

THESIS

THRESHOLDS

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Laura Carpenter Truitt

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Master's Committee:

Advisor: David Yust

Co-Advisor: Patrice Sullivan

Ajean Ryan

Sanam Emami

Joseph T. McGrane

## ABSTRACT

### THRESHOLDS

These paintings and drawings reference the interaction of architecture and landscape; physical space and a merging of geometric and organic forms. They utilize the horizon line and linear perspective to create an illusion of space. By using human sized scale I encourage the viewer to exist physically in the space, and by keeping the imagery ambiguous the viewer is engaged in the creation of the space. I see these works as thresholds; an unsteady viewpoint in the middle of a representation and constructed metaphorical space.

These works operate with multiple thresholds. First of all there's a metaphoric threshold, a place that is specific to my local fluctuating landscape. Secondly, there's an architectural threshold between inside and outside, looking out and seeing in. Thirdly, my work explores structures between their life and death; construction, decay and destruction. Finally, there's an enacted physical threshold that I think about while painting, trying to paint in-between foreground and background, and creating structures just to destroy them so that they sit at a mid-point of completedness.

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## THRESHOLDS

These paintings and drawings reference the interaction of architecture and landscape; physical space and a merging of geometric and organic forms. They utilize the horizon line and linear perspective to create structured space. By using scale that echoes the size of the human body I encourage the viewer to exist physically in the space, and by keeping the imagery ambiguous the viewer is engaged in the illusion. I see these works as thresholds; an unsteady viewpoint that is in between representation and metaphor.

The Oxford English dictionary defines threshold as a “reference to entrance, the beginning of a state or action, outset, opening.”<sup>1</sup> ‘Threshold’ not only describes the moment between interior and exterior space, it is an entrance into a painting. In my interview with artist Susanne Kühn, whose interest in architectural elements in her work has influenced my own, she defines threshold as a

physical and intellectual area of transition. Painterly elements... juxtapose each other, mix together, become something different, change, are being distorted or smoothly go from one stadium into the next. In a painting, this is a very interesting moment, because this is the area where new elements evolve which are entirely specific for one particular painting.<sup>2</sup>

The threshold is where the painting comes alive, where it begins and takes on its own life, independent of its sources and original intent. This is also where the viewer can take some authorship in the meaning of the imagery.

These works represent multiple thresholds. First of all there’s a metaphoric threshold, a place that is specific to the language of landscape. Secondly, there’s an architectural threshold that I try to construct between inside and outside, looking out and seeing in. Thirdly, my work explores structures in the threshold between their life and death; construction, decay and

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<sup>1</sup> "threshold, n.", *OED Online*, (Oxford University Press, Dec. 2011) 5 March 2012, <<http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/201234>>.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Susanne Kühn by email March 23<sup>rd</sup> –April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2011, see Appendix I, 28.

destruction. Finally, there's an enacted physical threshold that I think about while painting, trying to paint in-between foreground and background, and creating structures just to destroy them so that they sit at a mid-point of completedness.

'Metaphoric threshold' has to do with how we 'read' a landscape. What does a certain shape of building mean in our culture? I want to press pause at the visual moment in between identification and confusion of geography, economic state, and relative scale. In his book *The Culture of Nature*, Alexander Wilson notes that there has been a major change in land use patterns in the last 40 years, especially in the relationship between city and country.<sup>3</sup> From the industrial revolution's centralization of money and power in the cities, there has been a spreading out, a sprawling, of populations into the rural areas in North America.<sup>4</sup> This has caused environmental problems in rural America, including abandoned farmland and "uninhabitable 'public' spaces of shopping malls and superhighways". The upside, Wilson insists, is that the sprawl translates into a fairer economic society, the distinction between city and country is less apparent.<sup>5</sup> In many of the mid-western and western states in America the grey area between city and country is a threshold between past and future economies and changing uses of geography. Like the threshold between housing development and grazing land in Colorado, these thresholds are visually jarring, representative of a landscape in flux.

*More Rural* and *More Urban* explore the complexity of land use on a large threshold between city and country. (Fig. 1)(Fig. 2) Urban towers and bridges navigate the viewer through the landscape in *More Rural*, and organic, botanical shapes and colors encroach into the constructed space in *More Urban*.

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<sup>3</sup> Alexander Wilson, *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez*, (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1991), 202.

