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Neil Jenney (b. 1945), *North America Divided*, 1990-92

ARTIST

Neil Jenney (b.1945)

TITLE

North America Divided

MEDIUM

Oil on wood, in artist's frame

DATE

1990-92

SIZE

25 ½ x 113 in : 64.8 x 287.0 cm

INSCRIPTIONS

Signed and dated "1990-1992" verso

PROVENANCE

Acquired directly from the artist in June 1995

Emily Fisher Landau, New York

Sotheby's, their sale, Emily Fisher Landau:

An Era Defined - Contemporary Curated,
1st March 2024, Lot 37

Private collection, acquired from the
above

EXHIBITED

New York, Fisher Landau Center for Art,
Wood Work, October 1997 - October
1998

New York, Fisher Landau Center for Art,
Painting and Sculpture: Selections from
the Collection Curated by Bill Katz, May
2007 - January 2008

New York, Fisher Landau Center for
Art, Visual Conversations, September -
December 2012

REFERENCE

A24-03



Balancing idealism and realism, Jenney's landscape paintings are highly stylised and rendered with a careful attention to detail. Begun in 1971, the *Good Paintings* are differentiated from Jenney's previous body of work, which he designated as *Bad Paintings* (1969–70) after curator Marcia Tucker's 1978 New Museum exhibition "*Bad*" *Painting*, which included his work. Painted in acrylic in a loose, gestural style, the *Bad Paintings* represent relationships between people and things, while upending preconceptions of connoisseurship and "good taste." The *Good Paintings* are instead exacting studies of nature in oil paint on wooden panels.

Jenney's *Good Paintings* impart the experience of observing the North American landscape at close range, in contrast with the expansive vistas of untamed wilderness typical of the historical Hudson River School. While describing the natural world, many of the works also remind us that the environment is never far removed from human intervention. Jenney's handmade black wooden frames are integral to these works, which he regards as "painted sculpture." Playing off the classical conception of a painting as a window into fictive space, the frames

create an architectural foreground, asserting their status as physical objects. The works' mediated nature is further emphasised by the inclusion of titles stencilled in uppercase serif lettering.

In the *Good Paintings*, "good" is both a formal and a conceptual label as seen through Jenney's refined use of paint and color, and his approach to themes of universal significance, such as the artist's cultural role, climate change, and notions of societal progress. Stretching over nine feet wide in a narrow horizontal format, *North America Divided* (1990–92) pictures a tree trunk and bands of cirrus clouds together with a worn wooden fence and a long strand of barbed wire. Related paintings feature divisions within the landscape, with fence posts, paths, stone walls, and other constructions demarcating space.

With a sense of subjectivity that verges on the mythological, the *Good Paintings* convey the coexistence of their subjects in both the real and the imagined world.



Neil Jenney

Neil Jenney was born in Torrington, Connecticut in 1945. He studied at the Massachusetts College of Art between 1964 and 1966 before relocating to New York City in 1966, where he has lived and worked since. Early on, he supported himself with various jobs, including driving a taxi, while continuing to make art with materials gathered from his surroundings. His initial work focused on environmental sculpture, but he soon shifted toward painting, which he found more sustainable as a primary practice.

By the late 1960s, Jenney was producing paintings in a deliberately rough acrylic style. In 1969, he began working with oil on wood panels, a medium he would continue to use extensively. During this period, he also introduced large, hand-built frames, often painted black and stenciled with the work's title. These frames became integral to the presentation and meaning of his paintings, underscoring the objecthood of the works themselves. Between 1969 and 1970, his art was associated with "Bad Painting," a term applied by curator Marcia Tucker, and one that Jenney occasionally adopted in his own descriptions. He later characterised his approach as a form of "realism," by which he meant depictions of simple relationships between objects that conveyed narrative truths. Critics and historians have observed that this early period contributed to renewed attention toward representational painting at a time when abstraction and conceptual art were dominant.

In 1978, Jenney was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in Fine Arts. His paintings are represented in major institutional collections including the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Corcoran Gallery of Art, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Over time, his themes expanded from object relationships to include environmental and social subjects such as natural landscapes, pollution, and militarism. His work also evolved materially, from acrylic on canvas to oil on wood, and later to large-scale oil on canvas paintings that he constructed and transported with attention to their physical presence.

Throughout his career, Neil Jenney has pursued a consistent exploration of painting as both an image

and an object, presenting works that examine relationships between forms, environments, and cultural conditions. His position within American art since the late 1960s has been marked by his inclusion in key exhibitions, his representation in major museum collections, and his sustained practice across decades.

Major Solo Exhibitions

- 1968 – Sculpture exhibition, Cologne
- 1969 – *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials*, Whitney Museum, New York
- 1981–82 – *Painting and Sculpture 1967–1980*, traveling survey (Berkeley, Houston, Washington DC, Amsterdam, Humlebaek, Basel)
- 1994 – *Natural Rationalism*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
- 2001 – *The Bad Years 1967–70*, Gagosian Gallery, New York
- 2007 – *North America*, Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, Connecticut
- 2013 – *Works of the Jenney Archive*, Gagosian Gallery, New York
- 2017 – *Drawings & Paintings*, Gagosian Gallery, New York
- 2018 – *American Realist*, New Britain Museum of American Art, Connecticut
- 2021 – *American Realism Today*, Gagosian Gallery, New York
- 2024 – *Idealism Is Unavoidable*, Gagosian Gallery, New York

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1969 – *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials*, Whitney Museum, New York
- 1978 – *New Image Painting*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
- 1978 – *Bad Painting*, New Museum, New York
- 1981 – Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
- 1985 – Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
- 1991 – Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
- 2023–24 – *Framing Nature's Paradox: Neil Jenney & Donald Sultan, 1969–2023*, Morris Museum



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