

Helen Johnson

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With gossamer lyricism and cartoony glee, Australian artist Helen Johnson paints her meandering mediations in layers of figure and material, wit and research. Loose papers blow over goofy patterns and comic clips, swirling globs of paint cloud scraps of figuration, while actual clouds hide all but the pointed fingers of lithe hands with painted nails pointing out into the misty void (*I opened my hand*, 2014). Notes and observations are written in a loopy black cursive, mostly on the back of long, loose, unframed canvases hanging from chains. And besides the literal presence of words here, her paintings have a literary sophistication: a little urbane, wryly humored, gently absurd. Johnson paints with some of Amy Sillman's frisky cinching of philosophy and abstraction, but this artist only dips her brush lightly into painting qua painting; the exuberant range and pastel politicking of Öyvind Fahlström is a more appropriate comparison.

Referential as hell, Johnson's particular sources are either curiously obscure or more pointedly about Australian history and art that's lost on American eyes. But even unread, the paths and patterns, textures and tones of all her disparate sources come together with a lissome wrist and soft-hued palette that makes its own meaning. One back canvas scrawl reads, "What does the poem think? . . . Poetry can hardly stand the demand for clarity, the passive audience, the simple message."

— Andrew Berardini



Helen Johnson, *Product Plural*, 2015, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, leather, 120 x 72".