<sup>4</sup> Wilson, 203.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

*More Rural* is in three separate panels, each panel is about the size of my own height and arm span. The horizon line was painted at my own eye height; this painting is meant to be one into which we can walk. Along with an unsteady floor and ambiguous imagery, the body sized scale in *More Rural* encourages a sense of a dimensional sublime. The idea of the sublime in painting is slippery but it seems to culminate in a representation that would make a viewer reflect on his or her own humanity. According to Edmund Burke one way that this can be achieved is by “a greatness of dimensions,” a situation that physically overtakes the viewer, like looking at the night sky or across the Grand Canyon.<sup>6</sup> In *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* Barnett Newman was trying to create a sublime moment that was independent of the outside world. His overpowering painting was an actual object of sublimity rather than a depiction of nature’s ability to rouse the sublime.<sup>7</sup> Like Newman’s painting, *More Rural*, when viewed from a foot away, tries to overtake a person’s peripheral vision. Ideally, a viewer is sucked into the painting and made aware of their physical size relative to the object and illusion of the painting.

Obscurity and confusion can also evoke the sublime. Burke explains: “When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes.”<sup>8</sup> In *More Rural*, the thinner paint and vertical drips in the foreground of the painting give the impression that the viewer is falling through the floor, an effect that creates apprehension in the viewer. (Fig. 3) In the middle panel the horizon line disappears, confusing the space and implying distance.

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<sup>6</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 53.

<sup>7</sup> Pierre Schneider, “Flat Forms, Deep Thoughts: Newman on Gericault,” in *Reconsidering Barnett Newman*, ed. Melissa Ho (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 136.

<sup>8</sup> Burke, 54.

*More Rural* employs a physical sense of awe and a feeling of falling through the floor to give the viewer a feeling of the sublime. In addition, the threshold between an illusory image and a flat object in this painting creates uneasiness. The white borders serve to remind the viewer that this is a depiction, a picture, a flat image, an object. The moment between bright white border and color is a threshold into the painting's illusory world. As a viewer's eye travels to along a perspective line or towards a bright area of the painting they are brought up short by the border. In this way they have to re-enter the painting, crossing that threshold again and again.

The objects in *More Rural* are taken from feats of human engineering that have a connection to water use. They are simplified and estimated. The red towers dot the landscape but also enclose the viewer so that as you look you realize that you are inside of a tower or cage. The towers come from images of hydraulic fracturing towers, a growing presence in the rural Colorado landscape, while the bridges come from images of the bay bridge in San Francisco and the Hoover dam bypass bridge in Nevada and Arizona. All the objects are marvels of human engineering and they represent our use/abuse of the landscape. There is a sense of dystopia about this landscape as if it's post-human habitation, it's a document of my own musings on water and rural land use. Fracking towers are a new development in our landscape, one in which we as a culture (and I personally) are fully compliant in; we drive gas vehicles, fly all over the world, and expect that freedom to negotiate geography. Fracking is a product of modern societies' consumption of energy and population growth, as is/was the Hoover dam, and the bay bridge. I'm using the towers and bridges as a starting off point on which to build or take down, they represent themselves less than the uses that we put them to. These objects sit on the threshold of recognition to a viewer, they may see a tower and not know whether it represents cell phones, power lines, fracking, or some other use, but the tower hints at human presence and engineering.



That ambiguity leaves room for the viewers own thoughts about human use/abuse of their local or imagined landscape.

The architectural threshold in my work is one in which the illusory space can portray two places at once. In *Threshold* (Fig 3) there is a long building in the upper left area that is seen from the outside. This building has somewhat transparent walls, and a black hole at the opening so we are seeing inside of the building in two different ways at separate interiors. At the same time, we know that we are inside of a larger space because there are perspective lines that roughly form some sort of ceiling or roof. There is detritus on the floor of the space so we know there's a floor, but there are vertical drips and transparent areas that make the floor area look like it continues down as a chasm or void. Objects that seem solid at first become transparent, like the half circle shapes that could be sticking up from the floor/ground. All this spatial confusion makes for a structure that isn't quite solid or easily navigated. There are moments where the architecture takes over the painting, and moments where the matter on the floor becomes more important. The formal play of geometric and organic shapes gives the eye places to explore and rest throughout the piece. In *View from the Outside* uncertainty of space is created by the fence structure that blocks the viewer's trajectory to the back of the painting, and the pile of organic jumble. (Fig 5) A threshold is an entrance and at the same time an exit, in my work the architecture sits at a similar duality between inside and outside, solid and transparent, horizontal and vertical.

There is a threshold in a building's lifetime that I explore in these paintings. As a building decays, or is being constructed, it visually becomes something other than a functional building. Often, a structure in the midst of being built has an indistinct future purpose, it could turn out to have many different uses. This is often the case with the decay or destruction of

structures; they become an abstract form with an unclear history. That ambiguity in between states of construction or decay is where I want my work to sit in a viewer's eyes. In *View from the Outside* odd angled lines on the building in the background indicate destruction. Decay is hinted at by the lines that devolve from straight to more rounded shapes in the foreground of the painting. Stable structures hint at possible intention, like the fence structure that roughly halves the composition and the orange wall area on the right side of the picture plane. These three states, destruction, decay and stability, combine to form a view that has many possibilities, more questions than answers, and is an open place to paint from.

