



# **STUDIO SEEING**

A PRACTICAL  
GUIDE TO  
DRAWING,  
PAINTING,  
AND PERCEPTION

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*Those who are in love with practice without theoretical knowledge are like the sailor who goes onto a ship without a rudder or compass and who never can be certain whither he is going.*

—Leonardo da Vinci<sup>20</sup>

## The 3D Cues

In the fall of 2013, I visited an exhibition of intriguing works by Julie Langsam. The show featured the large paintings that are her signature tripartite works incorporating a single modern architectural icon against a broad sky, accompanied by geometric solids at the bottom.

In *Gropius Landscape: Bauhaus*, for example, the view of the Bauhaus building shimmers before a soft, yet vivid sky of complementary hues. The building's gray facade appears lit from below by a purple light, cast from the forms upon which the building rests. Below the building a black-on-black panel hovers, evoking Ad Reinhardt's paintings. To see the geometric cross and grid emerging from



Figure 2.1: Julie Langsam, *Gropius Landscape: Bauhaus*, 2014. Oil on canvas. 72 × 84 inches. Courtesy the artist and 532 Gallery Thomas Jaeckel, NYC.



the delicate color temperature shifts of the blacks, I had to spend some time in front of the painting and focus on the panel (Figure 2.1).

While I was admiring Langsam's paintings and thinking about Modernism, a former student engaged me in conversation. I told the student that I was painting and that the process was very mysterious. "How so?"

We walked out of the gallery and into a long hallway. I pointed and said,

Look at that. The walls, floor, and ceiling appear to get smaller and converge. You and I know that if we walk down the hallway, the distance between the walls, ceiling, and floor will remain the same. However, it does not look that way.

"Isn't that just perspective?"

"Indeed," I replied. We went back into the gallery. "Now look at the paintings. Do you see the perspective?"

"Yes, of course. There is a building underneath a sky."

"Now look at different parts of the painting. Do you see different perspectives?" I asked.

"No," the student replied, tentatively.

"Now look around the gallery and then outside this room and down the hall. Do you see different perspectives?"

"Oh yes, I see."

Isn't that amazing? The painting is a flat surface covered with colors. On this surface, we see a recognizable building, a beautiful sky, and geometric shapes. But when we move in front of the painting, the perspective does not change. However, when we look around the physical world, the perspective constantly changes. How do you explain that? Painting is very mysterious.

Perspective in art usually refers to the illusion of three-dimensional (3D) objects or spaces on a two-dimensional (2D) surface. In Langsam's painting, viewers see the building "in perspective." The term can also refer to the viewer's particular response or interpretation of art or point of view. Perspective has many different meanings, depending upon the world of discourse.

Neuroscience has much to tell us about perspective and how people see. Margaret Livingstone is a Professor of Neurobiology at Harvard Medical School who specializes in the field of visual perception. Her research and writings offer insights into how our brains process visual information. She and her co-researchers have documented the neuroscience of how humans