

Anna Freeman Bentley

Collected and Composed
Frestonian Gallery, London
16 January – 22 February 2020

This exhibition by East London-based Anna Freeman Bentley (b. 1982, London), her first solo show with the West London-based gallery, followed solo exhibitions at Ahmanson Gallery in Irvine, California, in 2018, and at DENK Gallery in Los Angeles in 2019, and was a decidedly joyful and colourful affair. Along with Freeman Bentley's trademark rapid yet carefully controlled brushwork, the palette was bold and bright, the oranges, yellows, pinks and lilacs positively effervescent in works such as *Establishing* (2019) and *Watching* (2019), presented side by side in the pristine exhibition space.

The former painting depicts a scene familiar to anybody who has ever visited a flea market or watched an episode of *Bargain Hunt* – a hotchpotch of bric-a-brac piled up on rickety fold-up tables inside a tent, hovering between an antiques fair and a glorified jumble sale. Small piles of crockery jostle with jugs and vases, mirrors and picture frames; a guitar sticks out from a bag, leaning against the table with empty boxes chucked underneath. There is, of course, always that flash of excitement on entering such a place – the thought that you just might find something of high value, a pristine pair of Staffordshire porcelain dogs that is perfect for your mantelpiece or a vintage butter dish that might make an excellent addition to a friend's collection. These are second-hand goods – 'preloved' as today's more go-getting sellers might refer to them – hoping to find a new lease of life in a different home rather than end up at the mercy of the recycling centre. Freeman Bentley's painting is glowing with the warm light of optimism and curiosity, like venturing into Aladdin's cave.

In the latter work, which also appears to be housed under a fabric roof, the owners (or staff) have clearly made more effort with the presentation of their wares: stripy and zigzag patterned rugs are displayed at eye level, festooned over the wooden rafters, while smaller items – unidentifiable trinkets and knick-knacks – are neatly arranged on large platters and trays on a central table. On first impression, the viewer might be forgiven for thinking they are looking at a Moroccan restaurant rather than a market stall, so appealing to the senses is the scene. Other works lead us towards the shabby chic end of the market – the kind of stalls you might find at *'les puces'* – the fairs common around France that seem often to tempt British dealers across the channel in search of desirable items on which they can turn a profit. The painting *Supporting* (2019) conveys this sense of antique continental charm, the pink-tinged light of

