

Margaret Priest

Art Gallery of Hamilton and
MacDonald Stewart Art Centre, Guelph

The content of Toronto-based artist Margaret Priest's drawings and paintings is architectural spaces and surfaces – our third skin, you might say. The drawings are small in scale, evoking the architectural photograph and revoking the overweening scale of Abstract Expressionist painting. They offer a surreptitious critique of the utopian dreams of International Modernism. In the 1920s, Le Corbusier sought to marry the functionalism he found in both anonymous traditional design (such as that of the pipe or drinking glass) and the machine (i.e. motor car, ocean liner) with a seemingly universal set of basic Platonic forms (sphere, cylinder, cube), in order to create buildings that would harmonize all social classes in a *ville radieuse*. Architects after World War II, however, translated these forms into signifiers of glamour and power for wealthy patrons and corporations.

It is these later examples of modernist architecture, seen as a masculine masquerade, that Priest subjects to her critical pencil. The drawings are small and placed off-centre, on large sheets of hand-made paper, enticing the viewer with their precise and brilliant technique, tightening the tension between illusion, mark-making and abstract composition. Thus seduced, the viewer is then left with an empty and melancholy scenography that can never be possessed or peopled.

The oil paintings, by contrast, are suffused with the glow of lingering fantasy: Priest re-stages Richard Neutra's Kaufmann House and then his Berger House with various permutations of decor and vista. In works such as *Remembrance of Things Past That Never Were*, Priest triggers our lost emotions with the flavours of bygone aesthetic colour schemes and furnishings and, as pictures within these pictures, places the covers of art books commemorating the Festival of Britain or British 19th-Century Art or the Tate Gallery's J.M.W. Turner collection. In North America, the modern movement has, from the start, harnessed itself to the chariot of consumerism; but the art book covers point to the fact that it is above all the death of European and British dreams of social utopia that Priest is mourning.

In Toronto, where divided British and American legacies rule over English Canada's modernism, Priest has contributed, as part of Bay/Adelaide Park, a wall entitled *Monument to Construction Workers*. Like a blonde, hi-tech-and-leather designer-mama, she oversaw the execution and on-site installation of a series of panels with a recurring motif of interlaced Platonic geometry constructed from different building materials and techniques. *Monument* catalyzed two bodies of work included in the exhibition: "The Construction Series," etchings based on the panel motifs; and the newest works, a series of sculptural pieces with which Priest interrogates the language of urban architectural forms entitled "The Body of Architecture."

This mid-career survey of Priest's work (at both the Art Gallery of Hamilton and Guelph's Macdonald Stewart Art Centre) revealed the conceptual consistency of her practice over two and a half decades. Ideally, Priest's work would be shown in Toronto to contextualize the Bay/Adelaide Park wall-piece. Beyond that, a Toronto retrospective would complement the explorations of recent history mounted by local galleries Mercer Union ("Love Gasoline") and the Art Gallery of York University ("Deflecting the Blind Spot"), which reminded us of contemporary art's roots in 1970s critical debates about representation.

Gerta Moray