

Collection of The Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

Günter Umberg

Ohne Titel / Untitled, 1992

poliment, pigment, dammar on wood

220 x 70 x 4 cm

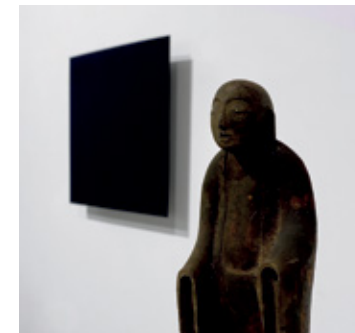
Installation: $E = MC^2$, Jensen Gallery, Sydney 2011



Silence is one of the great arts of conversation
– Marcus Tullius Cicero

Whilst both Umberg and Sandback are artists whose work has a radical clarity to it, they seem to begin from diametrically opposed positions – one giving supernatural density to material and vision and the other offering us the most modest evidence of form and sensation - so humble in fact as to have us question the very existence of space and volume, ours included.

It was apparent in this exhibition and in others that Umberg has been central, exhibitions such as the Museum Ludwig's 2001 *Body of Painting*, that his work behaves as something of a counterpoint or fulcrum to multiple positions. It is perhaps easy to see this state as one of opposition, however it may be more accurate to see Umberg's paintings as unexpectedly co-operative. I can assure you though that this co-operation only extends to work that is similarly assiduous. In attempting to explore this dynamic I made a small project some years ago with the work of another 'realist' painter and in this instance, it revealed, somewhat cruelly, the deceit that can accompany representational painting that aspires to clarity but instead confuses it with hollow simplicity and mannerism.



Above: Günter Umberg
Ohne Titel / Untitled, 2019
poliment, pigment, dammar on wood
52 x 49 cm
Japanese Buddha Bodhisattva, Edo period
23 x 6 x 4 cm
Installation: Fox Jensen, Sydney 2020

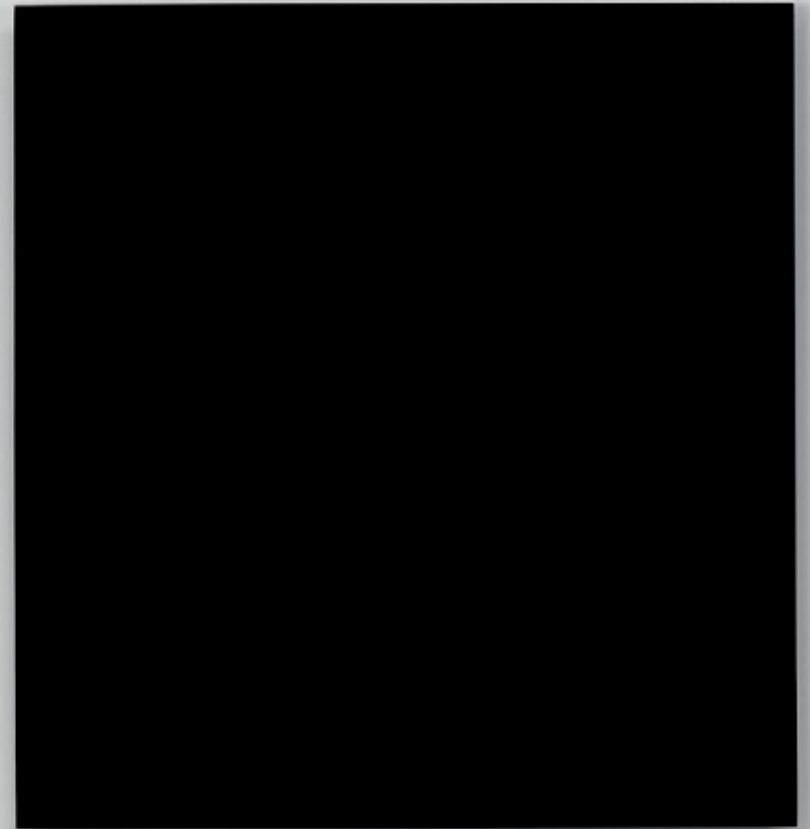
Opposite: Günter Umberg
Notre-Dame du Haut, Ronchamp, Haute-Saône, France, 2018

