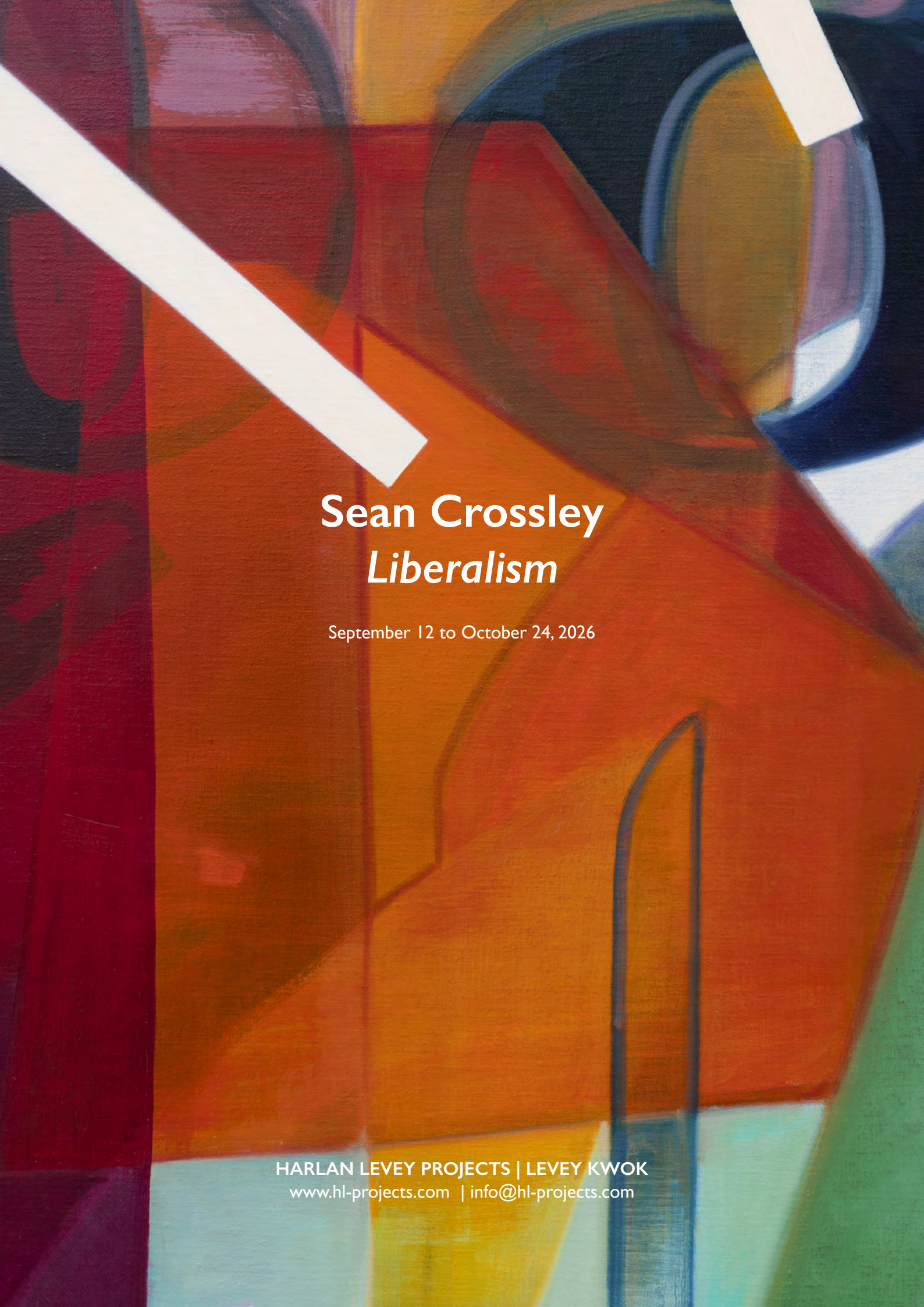

Sean Crossley
Liberalism

September 12 to October 24, 2026

HARLAN LEVEY PROJECTS | LEVEY KWOK
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Installation view the exhibition *Liberalism*.

