

PAINTING COMPLICITIES

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The title of this exhibition, *Description Without Place* was chosen by the artist and taken from a Wallace Stevens' poem of the same title. In this poem, Stevens argues for the value of poetic representation, what he calls "seeming"; Seeming is understood as interpretation, as something slightly beyond reality, and as the fundamental manner through which humans come to make sense of the complex world around them.

The exhibition *Description Without Place* presents a selection of paintings, drawings and collages produced by Kevin Appel over the last two years. This exhibition traces a dramatic shift in the artist's work over this period, resulting from a rich critique by the artist of his previous work. Each of these works engage the North American vernacular architecture of a rectangular house with a four-sided pitched roof. The exhibition follows the diverse ways in which Appel has used this iconic structure, moving his investigation of architectural and painterly space toward increasingly complex and undefined territory.

Over the last ten years Appel has produced paintings that have investigated the historical relationship between painting and architectural space, using imagery that referred to late-Modernist architecture. In projects such as *House* from 1999, presented at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, the artist created multiple paintings of multiple views of a fictional house. The clean lines and open spaces of this structure recalled the utopic forms of the International Style propagated by the architects Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, while additionally referencing the traditional Japanese architecture that had served as influential material for many Modernist architects.

These paintings were tightly developed conceptually and formally. They were designed to create an environmental situation, in which viewers could mentally project themselves into the space the paintings defined. The perspectival lines of these large-scale works closely matched those of the gallery in which they were placed, and the specific sequence of interior views allowed the viewer to mentally "fill in the gaps" between each canvas. With these techniques Appel made reference to mural and fresco traditions, genres in which painting has been more closely allied with architecture. Appel's use of perspective addresses the radical development of two-point perspective made during the Italian Renaissance and the dramatic effect it had on painting and the articulation of architectural space. With these works the artist additionally speaks to the continued use of this form of articulating space within contemporary "virtual reality" computer programs.

It was around the time of his exhibition at MOCA that Appel was invited to work with the architects Alan Koch and Linda Taalman of *OpenOffice* in New York on the design of a private home. Appel worked with Koch and Taalman for five years on this project, exchanging ideas, sketching together, discussing the conceptual and construction issues involved in the creation of a house. Over this period Appel describes how he grew

increasingly frustrated with the pragmatics of architecture, the money needed and the constraints imposed by the laws of physics- such as gravity not allowing certain kinds of structures and relationships between forms. Koch and Taalman stressed the development of a cohesive “program” for the structure, one clear over-arching conception or reading for the house. These restrictions moved the artist to a greater appreciation of the freedom and abstraction possible in painting; particularly painting as a space in which disparate elements can be combined and coexist without adhering to a single, coherent explanation.

During the *OpenOffice* project, Appel also began to reflect critically on the concept of “home.” He was developing a house project very much based on his previous paintings, one which both served as a re-reading of Modernist architectural forms, and one which again referenced traditional Japanese designs, specifically the Katsura Palace in Kyoto from the seventeenth century. Over the five years of its development, Appel began to question the extreme aestheticization of this project, as well as the role of these chosen architectural referents in his prior work. Previously there had been an interest in how these elegant paintings fit seamlessly into the Modernist interiors of the collectors homes in which they were eventually placed. But with the *OpenOffice* project the artist’s interests began to change, as he began to see his spatial and painterly investigations being over-shadowed by the reified Modernist references he was using. He wanted to add more symbolic or referential forms into his work.

It was these concerns that led Appel to engage the simple house structure that is evidenced in each of the works in the exhibition *Description Without Place*. Appel began investigating primal house structures: log cabins, salt-box houses and the vernacular of suburban North American homes. The four-sided, pitched roof house that appears in his recent work is an iconic shape, the kind of house that a child would represent if asked to draw “home.” Appel was attracted to this form both for its symbolic implications, as well as for its familiarity. He was interested in using this basic architectural structure to disrupt the viewer’s conception of home, and to additionally de-familiarize the conventional spatial relationships that this house’s form articulates; to move the viewer toward a more complex phenomenological and psychological engagement with his works.

