

ART about NOTHING turns out to be something basic about art. Robert Cenedella's installation recalls the famous pronouncement by Maurice Denis, from 1890, "Remember that a picture – before being a battle horse, a nude woman or some anecdote – is essentially a flat surface covered with colors arranged in a certain order." Cenedella takes the idea of essentiality farther back. He reminds us that before such a painting can be realized it requires a skeletal, empty wooden rectangle: a stretcher.

Stretchers are one of the essentials of easel painting; they are the supports on which a canvas is stretched before it is painted. Stretchers are plain no-nonsense objects that stay behind the scenes, so Cenedella has brought them to the fore in a kind of celebration of the basics: voids, origins, beginnings and first principles. Cenedella is an inventive artist, and a bit of a showman, so many of the stretchers here are fanciful works of art in themselves, sometimes arty or primitive.

Yet here is something bold and heroic. In a way, the Sistine ceiling is art about nothing, too, because Michelangelo was describing creation before the realization of the myriad world as we know it. With bare-bones objects and without a storyline, Cenedella is dedicated to reminding us that some fundamental values operate unseen. (A thought: Michelangelo had to cope with elaborate but awkward scaffolding to realize his art, while scaffolding serenely crafted constitutes Cenedella's whole endeavor.)

The painting on the invitation to ART about NOTHING is another approach to the idea of "art about nothing." Like most of Cenedella's detailed landscapes, it is satire about contemporary life. There is a lot of busy-ness going on in the vast aerial view, but in the foreground is a different order of activity – a bustling heap of stretched paintings with their sharp corners emphasized. Cenedella encourages ambiguity in the interpretation of his art: the heap of paintings could have a negative connotation, they might be in a landfill, but more likely the mound of paintings, like the actual installation of stretchers, represent a homemade monument to the necessity and tenacity of art.

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