

FINE ARTS

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LONELY AT THE TOP

Paintings, sculptures depict
ideals that may be out of reach

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Special to The Plain Dealer

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Heaven Is a Place Where Nothing Ever Happens," according to the 1979 Talking Heads song. But for New Wave auteur David Byrne, "Heaven" was a bar.

For Julie Langsam and Charlotte Becket, who borrowed the words as a title for their show of paintings and small sculpture, it's all about art. And their two-person exhibit explores what it means to yearn for an ideal — for heaven — at this time, early in the 21st century.

Langsam, a native New Yorker who has been an associate professor at the Cleveland Institute of Art since 1996, paints desolate (though often colorful) landscapes, each serving as the improbable setting for a single Modernist icon.

Earlier works depicted modern "classics" of domestic architecture by such greats as Mies van der Rohe and Marcel Breuer, plunked down in the midst of barren terrain. Langsam's medium-size oil-on-panel works comment on the inaccessibility of High Modernist purism; no driveways lead up to those dwellings, no sidewalks or paths pass near, there are no neighbors — not so much as a lonely shrub.

Her new paintings continue this theme, but instead of quoting architecture, Langsam now places famous artworks in blank, cloud-shadowed vistas.

These works — a sample from Sol LeWitt's "Incomplete Open Cube" series, Donald Judd's "Tablebench Prototype," Constantin Brancusi's "Endless Column" — bracket much of the 20th century's explorations of pure form. All are essays in "modular" art production and aspire to the sort of infinity of mind and spirit that landscape once symbolized for artists, poets and philosophers in the first decades of the 19th century.

Langsam's formal juxtapositions also have a personal edge, questioning the loneliness and sheer inhumanity of the ideal.

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COURTESY OF JULIE LANGSAM

Cleveland Institute of Art professor Julie Langsam's "Brancusi Landscape (Endless Column)," on view at Heights Arts as part of the exhibit "Heaven Is a Place Where Nothing Ever Happens," puts the famous Modernist sculpture in a cloud-shadowed vista. She seems to use the image as a ladder to a formal heaven that can't otherwise be reached or touched.

In one of her most striking works, the painter depicts Brancusi's 1938 column rising on the side of her canvas, against a deep red sky. She seems to use the image as a ladder to a formal heaven that can't otherwise be reached or touched. The artwork itself is the medium of communication with the ideal.

Before her 2002 graduation, New York artist Charlotte Becket studied with Langsam at the art institute. Her small-scale, Mylar-sheathed plywood constructions at Heights Arts have a deliberately ersatz look to them, like pyramids carved from fool's gold.

In fact, Becket's meditations on Modernism have been consistently pessimistic, and rather sly. Instead of considering the implications of form, she takes a stroll through the ultrasmooth world of Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons (whose large stainless-steel "Rabbit 1986" has been nicknamed the "Brancusi Bunny"), a place where minimalist and Pop styles mix and erode one another's cultural premises.

For a recent solo exhibit in New York, Becket installed a 10-foot-tall work titled "Wishing Well." Basically a huge bellows made of trash and plywood, "Wishing Well" breathed garbage in and out, in a parody of recycling.

Becket's small, very clean sculptures at Heights Arts also do their share of breathing. Four parts of a single work titled "Laughing Gas, Truth Serum, and Fools Gold" are spread around the gallery. Composed of small, glittering pyramids and cubes situated on plateaulike constructions that seem to float, they almost could be a vision or dream in some Neo-Geo version of celestial bliss — except for the crinkling, huffing and puffing. Becket's heaven seems to have tumors, or at least a restive unconscious.

Like tin-foil Jiffy Pop bags, swelling as they hatched popcorn on Mom's gas range, Becket's shapeless Mylar bags burgeon by infinitesimal degrees. Attached goiterlike to the sides and bottoms of the narrow plateaus, they seem like recycling bags for used theorems, the slightly nasty side of a heaven where something *is* happening.

Maybe Becket proposes a place where ideals can digest and reinvent themselves. As the Talking Heads sang in that long-ago New Wave dawn, "It's hard to imagine that nothing at all / Could be so exciting, could be so much fun."

ART REVIEW

Heights Arts

What: The two-person exhibit "Heaven Is a Place Where Nothing Ever Happens," paintings and sculpture by Julie Langsam and Charlotte Becket.

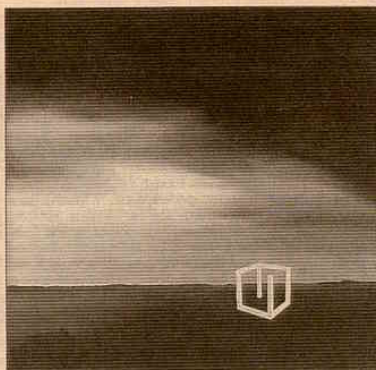
When: Through Sunday.

Where: 2173 Lee Road, Cleveland Heights.

Admission: Free. Call 216-371-3344 or go to www.heightsarts.org.

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Langsam's formal juxtapositions, as in "LeWitt Landscape (Incomplete Open Cube, Purple/Orange)," come with a personal edge, questioning the loneliness and sheer inhumanity of the ideal.

COURTESY OF JULIE LANGSAM