

Painting as Architecture/Architecture as Painting

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Kevin Appel has long been fascinated with architecture as a subject matter and with the modern home as a parameter for his own exploration in painting and works on paper. While the new paintings in this exhibition represent a departure as described by Tobias Olander elsewhere in this catalogue, Appel's previous work shows affinities to an ongoing tradition of elegant, reductive abstraction in the work of artists and architects who, like Appel, have come of age in Los Angeles—the “ground zero” of modern residential design—from the 1940s to today. More significantly, Appel's work is part of a pronounced generational engagement with the legacy of modernism that has emerged during the past decade wherein artists working in diverse media have simultaneously interrogated and engaged with the concepts, implications, and aesthetics of modern design and architecture.

Simply scanning the list of group exhibitions in which Appel has participated—ranging from *Bastards of Modernity*; *The Perfect Life: Artifice in LA*; and *Against Design* to *Paintings Interested in the Ideas of Architecture and Design* and *Animated Architecture*—reveals an ambivalence about design and architecture that has underpinned his work and that of contemporaries with whom he has been positioned. In Appel's earlier body of painting, the complex, contradictory, and ambiguous nature of his inquiry was subsumed by an attitude of detachment which succeeded in masterfully diverting

attention from the full range of his analytical intentions. The paintings of the late 1990s for which he is, so far, best known project a sensibility of apparent coolness and neutrality. In these works, Appel seemingly does not comment on the nature of modernism either in a celebratory or critical way, nor does he overtly probe its uncanny aspects or otherwise attempt to investigate it as a social or cultural phenomenon. Instead, he dissects and analyzes modern architecture in an almost detached manner, utilizing its formal and structural conventions as the stimulus for his own. Writer Jan Tumlir commented on the aura of neutrality permeating his painting as entirely strategic and that his position is that of a “realist...immune to the initial utopian thrust of the Bauhaus and Danish moderne designs that pervade his paintings as are its knock-off retailers at Ikea and Pottery Barn.”¹ Yet a neutral treatment of architecture and design as subject matter is inherently contradictory as these disciplines are the very embodiment of social ideology about which adopting a position of some sort is inescapable. Appel’s latest paintings more fully and forcefully probe these contradictions.

While foregrounding the visual and spatial, Appel’s earlier work conveyed a strain of oblique social and cultural commentary in the form of psychological resonance wherein he infused his depiction of familiar environments with a sensation of placelessness, uncertainty, and void—this all the more so when his work approximates the conventions of architectural drafting and the synthetic appearance of imagery resulting from computer-rendered forms and spatial relationships. In this respect his paintings ever so subtly hint at the flipside of the utopian and universalizing aspirations of the modernist

¹ Jan Tumlir, “Inside/Out: On the Painting of Kevin Appel”, in Kevin Appel (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999), p. 30.

ideals of the fifties and sixties that animated the work of an entire generation of artists and architects ranging from Craig Elwood and Pierre Koenig to John McLaughlin and Karl Benjamin, while at the same time drawing heavily and evidently from the precedents established in their work.

Raised in Los Angeles and reaching maturity in the early 90s at the beginning of an era of renewed appreciation and focus on mid-century modern architecture there, Appel's interest in design as subject matter was fueled by intensive exposure to the culture of modernism. The child of an architect father and an interior designer mother, Appel grew up in a modern house and developed an awareness of the pervasiveness and significance of this residential tradition in Los Angeles. He became familiar early on with the tools of drafting and the principles of design and in art school gravitated toward an exploration of these conventions as vehicles to provide content for his work. For a young painter, for whom the establishment of a meaningful content to animate his or her work is one of the most important and difficult artistic problems, subject matter such as design and the aesthetics of interiors was able to provide a basis for both content and form in painting. Appel found rich sources in the pages of design and shelter magazines such as *Sunset* and *House and Garden*, utilizing them as the basis of painterly analysis. Intrigued by composition, color, and materiality, he altered and exaggerated the features of these images as the basis for paintings, first at small scale and then eventually working in larger formats. In addition, he used the overarching thematics of modern interiors as a springboard to other subject matter and areas of artistic and theoretical inquiry, exploring, for example, the relationship between illusionism and minimalism in otherwise ostensibly

purely formal paintings. Becoming more analytical in terms of the structure of spaces in a way that approximates the explorations of architects also concerned with a kind of “exploded” structure as the basis of form, his work progressed to an increasing level of abstraction. At the same time, his paintings became more luminous, as if infused with a pale and drenching sunlight, serving to convey an overall cohesion of tonality in tandem with form, as opposed to the bolder contrasts of color and composition in his earliest paintings.