The artist’s first use of this house appears in a series of six pale paintings that he produced in 2002, three of which, *Renovation 1*, *Renovation 3*, and *Lake House 2*, are presented in this exhibition. Here, the house is shown surrounded by white trees, against an opaque ground of gray-green. The tones of these paintings initially appear elegant and attractive, but with time the coolness of these colors becomes hygienic, alienating, ominous. The placement of this house in a strange forest environment increases the sense of discomfort that these paintings come to invoke. Home, as represented by this structure, becomes a place of isolation versus communion. This structure is additionally presented extremely open, with cut walls and windows exposing its interior; a treatment which counteracts expectations regarding both the enclosed protection and the privacy associated with a home.

These paintings maintain the mural-scale of Appel’s previous work, as well as much of their interactive character. They present this house in two-point perspective, which, along with their clear scale relationship to the body, help create the sensation of a virtual space in which viewers are invited to enter. This series of paintings presents static

images of various sides of the exterior of this house, as well as several interior views. The relationships between these views are not as clear or seamless as in Appel's previous work however, as these paintings begin to stand more as a series of individual works, rather than as parts of an installation or completely environmental situation.

Illusionistic space is complicated in these works through Appel's diverse handling of the acrylic paint he uses. The wood grain of the house, which is applied in a smooth, precise manner, is contrasted with a thick, rough treatment of the paint used to depict the trees in these paintings. The physicality of the paint emphasizes the surface on which it is placed, highlighting the space of the picture-plane, in a manner that obstructs evocations of three-dimensional space.

Eight untitled drawings, also from 2002 are included in this exhibition. Shown at various angles and sides, this familiar house structure appears broken into multiple, transparent planes, each articulated through fragile parallel pencil lines, or through veils of colored, liquid acrylic paint. Similar to the *Renovation* paintings, the interior of this structure appears exposed in various ways. Yet within many of these drawings parts of each house's interior appear to have been pulled outward toward the exterior, in ways that defy gravity or a specific logic. Presented together, these various views create a sense of quiet movement. They come to articulate a rotating, animated object, referencing computer animations of architectural designs. In these drawings this architectural form becomes an abstracted object of play. The ways in which the transparent planes of these houses overlap and fold at angles next to one another, recall manual manipulations of paper, as in the creation of Origami forms. The viewer's scale relationship to these drawings increases the object-toy quality of this house, its size referencing dollhouses or large architectural models.

Appel's most recent body of work includes a series of eleven collages and four large paintings, all of which were produced for *Description Without Place*. Appel traveled to Mexico City in the Spring of 2002 to see the galleries of the Museo Tamayo, where his yet-to-be created works would be first shown. Appel has described how the complex layering of information witnessed within the urban context of Mexico City greatly impressed him. This influence, as well as a deep interest in making work that juxtaposed more disparate elements (an interest that had been developing since his work on the *OpenOffice* project) led the artist to pursue his ideas within the medium of collage. Appel subsequently produced four paintings that make direct reference to relationships worked out initially in this medium.

The four paintings produced in this series display an increased interest in color, with strong pinks juxtaposed against pale acid greens and the rich browns of painted wood-grain. These colors respond directly to the colors of the materials used by Appel in his collages. In several of them, and in the painting *Knit*, Appel uses a deep salmon-pink within internal areas of the houses he depicts. This placement and color evoke flesh, such as that of the orifices of the human body.

In these paintings and collages Appel's house form appears increasingly abstracted and manipulated; multiplied, overlapping or folding into itself in most works. Trees reappear as a narrative element, yet their cartoon-graphic treatment is distinct from that witnessed in the *Renovation* paintings, and specifically contrasts the style of the houses

represented. More logs than trees, these muscular, phallic objects are shown piercing through various openings in the houses.

Appel has described the direct influence of Philip Guston on these works, most notably in the cartoon handling of these log elements. The artist was attracted to the directness, the “dumbness” of the symbolic forms that Guston engaged. Guston was an artist who additionally mixed styles throughout his lifetime, moving from Social Realism to Abstract Expressionism, then to his signature cartoon-expressionist style. The confidence needed to alter styles so dramatically and sincerely, combined with the care in which he painted within each of these genres, attracted Appel to Guston’s work at a moment when he was looking to complicate both formally and symbolically his painting practice.

Logs are a humble building material, and combined with Appel’s basic house form, evoke the mythic log cabins of the North American West. The artist was interested in referencing the American West, particularly how its mythology articulates conceptions of the pioneer and the maverick. Appel associates the independence, self-reliance, and perpetual search for new territory that form a part of this myth, as analogous to narratives regarding the avant-garde artist. 1950’s New York Abstract Expressionism is often understood as North American painting’s most avant-gard moment. Paralleling Appel’s associations, one recalls the critic Harold Rosenberg’s famous 1959 essay titled “The American Action Painters.” In this essay Rosenberg argues for the uniqueness of the New York School, using language that evokes the conquering of the North American wilderness, such as equating the space of the canvas with an “arena in which to act.” #1 Appel’s use of these references is meant to be humorous, as well as nostalgic for the kind of utopian vision these ideas contained; the idea that painting can be ever new and change the way we encounter the world.