The enacted physical threshold in my work is a formal action that I take in conversation with the painting. I will often physically obscure or destroy the structures in my work after creating them, either by blurring the images with a dry brush, erasing and rubbing out parts of the image or by using thinner to wash away the paint. In *Decay* the washes of paint cover some of the structural elements on the left hand side of the painting; I enacted decay on the building using mineral spirits. (Fig. 6) On the right hand side, where the building is most solid, I dragged paint across the plane of the building creating a skin or siding of the barn. Much of the debris in this painting sits on the top of the physical layers of the foreground, mimicking the actions of objects being dumped around the remains of a structure.

To increase the sense of unease and play with the physical threshold of the painting I also create a confusion of space with foreground and background reversals. In *Construction* the part of the painting that should be the furthest away, the sky, is painted in thick, opaque, vibrant paint contradicting the washy, vague nature of the buildings that stand against the sky. (Fig. 7) This opposition is important for two reasons; it is another way that I am destroying the illusion of the painting, and it slows the viewer down so that they have to take a little more care getting back to

the vanishing point. In a detail of *More Rural* you can see that the bridge structure is made up of the washy first layers of the painting, and the background of the bridge is physically brought to the front with thick yellow-white paint. (Fig. 8) Making the metaphoric background into the physical foreground emphasizes the fact that this structure is a painting, an object rather than a representation.

In *More Urban* the action enacted is an excess of geometric lines, constructed through planes and structures, breaking the sense of space. The grids and lines become a mess of in and out, and in the lower right area the organic marks stolidly creep over the structure. The destruction is in the overload of lines, built up and built up, and then taken down by painting around those lines. The largest vertical line in the left half of the painting shows the layers and destruction of painting in and out and around the urban marks.

These thresholds are all aimed at creating a structured space that is metaphoric, architectural and physical. The paintings work best when they are ambiguous enough to encourage invention of a new space, and referential enough for the viewer to be sucked in.

Color plays a significant role in these works. Sometimes it is used to denote a landscape element and confuse space (like the 'sky' blue in *Construction*), more often it is independent from the object it represents and is activated by its relation to the other colors in the painting.

In *Construction 2*, the painting plays on the complimentary relationship between a warm, hot, orange and cooler greens and blues (Fig. 9). The orange is the thin under painting of the piece, it peeks through more solid greenish blue background creating a clash between the two colors that draw the eye. In the mid left hand side of the painting the warmer, cobalt blue side of the building stands out because of its difference from the greener blue, and it's opposition to the orange.

In *Palette Studies*, I researched painters from the last four hundred years, replicating their colors in my own compositions in a series of 35 small paintings. (Fig. 10) This enabled me to expand my own knowledge of other painter's color use, not only by seeing but by doing. For example, in the third series of small paintings from the left hand side I was looking at Giorgio Morandi's *Still life* 1963 (Fig. 11, Fig. 12). I also picked color palettes that I was not immediately attracted to, like Howard Hodgkins garishly saturated palettes, or Susan Rothenberg's muddy, nearly monochromatic horse paintings. By studying these palettes I learned by doing; Rothenberg's colors are not nearly as muddy as they seem at first, and Hodgkins' are hard to replicate. This color finding project eventually became an abbreviated palette history of painting, and I made the small works in the shape of Polaroids to point to the storied relationship between painting and photography.

In *More Rural* and *More Urban*, my palette was influenced partly from Edward Burtynsky's strangely organic photographs of the Chinese quarry in Xiamen, and partly from Nadav Kander's photographs from his book *Yangtze, The Long River*. (Fig. 13) These photographers draw attention to land use, Burtynsky documents the visually arresting damage of quarries, and Kander highlights the exquisite beauty of a dammed and polluted river corridor. I used parts of their color combinations in *More Rural* and *More Urban*; soft, organic colors in man made structures and constructions.

Appropriation of color is a research tool, as is my use of images from the internet. Many of my paintings are informed by pieces of captured internet photos or images of my own. The photos are documents; this is what a fracking tower looks like, this is what a half destroyed house looks like, etc. There are moments in my painting where I reference photography; the Polaroid shape in *Palette Studies* or the white borders in *More Urban* and *More Rural*.

Photography is not my subject, but it is an important element in my process. My paintings are very decidedly not photographic or photorealist, a distinction that needs the photograph as it's opposite to exist.