I think we can agree that Umberg's paintings appear defiantly free of depiction. They resist the easy allure of recognition at every turn and yet I have been fortunate to travel with him and know how often he stops to look at images and how deeply he understands portrayal. He slows down, not just to look at, but to absorb and assimilate them. There is a sense that he is absorbing their very spiral matrix into his own core. This kind of looking is well beyond analysis and scrutiny. It is as if he is taking a full audit of what he sees and feels and then his own paintings, as contained and free of the burdens of likeness as they appear, expand by association - howl with recognition and remembrance of those experiences.



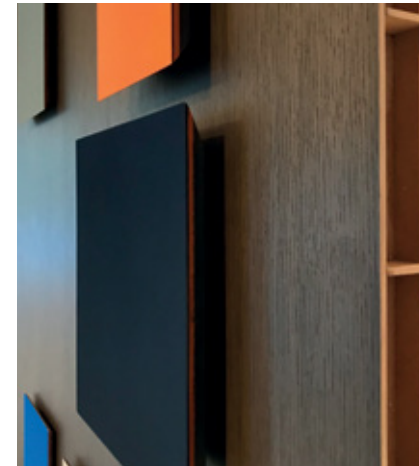
Above: Rogier van der Weyden
Francesco d'Este, ca. 1460
oil on wood
31.8 x 22.2 cm

Opposite: Günter Umberg
Ohne Titel / Untitled, 2019
poliment, pigment, dammar on wood
52 x 49 cm





In recent years Umberg has added a group of paintings that exert even greater conversational possibility. Various called *Plans* and *Territoriums*, Umberg has gathered paintings of various scales and colours into dramatic arrangements, most installed on a new material substrate that acts as an architectural anchor, a field that seeks to corral these more frisky installations. These works gather a new molecular energy through their clustering. Colour and scale gain unexpected yet specific compositional alignments through their congregation. Whilst the more traditionally highly 'stilled' conversation that exists between Umberg's single work and the viewer, or indeed between his painting and its environment is breached to some degree in this new constitution, the multiple exchanges that each element enjoys escalates the volume and range of the conversations so that we/they are now in conference with a small choir.



Above: *Plan No. 3* (detail)

Opposite: Günther Umberg

Plan No. 3, 2017

poliment, pigment, dammar on wood, MDF, oak veneer
270 x 220 cm

Installation: *Plan No. 3*, Fox Jensen Gallery, Sydney 2017



Galerie Thomas Zander

Installation: James White, Günter Umberg: *Conversation*, Köln, Germany 2019



I know James and his paintings much less so. This is the very first time the Sydney gallery will present his work and yet the quality of provocation and clarity, the measured sensibility that is fundamental to Umberg's work feels demonstrable in his paintings. Recognition and remembrance too - in fact the works are positively loaded with flashback and reconstruction. White's paintings seem to celebrate the enigmas of hindsight, reminding us about what is behind, as much as what is in front. In doing so they are like history itself - Victor Hugo asked "What is history? An echo of the past in the future; a reflex from the future on the past." Well James White's paintings collage fragments of recollection that cohere into powerful, sometimes alarming impressions of what lies ahead.

Though their emotionally cool collaboration with photography, itself a witness to past events, implies that something is secured in the image itself, it is White's stubborn re-making of these images in the medium of paint, together with the implications of time that defends our deeper memories, protecting them from erosion by seeming to solidify their somatic genealogy.



