

ERIN CURTIS

PERSPECTIVE THRESHOLD



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

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AUSTIN, TEXAS

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Perspective Threshold

Erin Curtis succinctly describes her art as taking architecture as “both subject and substance.”¹ Which is to say that Curtis’ work is, in part, fundamentally about space. Over the last several years, she has created a group of houses out of large-scale paintings, found textiles, derelict furniture, and architectural fragments. These painterly environments address the problems of pictorial space at an architectural scale, playing with the spectator’s perception of two and three dimensions, and ultimately of illusion and reality. Curtis’ work is also *about* architecture, in the sense that she makes representations of buildings – some based on photographs of actual structures, others imagined – that challenge Modern architecture’s myths, especially its maxims: “Less is more.” “Ornament is crime.” “A house is a machine for living in.”

These two lines of inquiry – pictorial representation and architectural myths – are intertwined most clearly in Curtis’ handling of pattern and decoration. The long vertical painting, *A Story of Modernism*, is a case in point. Four discrete scenes stacked one atop the next reveal interior and exterior views of specific architectural spaces. Eschewing the understated tones of Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer’s Chamberlain Cottage (1940), and the mirrored glass curtain wall of Eero Saarinen’s General Motors Technical Center, (1955), Curtis has colored every surface of each building in high-keyed hues and created obsessive patterns that dramatize the relationships between light and shade, one section of the grid to the next. The pitch of Curtis’ decoration becomes more fevered towards the top of the canvas, reinforcing the “story” told here, which reads from bottom to top: the colonnaded arches stand in for the architecture of the past, Chamberlain Cottage for Modernism’s high point, and the General Motors Technical Center for its degeneration. Overlaid on top of these scenes



The Memorabilia Collection (A-F), 2009. Found Object Collage. 9" x 12" each.
The House, 2009. Installation. 8' x 8' x 24'.

is a veil of abstracted red flowers drawn from Indian embroidery and the year Curtis recently spent in that country. While unifying the composition, the repetitive pattern also works to counter modern architecture’s pretensions to the machine, drawing attention to the artist’s hand that applied one dot after the other and the hand that stitched every thread of the original embroidery.

Here and in much of Curtis’ work, pattern disrupts the illusion of three-point perspective and draws the spectator’s eye to the surface of the canvas. In the large painting aptly titled *Perspectivism*, she used the same artificial palette to abstract the concrete slab buildings of a cityscape into a jumble of flat colored planes set against a yellow sky. Varied patterns of diamonds, squares, stripes, flowers, and other shapes set off parts of the sky as well as adjacent faces of the blocky buildings, which are painted in different modes of perspectival representation: elevation, axonometric perspective, linear perspective. This combination hints at a logical pictorial

strategy but does not add up to a comprehensible whole. The cityscape as such is barely legible, literally drowned out by its parts.

In other paintings, plant life doubles as both landscape and pattern. The wavy form repeated in shades of green in *Flight of the Suburbs* indicates a shrub or a tree, but when the same shape is repeated in pink, it becomes a decorative element that confuses the depicted space. Curtis’ plants often hover somewhere between living organism and wallpaper pattern, echoing the decorative function of landscaping in architectural plans. In many respects, however, these paintings break every tenet of twentieth century architecture. Here, ornament is not crime. Less is indeed a bore.

While Curtis’ paintings tend to discredit pictorial illusion, her constructions do the opposite, inverting the rules of visual representation. The two most basic models for explaining how a work of art should be regarded are the window or mirror, the

paradigm most closely tied to Renaissance perspective, and the self-sufficient object, wherein the work of art asserts its own reality. When applied to painting, we might say that with the former, the spectator enters the illusionistic space of the painting, whereas with the latter, the painted canvas exists physically in the spectator's space. In much of her work Curtis deliberately contrasts these two modes of representation by addressing the problems of pictorial space at an architectural scale. At first this may seem a bit wrong-headed, since the interchange between window and object that characterizes painting seems not to apply to architecture. So for example, in their discussion of transparency across pictorial and architectural space, Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky argue that, while painting can only *imply* the third dimension, architecture *cannot suppress* its three-dimensionality. The spectator physically enters the actual space of any building. A window in a house or an office building really is just that – a window.² Curtis does not shy away from, ignore, nor subvert these facts; rather, she transforms the window of architecture into the “window” of painting and thereby inverts the window/object paradigm. If visual representation relies on a painting of a window “looking like” a window, no matter how stylized or abstracted, then Curtis invites us to regard a window as if it were a “window,” a representation rather than an object.

