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ARTWRIT

BRITT JULIOUS REVIEWS NICHOLAS FRANK

The biographical history of an artist frequently runs outside of the typical construction of a narrative. For many, there is no concrete beginning or ending, but rather a series of false starts, hasty exits and extended breaks that define an artist's career. Milwaukee-based artist, writer, and curator Nicholas Frank cleverly addresses the superfluous nature of narrative and biography in his solo show at Western Exhibitions, "Reality, whatever it is."

The exhibition is divided into two sections. The first consists of a series of yellowed, framed book pages containing the history of work (writing, art, exhibitions) produced by the artist as part of his ongoing "Nicholas Frank Biography" project. Frank uses the meta-narrative, in part, to describe his past work (solo exhibitions and group shows), but to also address the redundant and ineffectual nature of the career retrospective and the culture that surrounds these frequently utilized "events." Written in third-person perspective and utilizing photographs from past events that Frank took part in, as well as interviews with friends or colleagues, Frank's self-fashioned biography takes on an authoritative tone and a textbook-like quality. Each page is presented without any context. Irremediably, the text can only be read for what it is on the page, though the story is one that is consistent and full of nuance. The pages are shown singly and there are no before and after pages -- or before and after chapters -- to address the total sum of what is written. The reader must individually draw meaning from the text, ultimately creating or taking away importance from Frank's biography at his or her own discretion, which poses the following questions: In composing biographical content, does the use of formal language and presentation distort or misrepresent the truth? Does relating a biography in academic jargon make it more believable, compelling or important?

The second section contains a series of six minimalist paintings with a different word or phrase on each ("Just Wait", "It Gets Good", "No Really", "No", "Really", "Really"). Here, Frank addresses the notions of anticipation and expectation. The paintings appear in the middle between the first set of biographical pages and the last set, breaking with the straightforward or even stuffy tone of the pages from the bound book. Whereas the book is more formal and authoritative, the paintings invoke a spoken, perhaps needy voice. The text literally jumps out at the viewer, inviting one to recite what can be read. Layering yellows, oranges and reds over black paint, the works get successively darker, culminating in a black canvas scrawled with the word "Really" repeated a second time. There is a familiar tone to the short phrases, as if the artist is trying to convince the viewer of the importance of the story being told, without giving the viewer the full body of text to make that particular assessment.

"Reality, whatever it is," is a story about a story. Frank uses the inherent storytelling qualities of art-making not only to tell his own story, but to also critique the means by which stories are told in the art world. The viewer will determine that Frank is at least somewhat worthy of a biography. Through the exhibition, Frank takes this concept one step further, creating a written narrative about his work but presenting it without context. Manipulating the natural processes of coding history, the message inevitably becomes muddled.

NICHOLAS FRANK
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119 North Peoria Street, Suite 2A
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