

Art

The Idyllic Landscape: Brutalist Architecture

By Will Laughlin

Thirty years after her graduation, artist Julie Langsam is returning to Purchase College, this time for an exhibition of her work on the campus that influenced her formative years as a painter.

In anticipation of her exhibition opening February 17 at the Richard and Dolly Maas Gallery at SUNY Purchase, Langsam has been excitedly re-examining the last fifteen years of her work. “I began to realize how much of my time at Purchase really formed my way of thinking as an artist,” Langsam explains. “The idyllic landscape there and my first real introduction to Brutalist architecture – it was hugely informative as to how I think about art and the space of painting.”

Edward Larrabee Barnes’ vision for the Purchase campus called for “a city within the country.” The concept of a beacon of progress, exemplified by modernist brick structures perched upon the horizon and visible across an empty field, is uncannily echoed in Lang-

sam’s paintings. For the last 15 years, she has investigated images of architecture, the myths of the Romantic sublime, and the legacy of Post-War Abstraction. Her exhibition is a self-examination of how these formal and conceptual frameworks guide her practice and have taken shape since her time at the college.

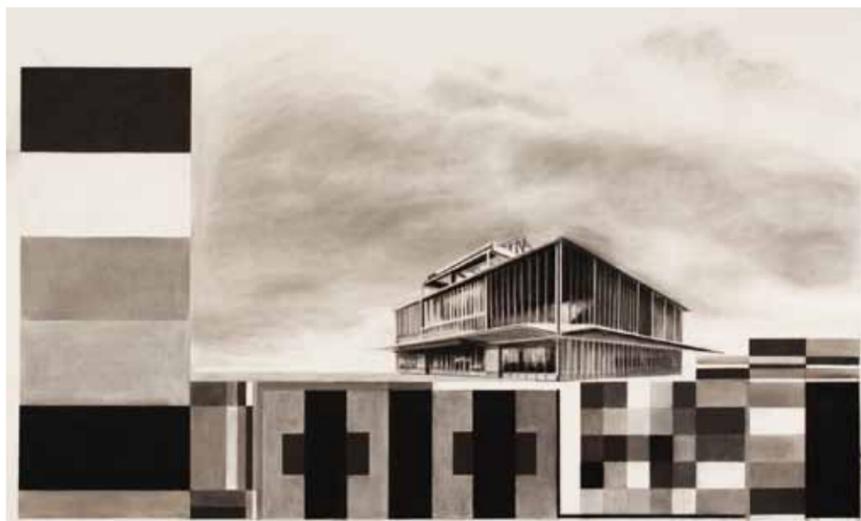
When Langsam arrived at Purchase in 1979, Governor Nelson Rockefeller’s “jewel”¹ of the SUNY system was largely complete, and his vision, alongside Barnes’ master building plans, was among the first public university campuses to situate conservatories of visual art, music, and theater together to encourage a natural interdisciplinary conversation to develop between students. However, Langsam is quick to recall that her arrival to this “dream campus” almost never happened. Under parental pressure she had applied to all architectural programs and only one art school. As the acceptance letters began to arrive, she hid them from her parents until the letter from Purchase’s School of Art and Design was delivered, telling her parents it was the only school that had accepted her. The Purchase campus had been formed in the late-sixties and early seventies in the aftermath of the Kent State riots. The lore among Langsam’s



Gropius Landscape (Director's Residence) 2012
Oil on canvas, 42" x 42"

peers was that each building on campus was connected through underground tunnels to ensure that students would be prevented from taking over and occupying any building during a protest. This kind of suppressive infrastructure supported the material foundation for Langsam’s startling realization: “You’re on this huge estate and all of a sudden you’re surrounded by these big brick buildings,” all rigid angles and block-like plans, “but on the mall there was a Henry Moore sculpture, which was the only organic form next to all of this *brick*, and I remember it being really shocking.”

