

In These Ghostly Homes, Scenes of Anxiety

Art Reviews

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The houses in Kevin Appel's six new paintings at Angles Gallery are the domestic equivalent of ghost ships: phantom apparitions whose mysterious beauty is shot through with enough menace to make your spine tingle. Combining equal measures of dreamy intangibility and raw anxiety, these wall-size pictures bring the perceptual refinement of classic Light and Space works into contact with the queasy realism of art inspired by film noir.

It's a volatile combination. At once seductive and chilling, atmospheric and claustrophobic, Appel's haunting paintings lure viewers into a world where every dream is caught in a nightmarish undertow.

All of his images depict solitary buildings, either a modest cabin made of plywood or a more elaborate dwelling made of concrete and beams. All are set in the woods. And all are empty.

Some resemble stylish summer homes. Others have more in common with the Unabomber's cabin. Devoid of furniture, all appear to have been abandoned while still under construction, just after their frameworks were built, but before any plumbing, electricity or other finishing touches were added.

They embody an extreme and peculiar type of stillness. Unlike the quietness that's conducive to relaxation, the silence that thunders through Appel's paintings recalls those moments when things are too quiet, when you know in your bones (and at



Kevin Appel's "Renovation 2": An extreme and peculiar type of stillness, unlike the quietness of relaxation.

the base of your brain) that something bad is about to happen. Time seems to stand still.

Appel intensifies this anxiety by limiting his palette to white. Traditionally, white signifies purity. But it's also a sign of surrender--of yielding to a superior force or suspending a battle to face one's enemies peaceably, if momentarily.

At first the paintings appear to be too antiseptic to be emotionally engaging. But after a while, their subtle color distinctions get more vivid. Although it's easy to lose count, it seems that they include about 40 different shades, from feathery grays to warm creamy tones. A rich range of variations recalls views through green-tinted sunglasses or icy blue plate-glass windows. One of the best things about Appel's art is that it treats white as a

color, a physical entity too complex and sensuous to be exhausted by the words we have for it.

Another is his masterful command of surface texture. Slathering on paint with spatulas and sculpting individual wood grain with a knife, Appel pays homage to plasterers and carpenters, working people whose knowledge (and love) of a job well done is an end in itself.