These works interpret 'landscape' as a visual language of structured space. In her book "the Language of Landscape" Anne Whiston Spirn describes landscape as the 'material home'. Landscape is where we "dwell", and creating a space in which we dwell is basic self-expression: Building and constructing is stating that "I am here, I exist"<sup>9</sup>. In these works I'm trying to create my own statement of existence, my view of the contemporary world that surrounds me. I want these works to sit in the viewers' mind as ideas of landscape, to be 'read' by viewers as a language that uses constructions instead of letters or words. Human sized scale encourages the viewer to exist physically in the painting, and through non-specific imagery the viewer is engaged in creating the space. These imagined places are a type of threshold, representative of the wider world but also existing by itself as an object. Spirn says "Landscape connotes a sense of the purposefully shaped, the sensual and aesthetic, the embeddedness of culture"<sup>10</sup>. This embeddedness of culture is natural to the vehicle of landscape and is what I'm trying to activate in the viewer.

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<sup>9</sup> Anne Whiston Spirn, *The Language of Landscape*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 16.

<sup>10</sup> Spirn, 17.

## FIGURES



Fig. 1, Laura Truitt, More Rural, 2012, water based oil on canvas wrapped panel, 72" x 144"



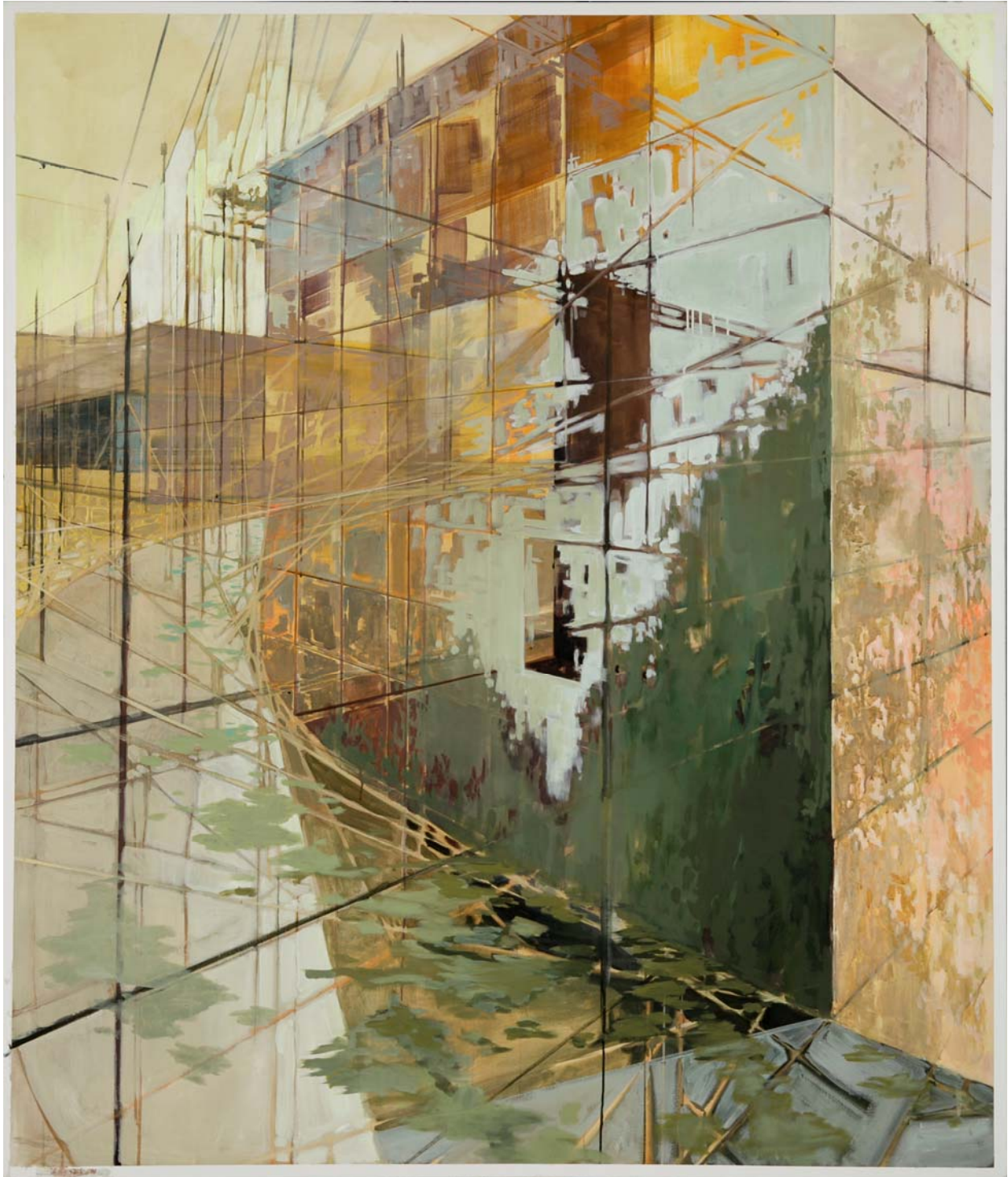


Fig. 2, Laura Truitt, More Urban, 2011, water based oil on canvas, 57" x 67".