Above: Installation: *Analogue*, Fox Jensen McCrory, Auckland 2020

Opposite: James White

The Whiskey, 2014

oil and varnish on acrylic sheet

in perspex box frame

165 x 155 x 7.5 cm (framed)



Choosing to work within the slim margins of the Still Life genre, White manages to accord his extraordinarily detailed observations a new revitalised but ambiguous symbolism. Whilst the atmosphere of uncertainty and incident that permeates many of the works continues the long traditions of *natura morta*, whose pervasive theme of the brevity of life, in White's compositions the imagery feels less premeditated, more documentary in feel. The crime-scene, almost noirish climate and desaturated palette of the settings, together with the occasional use of multiple viewpoints animate and hasten our rendezvous with the paintings. These aren't "stilled" narratives that depend on a lexicon of agreed symbolism, rather White's paintings have a cool disorder to them that causes us to question how vision itself is coded and assimilated.



Above: Willem Claesz Heda
Still Life with Oysters, a Silver Tazza, and Glassware, 1635
 oil on wood
 49.8 x 80.6 cm

Opposite: James White
Atorvastatin (detail), 2016
 oil and varnish on acrylic faced honeycomb panel
 in perspex box frame
 63 x 73 x 6 cm (framed)





James White
Atorvastatin (detail), 2016
oil and varnish on acrylic faced honeycomb panel
in perspex box frame
63 x 73 x 6 cm (framed)

The updating of the *natura morta* platform that James White achieves involves two fundamental strategies. The contemporaneity of the objects, their lack of sentimentality successfully reduces any cloying nostalgia that often weakens the genre. The objects he chooses to paint have an occasionally unwelcome familiarity. Their domestic ordinariness is a quality we recognise immediately. In this sense White's paintings feel loaded with innuendo. Because we don't simply recognise their subject matter, we can begin to feel like witnesses, perhaps even suspects in the scenes.

Images that arrested a moment in time are now given the responsibility that goes with being an actualised object. In White's paintings, images that were conceived at shutter speed are incubated at length. Perhaps it is this negotiation with time that Umberg and White share most profoundly. Both artists request we slow down so as to begin to apprehend, not what it is that we see, but what it is that we don't, not simply what the painting feels like, but what feeling it invokes in us. In a sense they are both petitioning us to experience sight as more than an ocular phenomenon, one that tangles with other senses, provoking memory and emotion and questioning the very notion that 'seeing is believing' by ritualizing visions' fallibility and contingency, its complicity with invention and its duty to experience.



James White
Lockdown Painting 8, 2020
 oil and varnish on birch ply panel
 in perspex box frame
 28.5 x 39 x 5 cm



Günter Umberg
Ohne Titel / Untitled, 2018-2019
 poliment, pigment, dammar on wood
 34.5 x 19.5 cm

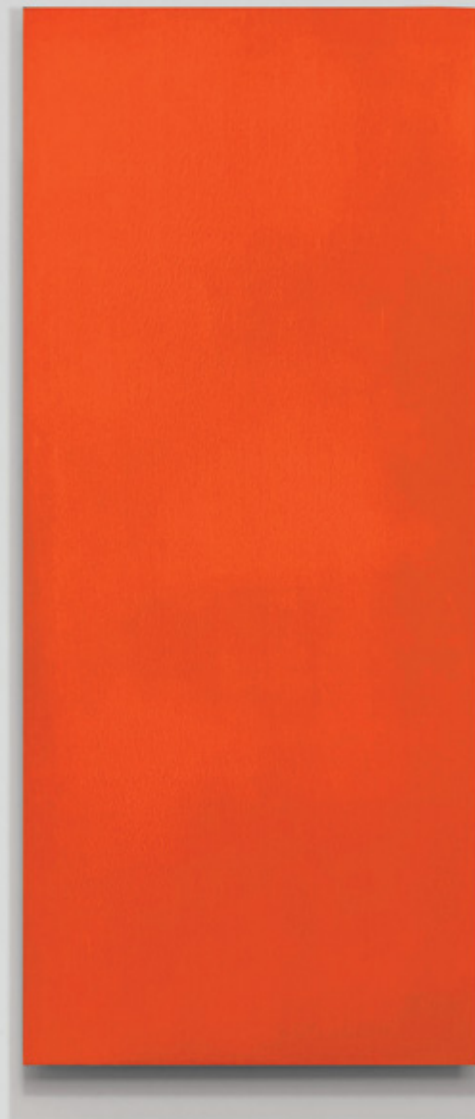
James White
Basement, 2012
 oil and varnish on birch ply panel
 in perspex box frame
 31 x 41 x 5 cm