民主黨
DEMOCRATIC PARTY
VENSTRE

Installation view the exhibition *Liberalism*.

Installation view the exhibition *Liberalism*.

Words from a Liberal – by Christoph Mueller

Classical liberalism began as a philosophy and developed into an ideology, but at its heart has always been a simple proposition: individuals should be free to shape their lives according to their own ideas.

That freedom is not absolute. The freedom of one individual ends where the freedom of another is restricted. From this principle follow the fundamental liberties of a liberal society: freedom of speech and of the press; freedom of religion; sexual self-determination; equality before the law; the right to life, liberty and property; and the autonomy of artistic expression. Not incidentally, many of these principles are embedded in the American Constitution. These were among the ideas that drew millions of people away from autocratically governed societies toward the promise of becoming free citizens.

The word liberal, however, has become increasingly complicated. In Europe, it is often associated with free markets, limited state intervention and individual economic freedom. In the United States, liberalism more commonly describes the centre-left of the political spectrum, associated with social welfare, government intervention and market regulation. When I introduce myself as a liberal in Europe, I am sometimes regarded as a supporter of casino capitalism. In the United States, I am often labelled a Marxist. Let's talk about art.

Classical liberalism is deeply important to artistic practice because it protects individual freedom, freedom of expression and pluralism. By resisting censorship and rigid ideological dogma, a liberal society gives artists permission to experiment, to challenge those in power and to express ideas that may be unpopular, strange or difficult to understand. The autonomy of art can be understood as a measure of the autonomy of the society around it. The common enemy of liberalism and the fine arts is oversimplification and propaganda.

Sean Crossley's paintings offer a contemporary way of thinking through this autonomy. Consider Jasper Johns's *Flag*, painted in 1955 at the height of the Cold War. Johns took one of the most recognisable political symbols in American life and made it into a painting — directing attention toward the physical object, its materiality and surface, its colours and the act of seeing. He remained deliberately silent about what the flag was supposed to mean, leaving interpretation open. That openness is fundamentally liberal. Crossley works in the same tradition. His *Liberalism* series takes political logos — images designed to communicate quickly and unambiguously — and subjects them to the very different conditions of painting. Where Johns asked us to see a familiar object as a painting, Crossley asks what happens when familiar political signs are made to operate as paintings. In both cases, recognition is only the beginning. Political identities become colour, surface, rhythm and competing forms. The paintings do not tell us what to think about liberalism; they create a space in which we have to think about what it might mean. This capacity to hold seemingly opposing positions without resolving them is itself a liberal gesture. Freedom does not require the elimination of difference, but the ability to allow difference to remain in productive tension.

To interpret a painting is not to discover a single hidden answer. It is an open-ended dialogue between colour, line, shape and texture and our own emotions, memories and intuition. Art asks us to exercise judgment for ourselves. Rebellion provokes conflict. And conflict lies at the heart of liberalism.

The goal of a liberal democracy is not to suppress it, but to create structures in which conflict can exist: to regulate and organise disagreement without eliminating difference. The danger begins when complexity itself becomes intolerable. If we seek a world in which there is one correct answer, one legitimate identity, one acceptable way of living, liberty and democracy are threatened. Artists tend to understand this instinctively. Art begins precisely where consensus ends.

Populist, nationalist and protectionist movements often appeal to a fantasy of returning to a more homogeneous past — a supposedly simpler world with clearer boundaries and fewer contradictions. That fantasy is powerful. But simplification can become propaganda, and propaganda can become a justification for censorship. Art should not resolve complexity. It should make space for it.
This is what Crossley's paintings ask of us. Multiple visual languages occupy the same field without one being allowed to become definitive. The works ask for attention rather than obedience, interpretation rather than recognition, and allow contradiction to remain unresolved. In that sense, they do not simply represent an idea of liberalism. They enact one.