Fig. 3, Laura C. Truitt, More Rural (detail), 2012, water based oil on canvas wrapped panel, 72" x 144".





Fig. 4, Laura C. Truitt, Threshold, 2011, oil and charcoal on canvas, 72'' x 80''.



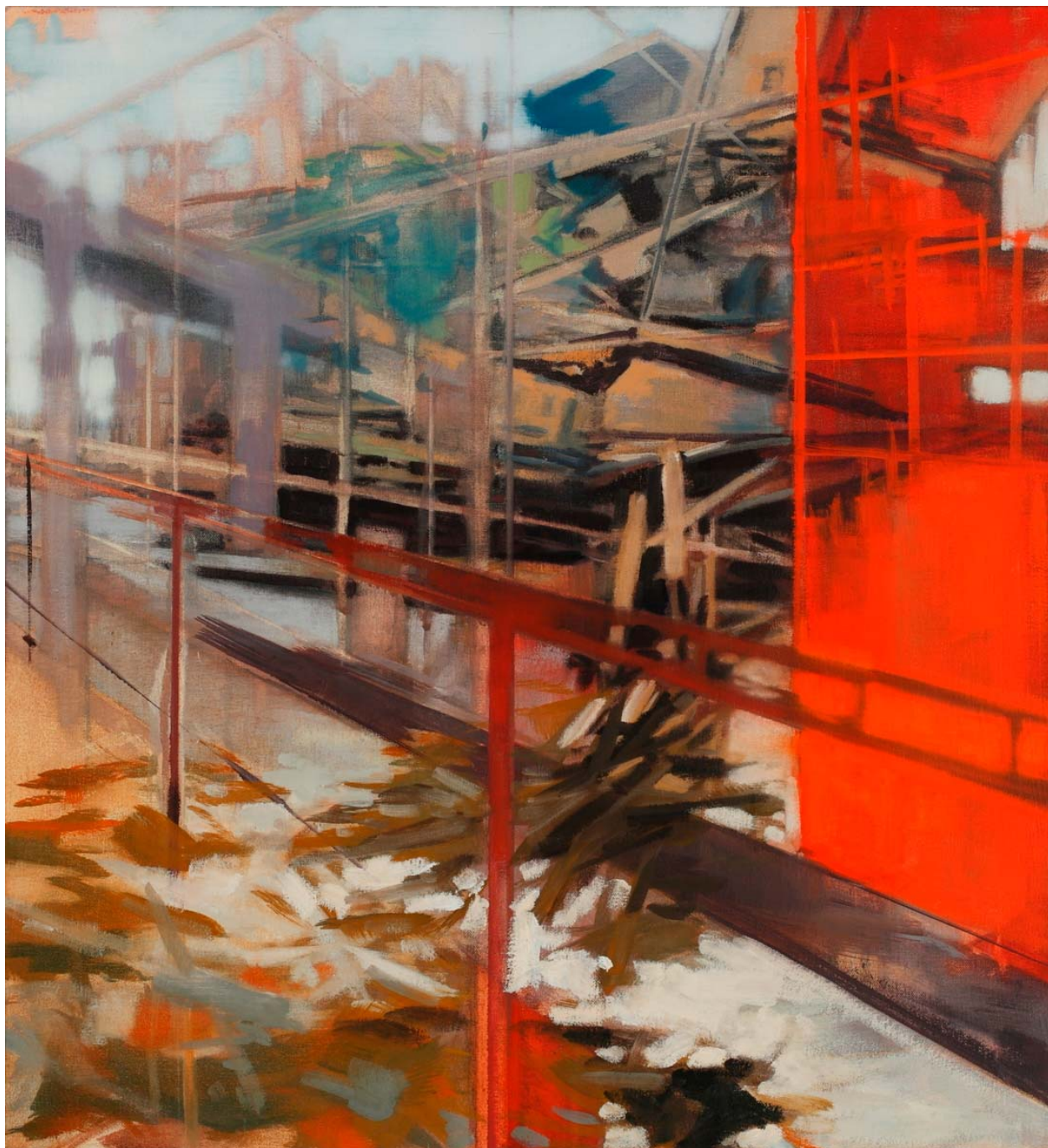


Fig. 5, Laura Truitt, View From the Outside, 2011, water based oil on canvas wrapped panel, 22”  
x 24”





Fig. 6, Laura Truitt, Decay, 2011, oil on canvas, 48" x 60".



