INTRODUCING
PETRA TRENKEL

The Berlin-based artist takes anonymous urban landscapes as her subject, yet her photographs and paintings are anything but generic

By Ara Merjian

RIGHT: **Petra Trenkel in her studio, Berlin, August 2008. Photo: Annette Kisling.**

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP: ***Auswärts*, 2007. Oil on canvas, 33½ x 57 in.**

BOTTOM: ***Akademie*, 2004. Oil on canvas, 31½ x 55 in.**

In a corner of Petra Trenkel's studio sit three postcards, propped on a shallow sill. Awash in the wan light of the adjoining courtyard, the picture of a church interior by Pieter Saenredam is kept company by a reproduction of Giorgio de Chirico's *Solitude* (*Melancholy*) (1912) and one of a Suprematist composition by Kasimir Malevich. Nearly the only stray props in an otherwise spare room, these images swell beyond their diminutive size, at once touchstones and talismans of a sort. Only Mondrian, Trenkel remarks, is missing from this improvised altar. The paintings by Trenkel on the wall—taciturn images of urban and suburban spaces, stripped of human inhabitants—confirm the echoes of these elective affinities. Despite the presence of her ex-votos and their felicitous influence, however, Trenkel has produced a distinctive corpus of cityscapes since she started exhibiting in the early 1990s. The architectonic genericism that is the domain of her painting appears exclusively her own.

Aside from the occasional soliloquy of a lone telephone pole (stripped of its attendant wires), or the branch of a leafless tree, line is consistently subsumed into colored planes in Trenkel's images. It delimits walls and windows; it guides, indiscernibly, the fugue of a street's recession. But it never manifests in these pictures except as an

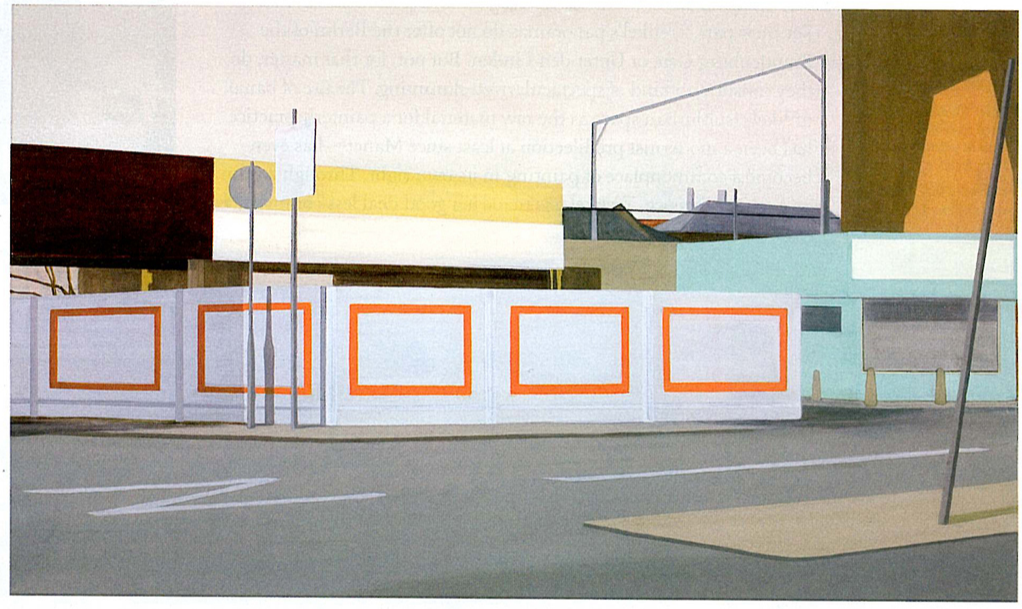
integument of the built environment. By suppressing wayward line—the agent of detail, the filament of specificity or even caprice—Trenkel consigns her buildings to the permanent abeyance of anonymity. That anonymity is further guaranteed by the singular absence of the human, and the eviction of any trace of language, from these scenes. *Auswärts* (2007) centers on a street corner packed with signs and signboards, purged entirely of any textual enunciations. The giant billboards in *Kanal* (2005) rear up absolutely bare, almost the louder for their blankness. Again and again, scenes are distilled to the skeleton of their structuring geometries.

We might project onto these surfaces some narrative about suburban alienation. But apart from effacing literal language and text, Trenkel's canvases refuse the literary as well, even in their unwavering figuration. These paintings' *Stimmung*—that ineffable German word roughly translated as "mood" or "atmosphere"—remains unchanged from image to image. With that disinterested consistency anchoring her practice, Trenkel takes a nuanced approach to form and to framing. In some canvases, such as two striking untitled works from 2003, individual buildings loom large, isolated almost like sculptures in their own right (conjuring, incidentally, the similarly disinterested discipline of Bernd and Hilla Becher's photographs). Other works pull back and open up to a wider view, revealing the recession of bleak apartment block, or the spaces where city unravels into country.

