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ART AND CULTURE ARTISTS, WRITERS, ARCHITECTS, DIRECTORS AND MUSICIANS

editor's choice **ART**

Julie Langsam

Julie Langsam's paintings are at once literary and sensuous allegories for the failed dreams of Romanticism and modernism. The failure to return to the idealized pastoral harmony of Arcadia or of reason's triumph over nature are expressed here not in the quixotic tradition of dystopic apocalyptic imagery but in a vision of how harmonious these are in their abrogation. Langsam's imagery consists of lushly painted expanses of dramatically colorful sky anchored to passages of nondescript vistas, which form the backdrops for distanced views of coolly rendered, ghostly, high-style modernist houses. While these buildings stake their claim to a sublime once associated in the American imagination with the more romantic source of the naturally picturesque landscape, the absence of driveways, roads or neighbors that would naturalize their presence carries the message that you can't get there from here. The "here" in this case is the world that we stand in looking out onto Langsam's imaginary though bucolic world of sophistication.

In keeping with her imagery, Langsam's format is simple but charged with references and meaning. While antithetical to traditional landscape painting, the square canvas, with slight compositional variations of placement, scale, color and architectural imagery, is appropriate to her modernist subject matter. Langsam's system of repetition and variation is comparable to the strict limi-

tations that such modernists as Josef Albers and Ad Reinhardt imposed on themselves. Conversely, it is this format that allows her to tell the twin stories of how our aesthetic and perhaps spiritual alienation is a product of both the Enlightenment promise of



Julie Langsam, *Gehry Landscape (Lewis Residence, North View)*, 2002, oil on panel, 24 x 24".

humankind's triumph over nature via rationalism and the romantic vision of the tragic and the transcendent sublime turned into the picturesque. By these means she also constructs a meaningful dialogue of postmodernism's conflicted discourse concerning such historically constructed dualistic opposition.

As if to reinforce this latter reading, Langsam's rendering of this tale of modernism's reductive order and romanticism's vision of a boundless nature eschews the mythic pursuit of the ideal of a rationally and aesthetically ordered urban society and opts for one that is more domestic and private. Her modernist icons are the fairly modest individual residences designed by the likes of Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies van der Rohe, Marcel Breuer, Richard Neutra, et al. rather than the great visionary projects of Le Corbusier, Constant and Louis Kahn. Her iconographic opposition of modernist artifice and romantic nature also serves as a prelude to the conflicted condition of a postmodernism that strives to construct a subjectivity that can accept that the desire for an objective reality can never be realized but still must be sought. As if to foreground our present desire for a new visionary space capable of expressing the fluidity of our postmodern world, the final painting in Langsam's series is of the unbuilt house designed by Frank Gehry for Peter Lewis, the owner of Progressive Insurance. The image of Gehry's curvilinear structure silhouetted against a yellow-blue sky implies that our present, too, might just be so many unrealized dreams that come to be promised and then fulfilled in the virtual worlds that art offers us.

SAUL OSTROW

Julie Langsam's paintings were on view last fall at the Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art.