That brassy Modern sculpture sitting isolated among an empty plaza of brick had clearly made a lasting impression. Beginning in 1998, her paintings have consisted of a rigid, tripartite structure: lone, iconic Modernist structure; melodramatic skyscape harkening back to Hudson River School painters such as Frederic Edwin Church and Thomas Cole; flat, graphic abstraction. This was a structure that Langsam developed after she moved to Cleveland, Ohio (where she taught for 13 years at the Cleveland Institute of Art before recently returning to the east coast to teach at the Mason Gross School of the Arts, Rutgers University in New Jersey). Upon arrival Langsam’s anticipated stereotypical idea of the Midwest proved false: “I thought everything was going to be completely flat. I thought Ohio was going to be like Iowa.” >



Prouve Landscape (Maison du Pueple), 2013, Charcoal on paper, 51.5" x 84"

1. Paul Goldberger, “Architecture: SUNY Purchase Campus Reflects Design Innocence of the ‘60’s,” *The New York Times*, 21 March, 1981





Le Corbusier Landscape (Villa Stein), 2011, Oil on canvas, 72" x 96"



Neutra Floorplan: Von Sternberg House, Color Determined by Chance, 2013, Watercolor on paper, 8.5"x 11"

In her most recent paintings, the severity of the horizon has been exhaustively investigated by playing with the scale of the buildings depicted. Against the unnaturally lush, hyper-real skies, Langsam renders these icons of early Modernist architecture (by heavyweights such as Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, and Walter Gropius, among others) in monochromatic tones of black, white and gray, making them appear both diminutive and detached from the space they are in. As the work developed and became more

complicated, the lower register began to be filled with her "interpretations" of paintings by polemic painters such as Barnett Newman and Ad Reinhardt, whose "black" paintings remain notorious in their near-impossibility to be reproduced in print. Beyond existing as exercises in futility, the coexistence of these three recurring elements acknowledge that many promises of Modernism were left unfulfilled -- remaining essentially propagandistic and inherently flawed by lack of any sense of messy humanness.

"Julie Langsam"

February 17-March 21, 2014
Richard & Dolly Maass Gallery
Purchase College, State University of New York
School of Art+Design, Visual Arts Building
735 Anderson Hill Road,
Purchase, NY 10577

Opening Reception: February 20, 4:30-7pm

This interest in the collapse of painterly and conceptual space, alongside the permeable boundary between representation and abstraction, has driven Langsam's practice and has become especially apparent in recent works examining blueprints and floor plans of previously mined sources. "I've never been able to fully commit to representation or abstraction-- I'm not sure where one ends or one begins," she explains. "In a weird way, these are actually the most representational paintings I've made... I don't see them as flat; when I look at them I see the three-dimensionality and the volume of the building." With a laugh she is quick to admit, "At the same time I could never be a sculptor!" For Langsam, there is much affinity between the paintings on canvas and those directly on the wall. The surface and conceptual tension apparent in each demonstrates a continued confrontation with the residue of Abstract Expressionism.

Simultaneously, the negotiation between intuition and rational determination has driven Langsam's conceptual insights and has been further examined in the coloration of the floor plan watercolors. After the plan of a building is drawn by Langsam from archived blueprints, the color forms are determined randomly by shuffling a large deck of hardware store paint swatches: a chip is pulled, the form is painted, and the process is repeated as the plan fills with color. This calls to mind Ellsworth Kelly's studies in the chance placement of gridded color, eventually leading to "Colors for a Large Wall" in 1951, and John Cage's experiments with the I-Ching. Langsam herself cites Mel Bochner's works from the early Seventies: self-determining sculptural arrangements of stones and matchsticks, which end up diagramming the logic by which they are arranged, as extremely influential.

Reflecting on her return to the place where she began her artistic career, Langsam mused, "I could really call this show *Revisiting Paradise*, because when you're thirty years out, who wouldn't want to go back to art school?" □