If *Nearby* (2005) depicts brick structures in a spectral and eerie solitude, *Mainpark* (2004), instead, hoists the viewer to an exhilarating, bird's-eye perch; except for the cant of a building facade, which delineates the scene's upper edge, scale becomes swallowed by the creeping green swell of a sprawling lawn. In quite a different vein, *Akademie* (2004) depicts the bleak courtyard of a single-story modernist structure, its pavement tessellated into rectangular slabs and marked by a few benches. The image's reverse perspective, tilted slightly toward the picture plane and framed with symmetrical frontality, affords the concentration on its geometric components—windows, cement blocks, a plain architrave. Here, again, architecture serves as the image's organizing premise, one that, even as it orders the whole, invites us to take pleasure in its parts.

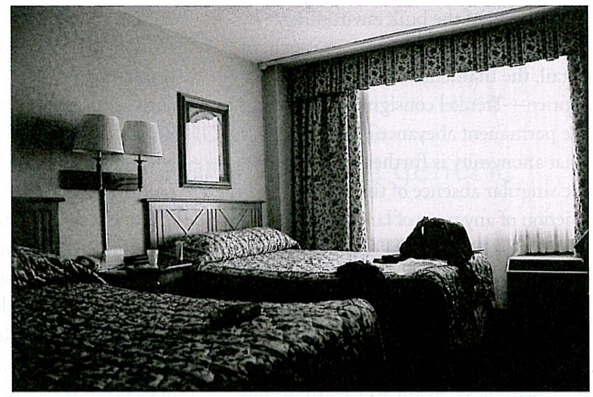
Most of Trenkel's images eschew such frontal perspectives in favor of side views. She stalks buildings—whether a Texas gas station or an apartment block—from the back or the flank. In their oblique angles and economy of color, Trenkel's paintings court comparison with the work of Ed Ruscha, such as his *Standard Station* series from the 1960s. Her 2006 residency in Marfa, Texas, and the dry, southwestern feel of many of her paintings certainly facilitate such a kinship. (Trenkel's recent foray into photography—serial images of identical-looking American hotel rooms—further contributes to the comparison, while demonstrating her aesthetic versatility.) But Ruscha's paintings draw the last gasps of Pop and the new afflatus of Conceptualism in the same breath. The laconicism of his landscapes, in other words, is a pretext for the loud yelp of language; the plainness of his works clears the stage for the camp of brand names. Trenkel's work shares none of the sleek verve of Ruscha's screenprints. She builds her surfaces from thin washes of oil, which appear thicker and more solid as a result of their structural service. Rather than flee from the dowdy, the workaday, Trenkel makes it her own.

To that end, her paintings also invoke another, earlier, American aesthetic, namely that of Precisionism. The works of Charles Sheeler and others celebrated America's industry as the most worthy pictorial subject, framing factories and water towers as monuments in their own right. "Sheeler is more naive than Hopper," Trenkel remarks with a wry smile. "Hopper is 'too good.'" By naïveté Trenkel means, I think, a belief in the ingenuousness of abstraction—an abstraction that can exist in cahoots with figuration, without the latter's "too goodness" (its narrative intricacy) overwhelming the simple



pleasures of the former. It was, after all, in America's industrial landscapes that Le Corbusier found the classical reconciled with the abstract, the spiritual distilled into a simple and incidental architectonics. Trenkel's paintings of Texas carports and pitched roofs, of storage houses and square pools, revel in precisely these kinds of unassuming geometric marvels.

What, then, is particular about Trenkel's genericism? What constitutes the specificity of her commonplaces? Does it derive from small-town Texas, or post–Cold War Germany? Of course, Trenkel's scenes appear almost identical in their anonymity. One of her canvases began as a painting of a socialist monument in East Berlin; she then changed it to accommodate imagery of the space behind her backyard. Still, something of Berlin, where she lives and labors, lurks in the marrow of nearly all of Trenkel's paintings. Perhaps it is the scale of the city—its wide sidewalks and even wider streets; an urban fabric far in excess of its population (only 3.4 million inhabitants for a vast metropolis); a city still coming (back) into form, despite the legacy of its monuments and its adventurous contemporary architecture. One still finds, all over Berlin, the sudden intrusion of grass and greenery into densely packed blocks, or derelict lots rising up out of nowhere, clearing an unexpected panorama. For their part, Trenkel's panoramas do not offer the Berlin of the Brandenburg Gate or Unter den Linden. But nor, for that matter, do they constitute a kind of spectacularized slumming. The use of banal, unlikely (sub)urban space as the raw material for a painterly practice has been a modernist predilection at least since Manet—has even become a commonplace of painting in its own right. Through a calm and sober diligence, Trenkel has made it a good deal less common. ✦



FROM TOP: **"Hotel" *(Chicago)*, 2004. One of a series of 10 pigment prints, 11½ x 8 in.**

"Hotel" *(Gallup)*, 2004. One of a series of 10 pigment prints, each 11½ x 8 in.

***Untitled*, 2007. Pencil on paper, 11½ x 16½ in.**