Curtis has largely focused her constructions on representations of interiors, including *House Painting*, which was exhibited at Austin's MASS Gallery in 2006.³ For that show, Curtis divided the gallery's large rectangular space into a series of rooms, building new walls where she affixed numerous large canvases, some with dimensions close to twelve feet. “Real” architectural elements – columns, capitals, mantles, windows, and doors – plus actual and painted wallpaper, a painted ceiling fan, as well as “real” and painted rugs, accompanied these canvases.

The paintings on the walls depicted the rooms of a typical house – living room, bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen – using a severely skewed perspective that, along with fields of pattern, further frustrated naturalism. In the new work created for *Perspective Threshold*, Curtis has streamlined the elements that make up her construction, but many of the same rules apply. This house is weighted more towards exterior rather than interior spaces that are radically abstracted, with the bulk of the “house” made up of mass-produced doors. In contrast with the intimate environments of *House Painting*, the door house functions as an empty shell that is all surface, drawing attention to the creation of space as an enclosure. The construction's status as a representation or an object remains ambiguous in a manner similar to paintings such as *A Story of Modernism* and *Flight of the Suburbs*, which hang off the wall, penetrating the spectator's space.

Even so, Curtis' deployment of mass-produced doors is deliberate and comments on modern architects' controlling ambitions as well as their penchant for standardization. Paradigmatic of this worldview is Le Corbusier, the French architect who championed the fundamental rethinking and refinement of the house as “a machine for living in.” The then-burgeoning automobile industry, analyzed every minute detail of the car as an item of mass production. Their goal was to beat its competition and come that much nearer to perfection. Le Corbusier reasoned that man's everyday environment should merit the same level of study and advocated a new architecture, advising readers of *Towards A New Architecture* to demand bare walls, built-in furniture, the most up-to-date fittings, and a vacuum cleaner.⁴ The legacy of these ideals ranges from high-rise housing projects to Design Within Reach, but for Curtis, it may be the idea that all aspects of everyday life could be provided for, and thereby controlled, which is most

fascinating. Standardization provided a baseline for a new way of life and at the same time enforced a lack of choice, since all necessary furnishings would be included and decoration was deemed superfluous. Standardization also yielded the mass-production of building parts, such as the doors that make up this house.

For all his functionalist rhetoric, however, the photographs of buildings in Le Corbusier's book are strangely depopulated, which could suggest that the pictured environments were created for everyone, or else be interpreted as suitable for no one. Taking one side or the other might hinge on your enthusiasm for the *tabula rasa*: How would you bring your past into such a house? How would you make it your own? Contemplating these questions may be beside the point, because in the end, the buildings of Le Corbusier, Saarinen, Breuer, and Gropius were not built for us. These architects aspired to create a universal architecture, but they also aspired to create an architecture of their time. In Curtis' art, Modern architecture drifts between monument and ruin, utopia and dystopia, a group of curious artifacts more than living environments. As if to underscore this fact, she draws her images not from observation, but from the pages of books.

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¹ Artist statement, spring 2009.

² See Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky, “Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal,” in Colin Rowe, *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and Other Essays* (MIT Press, 1976). First published in *Perspecta*, 1963.

³ *House Painting* was subsequently shown at Lawndale Art Center, Houston.

⁴ From “The Manual of the Dwelling,” in Le Corbusier, *Towards A New Architecture*. Trans. Frederick Etchells. Dover, 1986. p. 122-123. Originally published in English by John Rodker, London, 1931.

ERIN CURTIS

Lives in Austin, Texas.