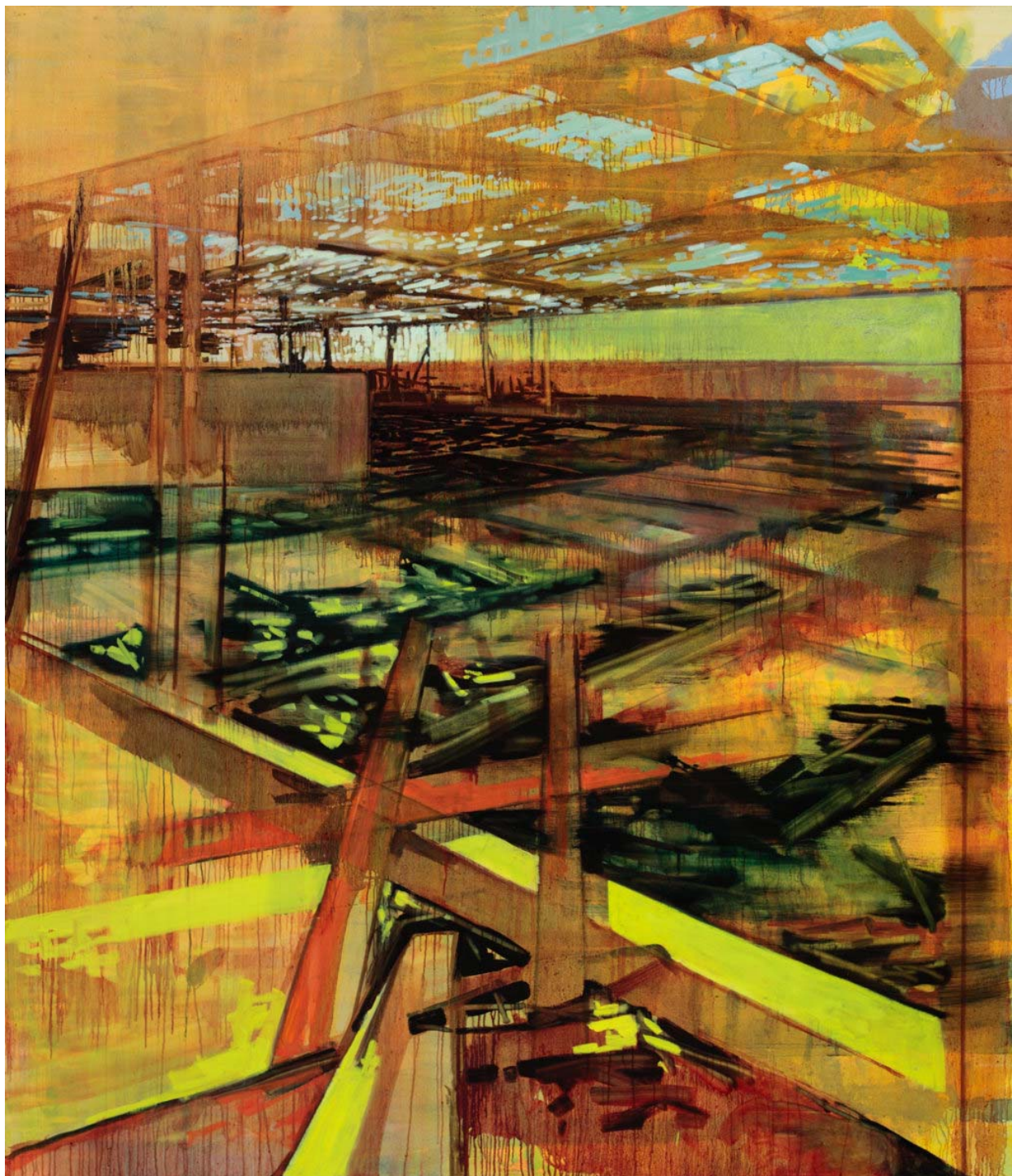


Fig. 7, Laura Truitt, Construction, 2011, oil on canvas, 72" x 82"