Liberalism is abstract and complicated. So, at its best, is painting.

Christoph Mueller is a German businessman and longstanding collector of contemporary art. Over a career spanning four decades, he has led some of the world's most recognisable airlines — including Sabena, Hapag-Lloyd, Aer Lingus and Malaysia Airlines — through periods of profound transformation. He writes here in a personal capacity, as a collector, a European and a liberal.

Installation view the exhibition *Liberalism*.

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Painting Liberalism – by Harlan Levey

To speak of liberalism today is to inhabit a crisis of the signifier. The word, detached from any stable referent, circulates across political cultures in a condition of permanent semantic instability, designating, in one national context, the freedom of markets and the retreat of the state, and in another, the expansion of social welfare and the regulatory intervention of government. What the word names, in other words, is not a concept but a field of contestation: a site at which competing ideological formations struggle for possession of a term whose originary meaning, the freedom of the individual from external constraint, has been so thoroughly overwritten by its subsequent appropriations as to render it, in any simple sense, unreadable.

It is precisely this unreadability that Sean Crossley's *Liberalism* takes as its operative condition. Crossley works with the visual identities of liberal political parties from across the globe, taking their logos, colours and slogans as readymade signs and submitting them to a process of painterly transformation that systematically evacuates their communicative function while preserving, in a state of suspension, their associative residue. The result is a body of work that neither illustrates nor critiques its source material but instead installs that material within a field of signification structured by the logic of the supplement: each element present in the painting both adds to and destabilises the others, producing a totality that is always in excess of its parts.

The procedure is worth describing in some detail. Each canvas is built from the layered superimposition of four distinct political identities, developed through a process of continual rotation in which the composition advances equally from all four sides of the square support. No single orientation is permitted to become definitive; no axis of reading is privileged over any other. The square, that format which, as has been noted, produces a "crisis at the centre" precisely because it refuses the hierarchical organisation of the visual field that the rectangle enforces, here becomes the structural embodiment of a theoretical proposition: that the centre is not a locus of stable meaning but a site of perpetual negotiation between competing signifying systems.

This is, of course, a familiar problematic within the history of abstraction. What distinguishes Crossley's project is the specificity of the material from which his abstractions are constructed. The logo, as a form, is the purest expression of what we might call the logic of the brand: the compression of complex social and historical meaning into a single, instantly recognisable visual sign, engineered for maximum communicative efficiency and minimum ambiguity. Where painting has historically opened signs to ambiguity and interpretation, the logo is its structural opposite: a sign that aspires to pure denotation, seeking to eliminate the gap between signifier and signified through repetition and institutional reinforcement.

It is this opposition that *Liberalism* inhabits and exploits. Detached from their institutional contexts and subjected to the conditions of painterly production, the accretion of surface, the inscription of gesture, the temporal duration of making, the logos lose their communicative transparency without losing their associative charge. They become, in the precise sense Barthes intended, mythological objects whose first-order meaning has been hollowed out to make room for a second-order signification that is no longer political but pictorial. Or rather, and this is the productive ambiguity at the heart of the work, they become objects in which the political and the pictorial are no longer separable, in which the attempt to distinguish between what the image means and what the image does has been rendered structurally impossible.

The encounter this produces is, in the phenomenological sense, one of deferred recognition. The viewer approaches the canvas as abstraction, as a field of colour relations, geometric tensions and surface incidents, and only gradually becomes aware of the presence of a familiar sign within the field, a presence that, at the moment of its recognition, threatens to collapse the pictorial back into the communicative, to restore the logo to its original function. But the painting resists this collapse. The recognition, once achieved, cannot stabilise itself; the sign dissolves back into the pictorial field from which it momentarily emerged, leaving the viewer suspended between two modes of looking that the work refuses to resolve.

