



# TEXTE ZUR KUNST

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**Wie wir arbeiten wollen**  
How we aim to work

## WHO KNOWS NOTHING?

**Adrienne Rooney on John Finneran  
at 47 Canal, New York**

We were greeted by lips and noses, but no eyes. The eyes were in the back gallery, keeping watch at the periphery from a small painting titled “Holy Spirits” (all works 2012). They viewed the entrance to 47 Canal and looked out through the windows. When given form in language, the body is often fragmented. For instance, we locate pain through description and speak of specific sensory organs as they take in the world on behalf of the mind. Representing the body in fragments draws attention to each part as a sign for its function. John Finneran visually isolated three of the senses, in light black outlines of their anatomical origin, and in so doing persuaded viewers to consider their own. The painting of lips and noses is titled “3 Noses, 3 Mouths” – only the eyes, which observed the main room from the fringe, are holy.

The exhibition “Goin’ Home” included a total of six paintings in the main gallery. Each recalls familiar symbols such as ancient Egyptian figures, but the artist tweaks these symbols to match his overall aesthetic language. The works are neither historical representations nor imitations of history but a collective reurning of styles. For instance, “Restful Spirits (Sunsets)” depicts three nude women, one of whom is upturned. These spirits recall the three graces, and if that is indeed what they are, they give a nearly life-size form to an otherworldly interpretation: Goddesses all but neon pink in skin tone, with purple locks and matching triangular pubic hair. The woman in the center rests her left foot on a sun the size of a soccer ball, but not so as to balance; the spirits don’t need to stand on anything to hold their vertical posture. If there is a narrative here, it may

be read through symbols, or perhaps in Finneran’s choice to use them at all. There is a sense that although the eyes are holy, the paintings contain more than is visibly present.

In earlier examples of his writings, available on his website, Finneran considered his canvases as territories for his mind externalized, referencing the capacity of symbolism and iconography to contain psychological and emotional information. Previously, he circuitously delineated the narratives behind his works and their motifs. However, with “Goin’ Home” he refused to provide the “expected” textual apparatus indicating to viewers how the works should be understood. Instead, he joined the increasing number of artists choosing to use the press release as a space for layering on meaning not otherwise present in the exhibition in a concrete way. Finneran wrote a diary-like entry about his hesitant relationship with a free jazz album by Albert Ayler, from which he derived the exhibition’s title. An abstract form of music that, like traditional jazz, prioritized the expression of the performing musician over the exact voice of the composer, free jazz promoted the presence of the personal through interpretation and improvisation.

Finneran’s visual language combines symbols from everyday life with images firmly embedded in an art viewer’s visual vocabulary. In this exhibition, tumbled forms from and beyond the art historical canon populated the galleries as leitmotifs among the works. In this group of paintings, Finneran engaged with inescapably mysterious and arguably spiritual signs, such as basic shapes, strong coloration, goddesses, isolated corporeal forms, the celestial and esoteric. In “Spirit Kneeling Beneath the Moon”, composed in shades of blue, the spirit kneels upside down



John Finneran, "Goin' Home", 47 Canal, New York, 2013, exhibition views

with feet toward the sky. The moon appeared several times in works throughout the space, often in place of heads. It was an icon of sorts in “Study for the Altar with St. John”, in which purple unevenly flanks a central pink color panel, the three segments roofed by dripping black. A study for a space of religious offerings, it is simultaneously a stage – with the set being a lemon-yellow crescent moon, translucent in a pink sky. Finneran provided abstract visuals for ineffable themes, some of which have been “mimetically” rendered in the past. We were greeted by mystery uncoded; although Finneran refused to profess the subtext of his paintings, he did nothing less than allow them to speak directly to the eyes. And as is often the case with abstract painting, these works surface from and appeal to the emotions, though not necessarily freed from intellect.

Although Finneran’s forms are recognizable, their signification is not clear, and I mean this in the best possible sense. For while the paintings may be interpreted in a variety of ways, it is essential to note that his exploration of history deals more with the personal engagement with vestiges of the past than with the pedagogical construct of historical knowledge. I, for one, have been taught that the sun has personified truth (all is revealed in light) – in Christian mythology it was made, along with the moon and the stars, on the fourth day of creation. Day and night represent powers of ruin that ceaselessly mark the passage of time. I could posit that “Holy Spirits” is a flock of the Eye of Horus, an enigmatic sign of protection in ancient Egypt that saw everything. But all of this is somehow inconsequential – I know that what I saw was *seeing*, not knowing. Feeling discouraged about his generation, Francis Picabia once wrote, “Even so, I still have hopes

that nothing has yet ended; there remain myself and a few friends who have a love of life, a life of which we know nothing, and which interests us for this very reason.”<sup>1</sup> This could also be said of history. That we know nothing, perhaps as little as we know of now, and that that’s part of the pleasure in looking back. The object we faced in “Goin’ Home” was history, well, its remnants, as seen by the eye, holy or not. And the politics of the past floated into the room in a playful way just long enough to confuse the viewer into thinking he knew what was up or down, sacred or secular, mysterious or nothing – or both.

John Finneran, “Goin’ Home”, 47 Canal, New York, February 27–April 7, 2013.

#### Note

- 1 Francis Picabia, “Francis merci!” (1923) in: same, *I am a Beautiful Monster: Poetry, Prose, and Provocation*, transl. by Marc Lowenthal, Cambridge, Mass./London 2007, pp. 299–300.