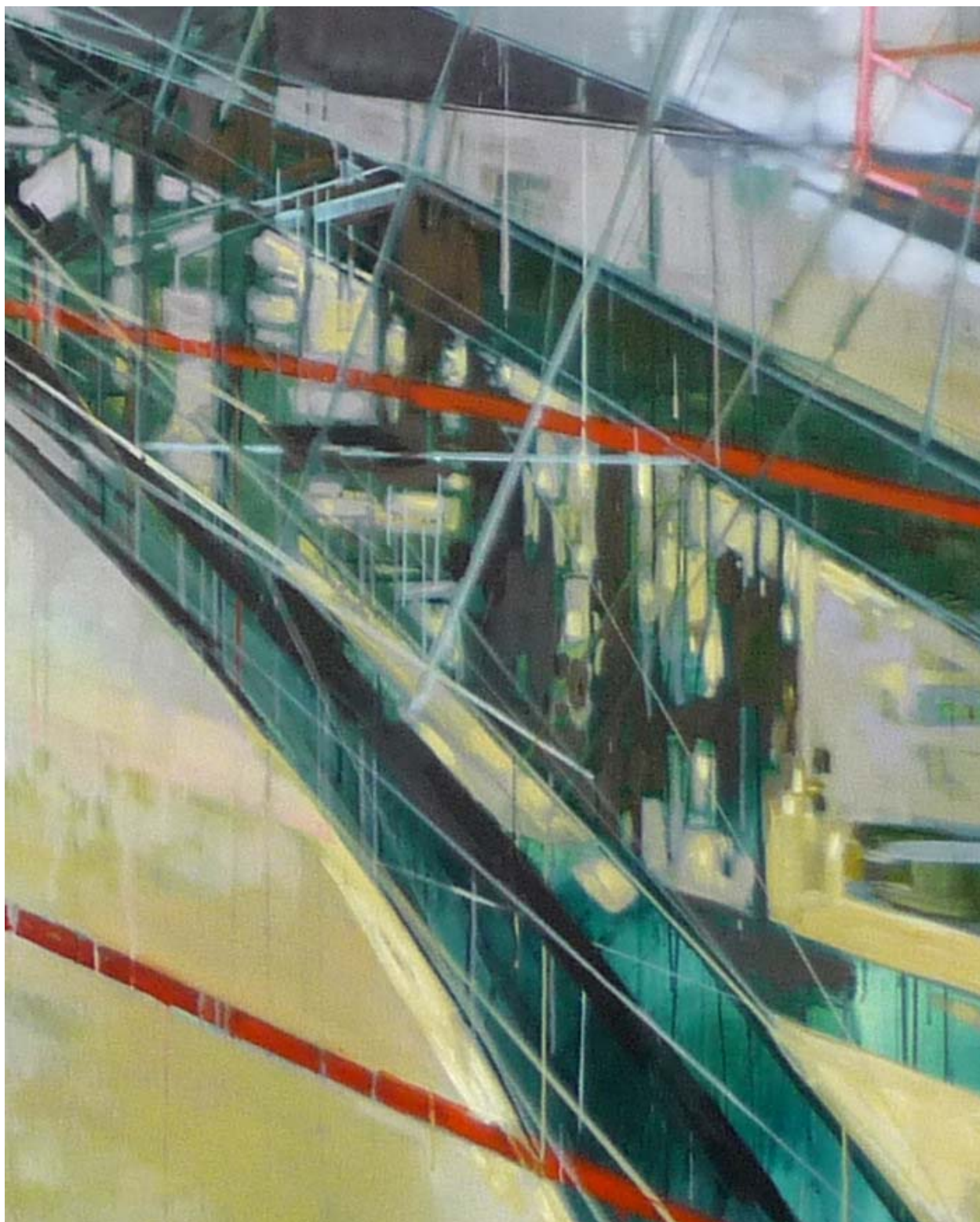


Fig. 8, Laura Truitt, More Rural, 2012, water based oil on canvas wrapped panel, 72" x 144"



Fig. 9, Laura Truitt, Construction 2, 2011, oil on canvas, 48" x 60".





Fig. 10, Laura Truitt, Palette Studies, 2011, water based oil on paper, 35 individual pieces, 4" x 4".



Fig. 11, Giorgio Morandi, Still Life, 1963, oil on canvas, 25 x 30 cm., data from University of California San Diego, © 2012 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome.





Fig. 12, Laura Truitt, Detail of Palette Studies, 2011, water based oil on paper, 35 individual pieces, 4" x 4".



Fig. 13, Edward Burtynsky, China Quarries #6, 2004, photograph. Image courtesy Edward Burtynsky, [www.edwardburtynsky.com](http://www.edwardburtynsky.com) .

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## APPENDIX I

Interview with Susanne Kühn by email between March 23<sup>rd</sup> and April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

**Laura Carpenter Truitt:**

I've read the interview that you did with Cydney Payton, and I'm particularly interested in the way in which you were talking about "thresholds". You mention that you are drawn to the space where wild nature and urbanism meet, does this translate into organic shapes vs. geometric shapes? Or disorder vs. order? Man vs. Nature?

Do the curtains that appear in some of your paintings have a historical significance, any relationship to the historical use of curtains in painting? In *Ann prepares the Laundry* 2005 the curtain is down, where as it is flipped up in *Melanie- Melancholy* 2007 and in *Girl at the Window* 2006. I wonder if your use of curtains in particular corresponds with the dutch mid-17th century practice of painting curtains to the side of a painting, as a sort of unveiling of the representation. In his article on the use of curtains in painting and theatre, Emmanuel Henin remarks about the curtain:

In including this system of hanging in their trompe-l'œil, the painters shift the limits of the image to the spectator's side and include a supplementary fragment of his reality. They thus blur the borders of representation, for, most often, the curtain is painted at the threshold of the picture, ambiguously in the exterior or the interior, insofar as it is possible to integrate it into the represented space at all.

