

# Kevin Appel's Paintings Offer Insight From the Inside Out

## Art Reviews

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TIMES ART CRITIC

The nine paintings by Kevin Appel in his small exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art are deceptively simple and exceptionally confident pictures. Appel, the 32-year-old recipient of the museum's 1999 emerging artist award, sponsored by Citibank Private Bank, paints chilly domestic environments that are at once immediately recognizable, visually welcoming and vaguely ominous. They show us where we now live.

One painting dates from 1998; the remaining eight were made this year. Each depicts a modern interior in which crystalline geometric transparency prevails--planar walls, floor-to-ceiling windows, faceted light, a confusion between interior and exterior space. Rational articulation merges seamlessly with an odd sense of disorientation.

The recent pictures rely on a cool palette of transparent greens and blues, their razor-sharp edges often abutting pure white. Appel paints with acrylic on canvas that is pulled taut over a wooden panel, which gives a crisp firmness to the surface. Sometimes the acrylic seems to be mixed with a gel, which yields rectangular slabs of color that are both light reflective and absorptive. They have an optical depth that wavers between being illusionistic and actual.

Most of these interiors include views to the outdoors, where carefully trimmed trees are set in strict orthogonal alignment. Schematically rendered, like faceted lollipops, the trees are composed in an array of greens ranging from lime to hunter. These bits of nature feel highly unnatural, recalling period Modern sculpture circa 1960 (in

the manner of, say, Richard Lippold or Claire Falkenstein).

A wall label at MOCA suggests an imagistic kinship to postwar Case Study House architecture, while painterly references to early L.A. Modernists such as Peter Krasnow could also be asserted. Yet, Appel's references don't aspire to that kind of transcendent purity; instead they possess a vernacular quality. The Case Study era recedes into the historical background.

The scale of the large works recalls field paintings (most are diptychs, the largest reaching 15 feet across). They require a lateral scan, like digital information being laid out on a screen. One result is that you don't imaginatively project yourself into the space of Appel's pictures; rather, each picture unfolds itself in front of you, like an elusive idea of domestic enclosure coming into perpetually uninhabitable view.

\* Museum of Contemporary Art, 250 S. Grand Ave., (213) 626-6222, through Jan. 2. Closed Mondays