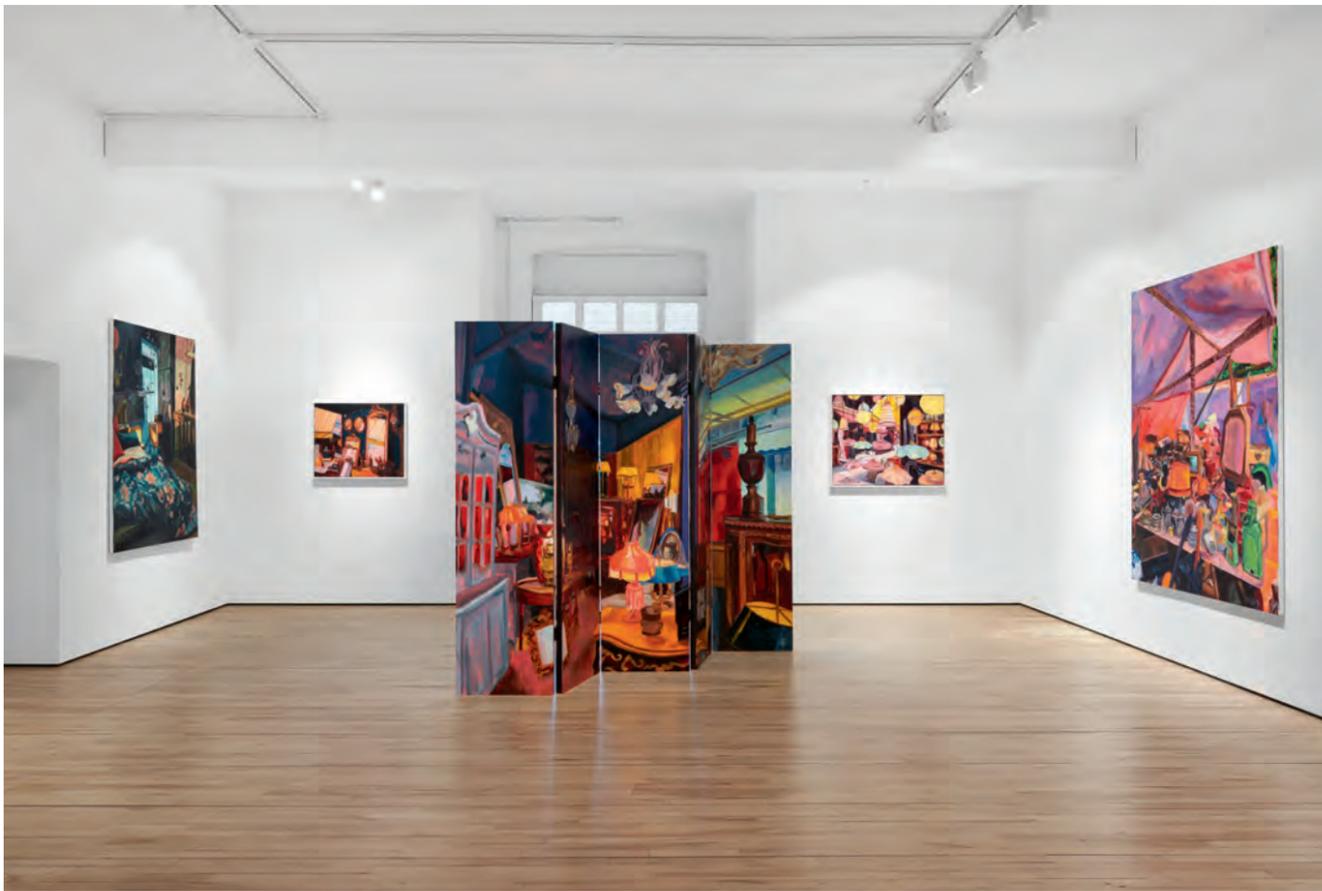
a summertime sunset falling through golden striped awnings, reflected in a stack of Baroque-style mirrors leaning against a dark blue wall. The decorative flourishes on the elegantly proportioned wooden and gilt frames might make us dream of escaping to our own chateau, or of making a new life in the sun. Freeman Bentley's handling of the paint here is just perfect – the level of detail and the complexity of visual information is counterbalanced by the confident, relaxed ease of her brush marks.

In addition to the ongoing series of flea market paintings, the exhibition also presented a number of other, very different interiors that are harder to put your finger on. Works such as *Propping* and *Blocking* (both 2019), for example, look as if they might be based on styled shoots from interiors magazines or sets from TV productions – the carefully selected and positioned furniture and furnishings giving the impression of being lived in yet seeming just that little bit too carefully composed to be so. It turns out that they are based on scenes created within museums – displays of interiors – showcasing particular design styles for visitors to experience. Thus, artificiality vies with authenticity, staged-ness with naturalness. Uniting the two discrete bodies of work is the absence of figures, despite the abundance of signifiers of human life, the former trying to present some sense of order among the chaos, the latter attempting to create the feel of spontaneity through careful deliberation. Both, in a way, are forms of curation.

Freeman Bentley has, ever since her MA degree show at the Royal College of Art, been fascinated by interiors, furniture, fixtures and fittings, by how architecture and design can shape the atmosphere of a place as well as guide our physical interaction with it. Acute angles, reflections, shadows, the positioning of a chair or the use of a decorative screen to divide up a room all become pictorial devices in her works, three-dimensional elements within a two-dimensional composition. Interestingly, this becomes inverted within the exhibition itself in a painting that takes the form of a freestanding, five-panel folding screen. One side shows an antiques shop at dusk, the reverse, staged interiors by night. We are one step closer to being able to actually walk around inside Freeman Bentley's paintings.

Establishing, 2019. Oil on canvas,
198 x 145 cm





Exhibition view of 'Collected and Composed' at Frestonian Gallery, London



Blocking, 2019. Oil on canvas, 161 x 121 cm