

Urban Incisions

Quinn Latimer

“We live in the suburbs, but I've got my business in town.”
—*Paris, Texas* (Wim Wenders, 1984)

“We don't believe in architecture, it's just frozen music.”
—Charles Sheeler

What pleasure is there to be had in architectural banality? In the clean lines—not Minimalist so much as unremarkable—and mute colors of our postindustrial landscape: the urban housing block, concrete parking structure, low-slung suburban home, or desert lean-to? While Precisionist painters of the 1920s like Charles Sheeler and Edward Hopper documented the industrialization of the American landscape with either heroically inflected geometric forms or a hushed homage, and early European photographers celebrated the modernization of their cities with spirited glamour, much of the attention focused on the postwar landscape by contemporary artists—photographers and filmmakers, in particular, thereby cementing such imagery in the contemporary psyche—has favored political readings over aesthetic (about social alienation resulting from the architectural detritus of industry and discarded political systems, for example). Nevertheless, there are contemporary artists who are exploring this landscape less for social critique than for its formal possibilities. In so doing, these mundane exteriors take on a very interior cast, embodying the sensibility of the artist that shaped them in much the way of a still life or a Baroque landscape.

The Berlin-based painter Petra Trenkel is one such artist. Although she works in the quasi-objective, impassive style of so much contemporary photography, her paintings' formal investigations obscure and thus complicate the political significance of their subject. Rendered in a subdued yet nuanced palette—stucco pinks, bleached blues, lemon yellows, burnt reds, the faded green of city flora—that recalls Richard Diebenkorn's Ocean Park series (which, not coincidentally, features a postwar suburban neighborhood of Southern California), Trenkel's discreet urban landscapes, which begin from source photographs that the artist takes, are pictorial compositions that emphasize geometric planes—walls, streets, squares—and juxtapositions of flat, uninflected color. The paint, which is thinned out and layered numerous times, is applied devoid of gesture. When viewing her works one doesn't feel or imagine the artist making the painting; Trenkel's hand is invisible as such. Instead, the viewer sees the painting as though one were inhabiting the artist's exemplarily rigorous point of view. The landscapes feel autonomous, born through the work of seeing as opposed to the work of making, which is ironic, given that these landscapes are very much made of what Trenkel sees fit to use. With their clarity of vision and execution, and their graphic use of color, the paintings impart an oddly cool surrealism. This is further emphasized by all that the artist chooses to leave out of her compositions—absence, it seems, plays a key role in this body of work.

Trenkel's urban landscapes are not just lacking the populace that it would appear they were built to shelter but are often devoid of certain architectural elements that one's eyes expect. In *Untitled* (2005), a series of solitary brick walls are aloofly situated in a blond expanse that may be a field or may be a stretch of sunlit concrete (it is to the artist's credit that it does not matter which); in the background, a green hill improbably arises out

of nothing, with a few square shapes loosely allusive of buildings rising behind it. In an untitled painting from 2006, the low, pink horizon of a house is connected to an austere carport of corrugated tin; the neighboring houses that should appear alongside it do not, just sky and more dun-colored ground receding into the distance. Like a Baroque landscape painter such as Jacob van Ruisdael (whose etchings of dying trees seem very much in kinship with Trenkel's line drawings of the sad shrubs and hedges that urban architecture is punctuated with), who reconfigured his landscapes of actual locals to more closely reflect their impact on his consciousness, Trenkel reorganizes the building elements in her landscapes to mirror her perception of them. It is here, then, that any socio-political critique or ethical imperative can be gleaned.

Whereas Ruisdael made the landscapes more monumental, the dramatic shadows hinting at heroic scales of feeling, Trenkel reduces unremarkable urban blight to its most abstract underlying structures and basic coloration, revealing individual formal qualities and an exacting grace and autonomy that quietly trumps the neglect with it was envisioned, built, and tended to. However, unlike much postwar German photography of similar spaces, which blares its political and aesthetic critique in a hunched documentary stance, Trenkel does not revel in the banality at hand but approaches it in a more delicately inquisitive manner. In this, her practice more closely aligns itself with Giorgio Morandi's investigations of bottles, which he increasingly plumbed for their purely abstract qualities, prizing their neutrality, their limiting formal constraints, and so their infinitely varied possibilities.

A series of paintings made in 2006 while Trenkel was artist-in-resident at the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas, is such an example. Although the paintings are lit by the dusty, bleached light of Far West Texas; the buildings featured are the roughshod structures of a small desert town; and the shadows of telephone poles and trees stretch long and thin across the canvases, the works do not seem out of place within the artist's larger oeuvre. Such is her singularity of vision, and the nearly uniform sensibility of global sprawl, that her landscapes of Berlin and Texas do not radically depart from one another. To this end, these exteriors are not about architecture, which Sheeler professed not to believe in anyway, calling it so much "frozen music" instead. They are concerned with seeing, and the profound interiority that any awareness of such action generates. As quiet as the paintings are, they compel a very active participation, asking us to reimagine the stoic utility of our surroundings, moving from representation to abstraction to representation again, and imbuing them with new meaning in the process. Absent of bodies, these landscapes make their viewer's body come strangely alive. In so doing, the paintings' sober reserve is warmed by the intensity of the artist's, and our, concentration, signaling Trenkel's compassion—intellectual and emotional—for both the mundane environs in which we thrive or fail but rarely actually *perceive*, and ourselves as we exist in such landscapes. Her deft acuity generously beckons our own, remaking the profane, commonplace world so we can finally perceive it as it really is, as we really are, or could be.