Within his collages and recent paintings, Appel’s engagement with architectural conventions of depicting space are increasingly diminished, as various styles come to clash with one another and as painting tropes take on greater prominence. Remnants of perspective appear in the house structures as they morph in various ways, yet there is no sense of gravity here, and no single vanishing point, as in his previous works. Adding to this spatial complexity is the artist’s use of *trompe-l’oeil* effects--the painted wood-grain included in the new paintings; and within his collages, the use of actual wood veneer and photographic fragments taken from magazines. These inclusions make distinct references to another aspect of the history of Modernist painting, specifically to Cubism’s use of collage and *trompe-l’oeil*. Within Cubism these elements served to articulate a multi-layered, multiplanar, pictorial space. From a Mexican art historical context, Appel’s use of both *trompe-l’oeil* and collage-like elements recall Diego Rivera’s 1915 Cubist painting, *Paisaje Zapatista*. In this painting Rivera combines several styles, depicting both fragments of painted wood-grain, as well as highly representational *trompe-l’oeil*, in the representation of a nailed piece of paper in the lower right corner of this work.

In Appel’s recent works, the sense of movement begun in his previous house drawings reaches a more dramatic level, as architectural elements appear to clash with natural elements, implying an odd, unclear narrative. There is a strange energy and violence in these works. The desire to project oneself into an illusionistic space is specifically blocked or made problematic here, through the undefined scale relationship articulated

between the viewer and the figurative elements of the houses and trees depicted. One is unclear in both the collages and more dramatically in the large paintings, if their viewing position is that of a giant playing with human-scale objects, or an average human facing gigantic, architectonic toys.

In a chapter titled “Foldings” of his book *Constructions*, the architectural critic John Rajchman presents a reading of a project by the contemporary architect Peter Eisenman, using Gilles Deleuze’s writings on Baroque space and architecture. Rajchman’s chapter comes to argue for a contemporary Baroque development of space and form, particularly through the denial of a single form of reading, or the desire for a clear thesis, when analyzing a work. It proposes rather an *intensive* reading of space and form, one which allows disparities to coexist and enhance one another without being subordinate to one over-arching method or conception. Rajchman writes:

What Deleuze calls an intensive reading is not an internal formal reading or an external contextual one but rather an experimental encounter. An intensive reading releases unnoticed “complicities” between two spaces that remain divergent and singular or common “implications” between two things that remain differently “folded” or constituted. #2

Rajchman’s text has influenced how Appel has developed his recent collages and paintings, and helps to articulate some of their complexity. Specifically the manner in which the artist has allowed several painting styles to come to coexist within these works, dialogues with this text’s argument for the reading of one “space,” through another. In Appel’s works, elements of abstraction and representation come to be read through and off one another, due to Appel’s mixing of the cartoon-style of the logs with the more architectonic house renderings, combined with the dramatic wood-grain elements, all floating on Monochrome, brush-stoked ground.

These juxtapositions raise illuminating questions. Are Appel’s cartoon log forms “abstractions”? Are they to be seen as more abstract than the houses drawn in perspective? Could the *trompe-l’oeil* fragments be described as representational or abstract elements? Are these paintings and collages to be understood as “representing” some apocalyptic scene of human-scale elements thrown into the air? Or are they simply geometric forms, exquisitely rendered in dense paint, which emphasize their materiality and the flatness of the ground on which they are placed?

The richness of Appel’s works created for this exhibition is in their ability to provoke such questions, but additionally how they construct encounters that deny any clear position or cohesive reading. The overall selection of works for the exhibition *Description Without Place* has sought to contextualize Appel’s most recent works within those that directly preceded them, not out of an interest in delineating a progressive interpretation, but rather as an attempt to present the complexity of the artist’s critical reading of his own work, though his use of a limited set of provocative forms.

1. Harold Rosenberg. “The American Action Painters,” *The Tradition of the New*. New York: Horizon Press, Inc., 1959. p.25

2. John Rajchman. "Foldings," *Constructions*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 1998.