This suspension is, I want to argue, itself a political proposition, though not in any programmatic sense. *Liberalism*, the exhibition title, operates on at least three registers simultaneously: as the name of a political tendency, as the name of an aesthetic condition (the openness, the refusal of closure, the capacity to hold contradiction in productive tension), and as the name of a practice of looking, what we might call, following the older usage of the liberal arts, the cultivation of judgment through sustained attention. That these three registers cannot be neatly disentangled from one another is not a problem the work fails to solve but a condition it actively produces. The paintings do not represent liberal subjectivity; they perform it, installing the viewer within a structure of experience that demands precisely the exercise of individual judgment, tolerance of ambiguity and resistance to premature closure that liberalism, in its philosophical rather than its party-political sense, has always claimed as its founding values.

What remains, and what no amount of theoretical elaboration can finally account for, is the paintings themselves: the specific quality of a colour relation, the particular way a surface holds light, the almost involuntary pleasure of an image that offers itself to the eye and then withdraws. Beauty, in this context, is not an ideological supplement to the work's conceptual apparatus but its most rigorous expression, the proof, if proof were needed, that what painting makes possible is finally irreducible to what painting means.

***Liberalism (D66/EPR/PPLE/AQ JOL)*, 2026**
Oil on linen
200 x 200 x 5 cm - 78 3/4 x 78 3/4 x 2 in

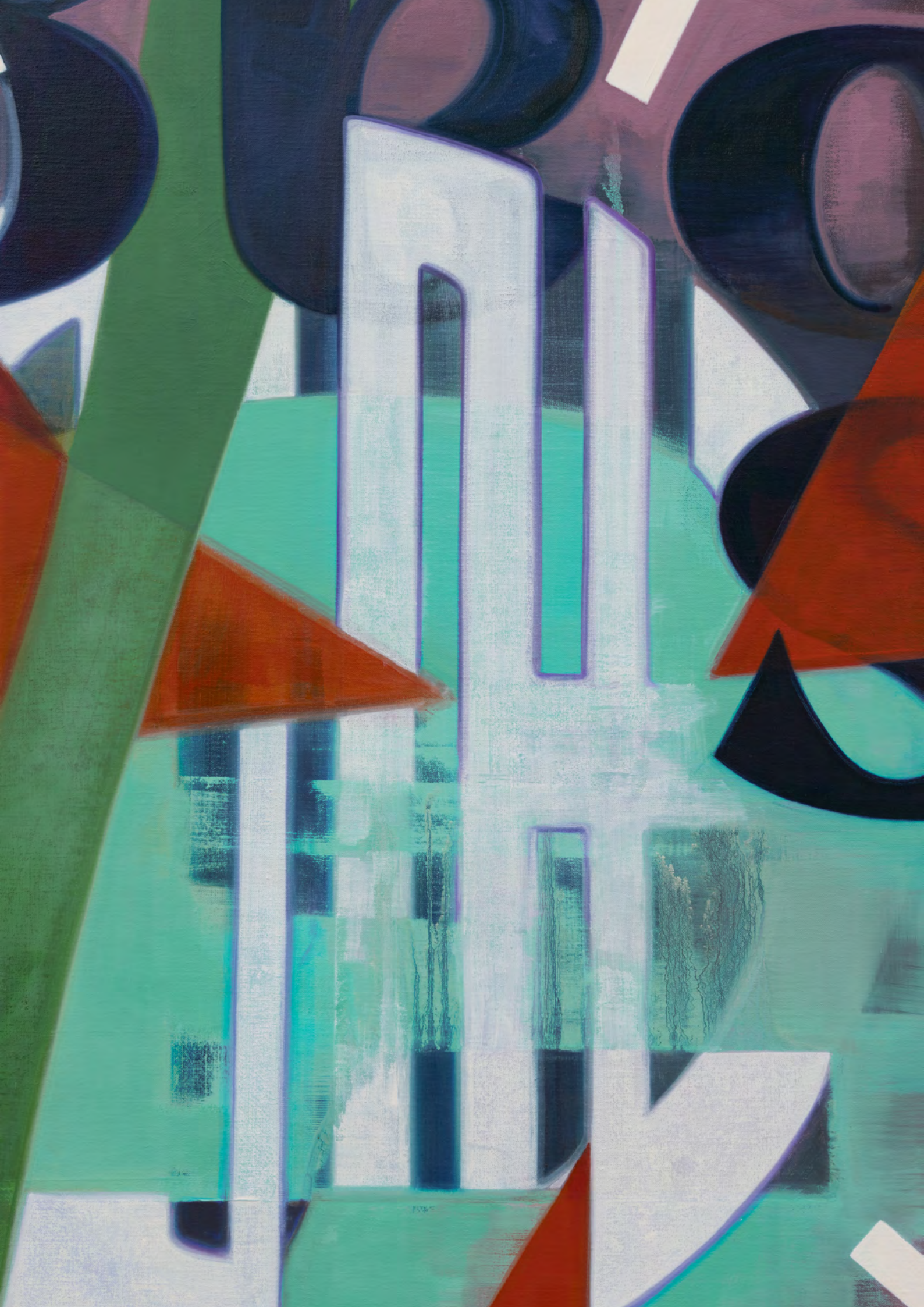
NSEMBLE

***Liberalism (PLP/FDP/PC/A)*, 2026**
Oil on linen
200 x 200 x 5 cm - 78 3/4 x 78 3/4 x 2 in

***Liberalism (LPC/LP/FG/ADL)*, 2026**
Oil on linen
200 x 200 x 5 cm - 78 3/4 x 78 3/4 x 2 in

***Liberalism (DPP/LDP/REDE/RE)*, 2026**
Oil on linen
200 x 200 x 5 cm - 78 3/4 x 78 3/4 x 2 in

***Liberalism (LDP/LE/DA/MOLIRENA)*, 2026**
Oil on linen
200 x 200 x 5 cm - 78 3/4 x 78 3/4 x 2 in



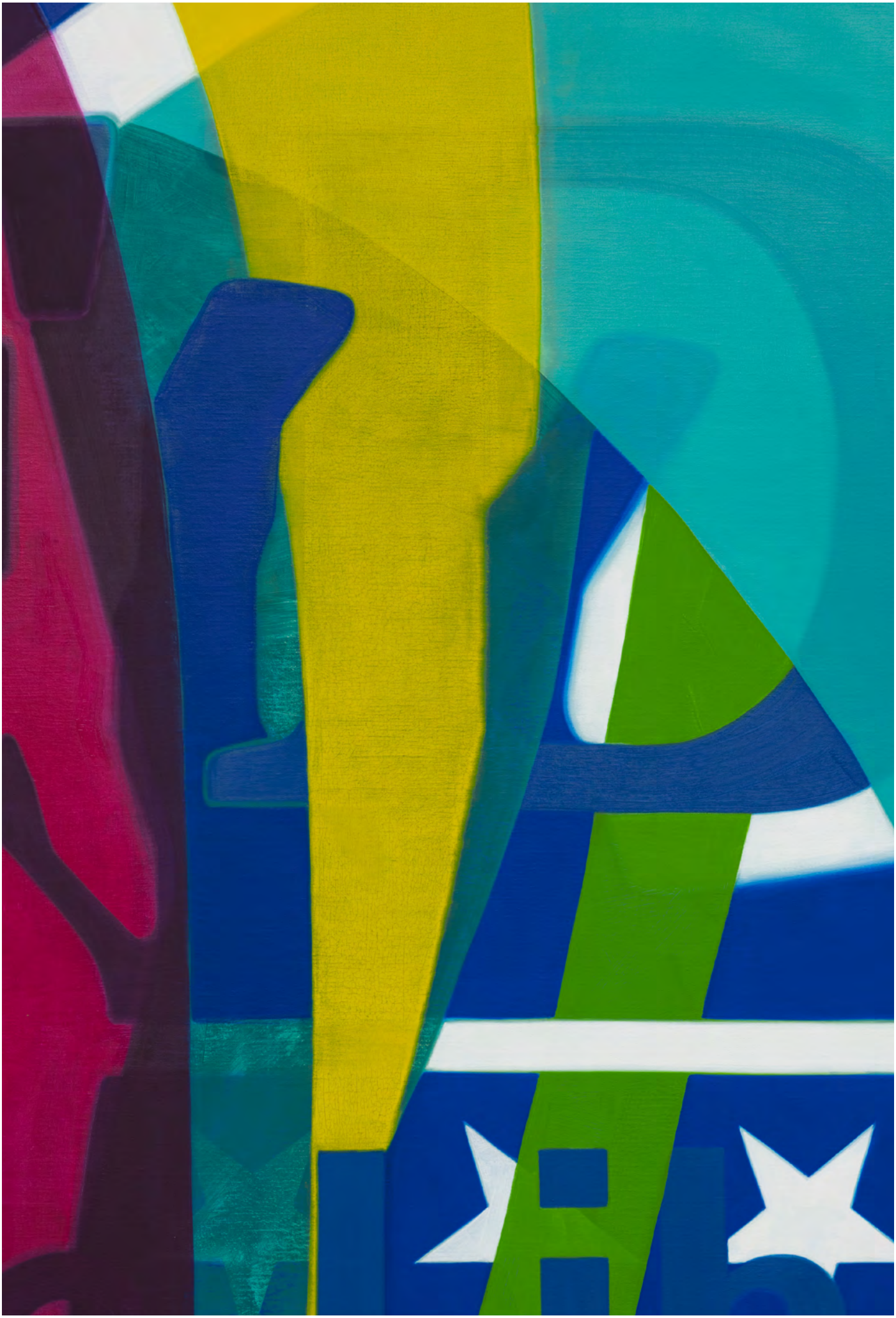
OCIÉTÉ

***Liberalism (SODELPA/V/INC/DEM.)*, 2026**
Oil on linen
200 x 200 x 5 cm - 78 3/4 x 78 3/4 x 2 in

***Liberalism (LIB/NLP/DP/UCR)*, 2026**
Oil on linen
200 x 200 x 5 cm - 78 3/4 x 78 3/4 x 2 in

PARTY

***Liberalism (FPD/REDE/DNC/DA)*, 2026**
Oil on linen
200 x 200 x 5 cm - 78 3/4 x 78 3/4 x 2 in



About the artist:

Sean Crossley's painting practice investigates what happens when images designed to communicate are transformed into paintings. Working through processes of accumulation, repetition and revision, his works begin with familiar visual forms—faces, objects, political symbols and everyday spaces—which are gradually woven into layered compositions. Through the buildup of surfaces and the revelation of pentimenti, individual images lose their fixed identities and enter into new relationships, treating painting not as a vehicle for illustration but as a space where meaning remains open to negotiation.

A formative residency at WIELS Contemporary Art Centre culminated in a series of one hundred paintings, later published as the artist book Excess/Support (MER. Books, 2024). The project established an approach that continues to underpin his practice: using painting to explore what becomes possible when images are slowed down, destabilised and remade through the material and temporal conditions of painting.

Crossley has presented solo exhibitions at WIELS Contemporary Art Centre (Brussels), Orpheus Institute (Ghent), Campus Biotech (Geneva), Harlan Levey Projects (Brussels) and FUTURES Gallery (Melbourne). His work has been included in group exhibitions at Flux Laboratory (Geneva), Emergent (Veurne) and nGbK (Berlin), among others. He has undertaken residencies at WIELS Contemporary Art Centre (Brussels, 2019), the Embassy of Foreign Artists (Geneva, 2021) and Cité Internationale des Arts (Paris, 2025).

Die Liberale