This seems particularly apt in relation to your work, were you thinking about this Dutch tradition and what is the significance of using these historical references in your work?

There are references to Durer's *Melancholia I* in your Painting *Katja- Melancholy*, and architectural references to Bastion Mainardi's *Annunciation* in *Hannah- 1482*. Is this related

more to content in your work or painting process? I could see it as a way to start with a "foundation" from which to start building your own private world, or as a play purely on historical contexts of painting specific to each painting. How do you choose historical paintings that you reference in your work? Is there always a hidden historical painting reference in each painting that you do?

One of my favorite pieces of yours, that I got to see in person at the MCA, is *Katja's Dream*. Architecturally it has many thresholds, in surprising places, that take the viewer in and out of space in a fascinating way. Is there a painting you were looking at when working on this piece? Because of the checkerboard tile, and the door that leads back and back to exterior space, I'm put in mind of dutch interiors. Having the doors open at odd angles forces the viewer to put the image together, to construct it themselves. I love the way that illusionistic space is used to confound space at the same time. What makes perspective so interesting to you as a painter? I would love to know your own narrative behind this painting; the significance of the man's portrait, the figure running in the farthest back space, the blank canvas/photo frame.

In your paintings, do the color choices play a role in defining space? Sometimes your color seem suggestive of the objects it describes, but sometimes it seems more arbitrary. How do you choose your palette?

Do you want your viewer to hypothesize about the objects in your paintings? Do you want the viewer to recognize the architecture of specific renaissance paintings in your work?

Your work seems to be a balance between a personal relationship to painting and a public conversation about paintings role in the wider art world. What do you see as the primary job of a painting in relation to the public and the private sphere?

**Susanne Kühn:**

My impression is that the core of your questions is the importance and meaning of art historical references in my work. I would like to answer this in a more general way.

There are two phases a painting is going through: phase nr. 1 is the process of painting when the painting is developed in the studio. Phase nr. 2 when the painting is finished and starts its own life.

Phase nr. 1: Each single object, area of paint, structure of paint has a meaning in the painterly process. My canvases are built up like the setting on a stage in search of a new independent contemporary visual world. Each element which is added during the process of painting has to be proved against the other already existing elements of the painting. Light and shadow, structure and application of paint, glossy or matt, cool color versus warm color, perspective and flatness, small and large are being played and weighted against each other until the cosmos of the painting starts to vibrate and develop a new three dimensional world on the canvas.

The rules on the canvas are the roles of the painterly process which I control and regulate. Because of this conceptual foundation, I am not interested in an art historical reading of those elements. The elements appear on my canvas to be proved if they can hold against other elements today.

I am wondering what you understand as a meaning in the art historical sense. What does it mean to you if you recognize a historic element of a contemporary painting? Could it be that painting meant the same for a 17th century Dutch painter, than it does today? Could it be that a painter back then was discussing, investigating the same problems as we as painters are discussing today, but just in a different political, social and culture environment?

I would like to give you one example of a painting "Stilleben am Fenster" 2009. You might recognize the general composition as a painting by Vermeer. In this painting, I wanted to investigate the curtain as a painterly and compositional element. The magenta curtain takes up almost the entire right side of the painting. It is an abstract composition of light translucent hues of pink, purple and magenta against very flat and matt areas of pastel rose areas. The abstract work gives meaning to the other elements of the painting: weight, perspective, scale as well as shadow and light.

The process of painting is finished when all elements work together, when a new cosmos is created which has its own existence.

Phase nr. 2: The control of the painterly process and its decision making has finished when I decide that the painting is complete. When a painting starts to be shown to observers, when it is being exhibited or reproduced, it starts its own life.

I am aware that each single person has a different relation to what they see, observe, discover on the canvas. It will depend on the viewers visual perception, his education, his viewing habits, what and how the viewer will understand the work.

Furthermore, I am not interested to lead the viewer in on particular direction, but I think it is important to have as many viewing option available as possible. I think these are the circumstances of our life today: a vast visual variety of pictorial material, available to everyone with or without meaning. My work is a contribution, as search and investigation of this fact.

A threshold is a physical and intellectual area of transition. Painterly elements (again the whole variety) juxtapose each other, mix together, become something different, change, are being distorted or smoothly go from one stadium into the next. In a painting, this is a very interesting moment, because this is the area where new elements evolve which are entirely

specific for one particular painting.

The use of color: Color is very important to me, but the use is again very broad. I am interested in the color and its reaction in the painting with light. How a color develops under the light and which quality it has: Bright/faded, light and translucent/versus opaque and matt, which weight a color needs in a painting to be the center of the painting or to be a minor element.

On the one hand, color can be controlled very closely at the beginning of the painting, but as the process progresses, color (and all the other elements) develop their own rules. I have to adapt to this reaction and have to correspond to the painting in order to keep the control.