

Contracting Utopia: The Paintings of Julie Langsam

There is a certain pathos associated with a wide expanse of land not yet developed or transformed. It signals a promise for a future where all kinds of possibilities could flourish. It is a site of pure potential. It is against this backdrop that artist Julie Langsam explores the terrain inherited in Modernism's wake – awash with a commixture of desire, dashed optimism, and a constellation of possible futures.

The romanticism of returning to nature has cycled in and out of the popular imagination for the last few hundred years - espoused by Rousseau in the 18th century, exploited in America by concepts of Manifest Destiny in the 19th Century, and reincarnated in the 20th century in the form of a utopian modernism. The mid-1960's, marked by cold war politics and a growing youth movement ushered in the era of turning on, tuning in and dropping out. But by then, with the launch of Sputnik in 1957 and a year later the birth of the NASA Space Program, the gaze also turned upward, focusing on the vastness of the sky, and on the potential colonies that could flourish on the planets that extended beyond Earth's clouds.

This focus on a future of unlimited expansion and possibility had an architectural vision to match. Among the largest international events, World's Fair exhibitions function as a model for a global community in a constant march forward, showcasing the innovative technologies and artistic achievements of participating nations. The 1964 New York World's Fair featured buildings designed by modernist architect Philip Johnson, including the Tent of Tomorrow, a circular structure that featured the largest cable suspension roof in the world at the time - in construction it resembled a bicycle wheel, with thousands of pieces of brilliantly colored fiberglass inset on the cable spokes that formed the roof, imbuing the structure's interior with radiant hues of blue, pink and red. This was the forward-facing architecture, swelling with the optimism and utopian promise of modernism.

In her paintings, artist Julie Langsam returns to the legacies of these modernist forms, painting utopian structures designed by Gropius, Johnson, and Le Corbusier - iconic buildings of the past which have long been deflated of their promised futures. Today these Modernist structures cease to signal a coming utopia. Assumed by luxury boutiques, these forms today no longer indicate a shared social future but instead, promise the cultivation of a comfortable and satisfying present for the private individual body. In Langsam's paintings the utopian structures no longer loom monumental, but are dwarfed by the sky, reflecting the contraction, and privatization, of this promise. Literary theorist Lauren Berlant has argued that in our current economic situation, when the most basic conditions for life - a living wage, a home - are rendered precarious, our object relations have changed. As a society we cling to our desires for objects that afford us feelings of security and happiness, the very objects that blockade social growth and the possibilities for transformations that would allow society, and for us, to flourish. We clutch to the objects that allow us to maintain our present, no longer feeling the buoyancy that would allow us to look forward to the future.

In her meticulous attention to iconic modernist masterpieces of the last century, Langsam's paintings are a eulogy for a past future, a future that never was, and a stark portrait of utopia's afterlife today, contracted into a series of private moments. The sky features prominently in her work - awash in rosy hues, the glow of light and color infuse the lingering Modernist forms with intimations of possibility. Perhaps it is dusk, but perhaps it is dawn. A new world may still be latent in these forms, and may yet be born anew.

-Sara O'Keefe
Assistant Curator, New Museum