EDUCATION

- 2009 Fulbright Scholar, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur, India
2007 M.F.A. Studio Art, University of Texas at Austin
1999 B.A. Liberal Arts, Williams College, Williamstown, MA
1998 Glasgow School of Art, Glasgow, Scotland

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2009 *Perspective Threshold*, Women and Their Work Gallery, Austin, TX
The Height of the Slow Season, Kashi Art Gallery, Kochi, Kerala, India
2007 *House Painting*, Lawndale Art Center, Houston, TX
2006 *House Painting*, MASS Gallery, Austin, TX

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2008 *Texpose: New Art from Austin*, Paragraph Gallery, Kansas City, MO
The Longest Day of the Year, Art Palace Gallery, Austin, TX
Le guerre de la travailleur, Fuse Box Festival, Austin TX
2007 *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Unit B Gallery, San Antonio, TX
Tabletop Sculpture, Art Palace, Austin, TX
Coda: MFA Thesis Exhibition, Visual Arts Center, University of Texas at Austin
2007 Hunting Art Prize Finalist Exhibition, Houston, TX
Texas Biennial 2007, Dougherty Arts Center, Austin, TX
2006 *Outside Area*, Gallery 3 at the Co-op, Austin, TX
Making It Together, Creative Research Laboratory, Austin, TX
Mattress Stripping, Red Mill Gallery, Johnson, VT
2005 *Terra Cognita*, Cinematexas 10, Austin, TX
Fever, Creative Research Laboratory, Austin, TX
ID, Fuse Box, The Blue Theater, Austin, TX
2002 *Newark Open Doors*, Newark, NJ
Group Show, Ballston Spa, NY
2000 Fellowship Exhibition, Berkshire Art Museum, MA

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 2007 Wendy Weil Atwell, "San Antonio, Erin Curtis and Karen Mahaffy," *Artlies*, Winter.
Meghan Hendley, "The Front Row," KUHF, Houston Public Radio, September 17.
Dusti Rhoades, "Top Picks," *Houston Press*, August 30.
Dan R. Goddard, "The Yellow Wallpaper," *San Antonio Express-News*, August 24.

Amanda Douberley, "Tabletop Sculpture"
(Austin, TX: Art Palace)

Til Richter, "The Fine Art of Austin," *Austin Monthly*, May.

Jade Walker, "Coda," in *Coda: An Exhibition*
(Austin, TX: Creative Research Laboratory).

Amanda Douberley, "Top 10 Visual Arts Exhibitions of 2006," *The Austin Chronicle*, Jan. 12.

2006 Amanda Douberley, "Outside Area," in *Outside Area*
(Austin, TX: Gallery 3 at the Co-op).

Justin Goldwater, "Making It Together at Creative Research Laboratory," *...might be good* (Austin) 75, August 25.

Salvador Castillo, "Making It Together," *The Austin Chronicle*, August 25.

Erika Morawski, "Erin Curtis & Stephanie Wagner," in *Making It Together* (Austin TX: Creative Research Laboratory).

2005 Jessica Lantos, "Erin Curtis," in *Fever* (Austin TX: Creative Research Laboratory).

RESIDENCIES

- 2009 Kashi Art Residency, Kochi, Kerala, India
2006 Vermont Studio Center, Johnson, VT
2002 Skidmore College Summer Six Fellowship, Saratoga Springs, NY

FELLOWSHIPS & AWARDS

- 2006 Continuing Fellowship, University of Texas at Austin
2005 David Price Endowed Presidential Scholarship, University of Texas at Austin
2004 Ellen Clayton Garwood Scholarship, University of Texas at Austin
2000 Berkshire Art Association Prize, Berkshire Museum of Art
1999 Peyser Prize in Painting, Williams College



Moving, 2008. Acrylic on canvas. 84" x 96".
House, 2009. Paint on found doors. 20' x 6' x 8'.



Above:
Perspective Threshold, 2009. Installation View.

Cover Panel:
Perspectivism, 2009. Acrylic on canvas. 59" x 94".



Kaufmann House Pool Set, 2009. Mixed media, acrylic on canvas & wood.
Temple, 2009. Acrylic on canvas & mixed media. 12' x 14' x 10'.
Flight of the Suburbs and *A Story of Modernism*, 2009. Acrylic on canvas. 120" x 38".

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