This shared entreaty of both Umberg and White, to decelerate vision and to enfold it with a more bodily announcement of form is also manifest in their unusually distinct but aligned approaches to the body of the painting. The decisions that Umberg has made over many years, to express the intersection between the wall and the painting - something that reveals the sides of the painting – at times even exposed its back, give his works a highly specific character. These are paintings that simultaneously present the body as both present and absent. They declare a measurable corporeal mass whilst manifesting an immeasurable void. Colour certainly alters the register of this experience but it is Umberg's decisions about proportion, about thickness and junction that help impose the paintings' actuality.



Günter Umberg & Andrew Jensen
Corberon, France 2019

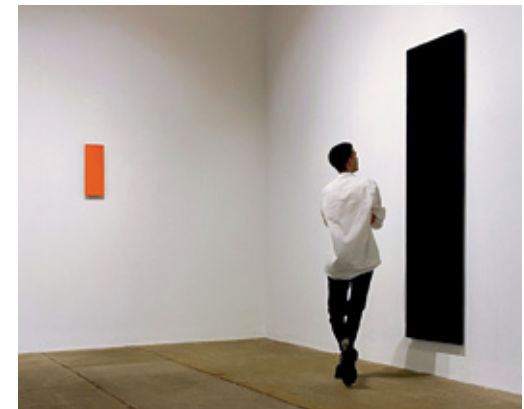
Günter Umberg
Ohne Titel / Untitled, 2020
poliment, pigment, dammar on wood
49 x 19.5 cm



White's decisions about the sides of the paintings are equally specific. Like Umberg he has long ago abandoned the neatly folded linen stretcher in favour of a more candid material expression. Laminated wooden edges or honeycomb panels are cut so as to reveal what they are – utilitarian supports for painting.

Their prosaic character can at times feel counterintuitive with the patient attention and skill given to realising the image but White's work has never been about illusion. This revealed material character allows both the work and the viewer to accept each other without disguise. There is an odd rectitude in this though, White would not claim any morality in it I'm sure. It's just that he, like Umberg, wants that paintings are conceived, made and experienced consciously. That their fundamental obligation is to truth not deception, they resist the current implosion of fact towards fiction and are at the centre of the conversation they share. This exhibition, even in its abbreviated form, demonstrates these common aspirations and paintings' rare capacity, to blend veracity and imagination.

Andrew Jensen



Günter Umberg
Ohne Titel / Untitled, 2020
 poliment, pigment, dammar on wood
 49 x 19.5 cm

Günter Umberg
 Installation: Fox Jensen, Sydney 2020

*Don't tell me the moon is shining;
show me the glint of light on broken glass.*
– Anton Chekov



James White
Atorvastatin (detail), 2016
oil and varnish on acrylic faced honeycomb panel
in perspex box frame
63 x 73 x 6 cm (framed)

James White
Lockdown Painting 8 (detail), 2020
oil and varnish on birch ply panel
in perspex box frame
28.5 x 39 x 5 cm



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p. 12 The Friedsam Collection, Bequest of Michael Friedsam, 1931

p. 16/17 Photo: Saša Fuis Photographie, Köln

p. 22 From the Collection of Rita and Frits Markus, Bequest of Rita Markus, 2005

p. 36 James White and Günter Umberg, London 2019