Whereas many of Appel’s contemporaries who use modern architecture and design as essential subject matter for their work do so in an expanded array of media including sculpture, installation, and video, Appel’s dedication to painting and two-dimensional work is noteworthy. As a painter, he sidesteps the challenges of cross-pollination of disciplines and blurring of boundaries between media that are explored by his colleagues, ranging from fellow Californians Jim Isermann, Jorge Pardo, and Sam Durant, who have reflected on the legacy of the iconic Los Angeles Case Study houses, to others including James Angus, Tobias Rehberger, Inigo Manglano-Ovalle, and Andrea Zittel who address the relationship between architecture and sculpture. Like most artists of this generation at or approaching mid-career, their work builds upon the premises and parameters of minimalism and conceptual art, but is infused with a greater specificity of content and social/cultural commentary for which design and architecture serves as fertile source material. Their approach has been described as imposing “disorder” on both the realms of design and art “by comfortably remaining in a liminal position between the two spheres of production...Instead of erecting an alternative paradigm, they locate meaning

as they interact with an environment.”² In Appel’s work, however, the interplay between art and architecture exist on a more conceptual, and formal, level rather than an experiential one, and has consistently been manifested in his assertion of the primacy of painting and its attendant concerns and issues over those of architecture.

The impulse to abstract has emerged ever more strongly in Appel’s work as it has evolved during the past decade, removing it from a realm of engagement with interior design as “still life” toward a more pronounced emphasis on painterly principles and fictive inquiries. Finding ever-stronger parallels between the premises and methods of painting and that of architectural rendering and construction has led his work away from more direct referents toward design to a position where the conceptual and formal underpin one another in exquisite tension. Ever more sophisticated and complex manifestations of artifice and stylization, his paintings continue to manifest a preoccupation with the interplay between space, surface, texture, and color. In his newest body of work, Appel has ceased making paintings that resemble interior design studies as well as those that manifest a kind of ethereal, reductive abstraction. Whereas previously he used the conventions of drawing as a tool to delve into the properties of visual and spatial relationships, his recent paintings appear to explode these conventions. Most notably, they depart from references to modernism in favor of a newfound engagement with a nostalgic idea of home. Their starting point in vernacular architecture seems only loosely recognizable; instead they resemble a riotous amalgam of pure geometries with distinct zones of color and texture and the rustic forms of tree trunks, some of which

² Steven Beyer and Melissa Brookhart, “Things We Live With,” in Against Design (Philadelphia, Institute of Contemporary Art, 2000), p.9.

interlock like Lincoln logs, to bind together these seemingly random yet tightly clustered fragments. In these works, Appel has sharpened his dedication to defamiliarizing the familiar. An aura of placelessness has given way to a sense of environmental cataclysm through his deployment of skewed perspective and shifts of scale. He elicits further categorical confusion by means of other painterly devices such as *trompe l'oeil* treatment of wood grain in combination with more graphic, cartoonish renditions of images of wooden logs, playing with ideas about materials in their synthetic and “actual” sites. Conveying a sense of tension and incipient movement, these robust, muscular images are simultaneously comical and sinister.

If Appel’s touchstones in painting during the past decade can be seen as having shifted from John McLaughlin to Philip Guston, a similarly parallel shift can be discerned in the architectural precedents to which his work shows affinity. His current body of painting resounds with the disjunctive, improvisatory sensibility found in the work of the mid-century architect R.M. Schindler—a far cry from the purity, clarity and rigor emblematic of the Case Study Houses or of a Miesian minimalist ideal. The emphasis on texture, seemingly improvisatory formal structure, and overt vernacular references that now animate Appel’s paintings suggest a parallel to Schindler—as if aspects of a late Schindler house were deconstructed and set into motion on canvas. Often constructed on site without working drawings according to the architect’s direct responses to the shaping of space, Schindler’s later buildings, in particular, unabashedly incorporated a variety of symbolic, naturalistic, and vernacular references. These elements endowed his architecture with an uncommon vigor and vitality that, at the time, was frequently

dismissed as chaotic and undisciplined because it departed so dramatically from the tenets of International Style modernism. Appel's heightened emphasis on the sensuous properties of paintings and in commingling contradictory elements and references within his works further manifests affinity to the maverick attitude of an architect like Schindler, or closer to the present moment, the increasingly additive and experimental sensibility in the recent work of the Swiss architects Herzog and de Meuron. Rather than making a cohesive statement grounded within a well-defined tradition, Appel, like these architects, is drawing closer to ideas and approaches that disrupt, problematize, and invigorate the previously established direction of his work. In his new paintings, Appel ever more forcefully and intuitively mines the zone between abstraction and representation, pointing directly to the inherent tensions and contradictions linking painting to architecture but also highlighting an expanded realm of practice, possibility, and history within the disciplines themselves.