

AN ARCHITECTURAL IMAGINARY

Marna Lee Shopoff

Submitted to the faculty of the University Graduate School
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Fine Arts in Visual Art and Public Life
in the Herron School of Art and Design
Indiana University

April 2014

ARTIST STATEMENT

Architecture is a visual and physical bridge between inside and out, a passageway of self-reflection. My work is about exploring compositional, personal and experiential connections while creating an invitation for the viewer to do the same. I am interested in spatial relationships that capture an essence of a place, how we move through a space in the world and within a painting.



Internal Constructs, Detail, 2014 Oil and Ink on Canvas, Diptych 64" x 142"

Questioning how I perceive a given place, my paintings become an extension of my identity. Color is used as an idea, a mood and an interpretation that reflects the built world surrounding me. Abstraction is a way to move through a space, allowing the suggested architectural elements to become a metaphoric voice, representing the temporality of my human condition, while teetering between the realms of public and private, intimacy and distance.

INTRODUCTION

Using architecture and abstraction as a philosophy, my work is a vehicle to investigate the perceptual intimacy I find within public spaces. I am a visual artist focused on painting and drawing. Blending contemporary with classical approaches to art and spatial relationships, my work explores the idea of perception as a function of human experience, place and personal memory. Interested in the concepts of abstraction and spatial design, I explore ideas relating to place identity and lived experiences within the built environment. I view the world in a particular way because of the context in which I have experienced it: the architecture, spatial politics, personal relationships, public and private intimate spaces.

I am interested in the interpretation of and the interactions with the spaces that surround me: what memories or feelings do these spaces spark and what sort of energy do they project? Likewise, I am interested in the roles that art plays in culture, architecture, and the site-specificity of spatial relationships that are formed by these interactions. My work explores whether, through art, we can share our individual perceptions, whether someone can access and experience a new view of the world through my paintings and how I can create a new space via my art.

In the pages that follow I will describe in detail my creative influences including public intimacy, architecture and abstraction while explaining their relationship to my artistic processes and overall intent as an artist.

PUBLIC INTIMACY

“At the door of the house who will come knocking?

An open door, we enter

A closed door, a den

The world pulse beats beyond my door.”¹

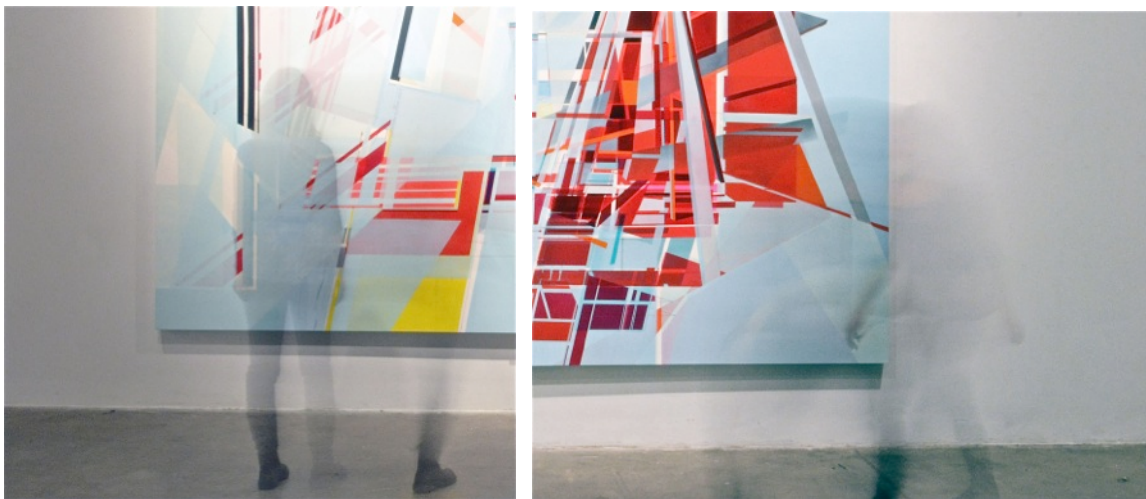
Growing up in a small town, living in a house behind the drive-in restaurant that my parents owned, my perception of home became blurred at an early age. Spending so much time between public and private, I found that what I considered to be an intimate space was a space shared by many. While in graduate school I have refined my artwork and conceptual research to focus on recreating a space, for myself and for the viewer, tapping into the intimacy I have found within shared spaces. I have come to identify that the interpretation of my surroundings is determined by my experiences, finding intimacy in public spaces.



Layered Between, Detail. 2013 Acrylic, Oil, Graphite, Conte, Ink, Charcoal on Canvas, Six Canvas Composition, 144" x 108"

¹ Birot, p. 127

My work is viewed through an existentialist lens, echoing the concepts of French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, “existence precedes essence.”² I question my human condition through the ideas, values and ethics I respond to on a daily basis. The knowledge that one has is based exclusively on human experience or as Sartre simply said, “being in the world.”³ This existentialist point of view summarizes the vision behind my art. My interpretation of and involvement in day-to-day life are what bring meaning to it. As I receive information that updates my perception of the world, on a nearly continuous basis, I am not in control but respond to and progress with it. My work explores whether, through art, we can share perceptions.



141 Install Detail, 2014 Oil and Ink on Canvas, Four Canvas Composition, 128” x 142”, Self Portrait

As such, I have come to understand that life is a mosaic of experiences that support and reflect each other in unanticipated ways. The foundation begins with the notion of an expected result but is subsequently adjusted as new experiences update my worldview. I look for deeper personal insight, deconstructing and revisiting a familiar memory or intimate

² Sartre, p. 49

³ Sartre, p. 41-49

space that was once common enough to be overlooked.⁴ To me, “place is our experiential foothold to reality.”⁵

ARCHITECTURE

I use elements of architecture in my paintings as a metaphor, an implied extension of my identity. As the most representational imagery in my work, architectural elements express the interconnectivity I have with the constructed world around me. It allows for a place of entry in my paintings, directing compositional flow while also designating a standing point for the viewer. It represents a timelessness I see in myself: strong and lasting while here, but ultimately fleeting in nature. Constantly in a state of unrest, I take comfort in the stability of architecture from the chaos created by a continuous stream of information. As such, each state of my painting is in flux, responding to each new layer, a new composition materializes, adding its influence to the work as a whole.



141 Detail, 2014 Oil and Ink on Canvas, Four Canvas Composition, 128” x 142”

⁴ McCarter, p. 403

⁵ McCarter, p. 403

A paradox exists within the material realm. Representing my human qualities without portraying a figure, it becomes a lens that reveals the temporality of my experiences. I identify with who I am through the spaces I inhabit and feel as if my body can extend its presence into the built environment that surrounds me.

Mirroring both the public and private realms of existence, architectural space is where social interaction occurs. My childhood house was a place of home to me, but a place temporary to others, creating a “fusion of inside and outside, privacy and publicity.”⁶ Architecture acts as a visual metaphor for my existence, blurring the line between where the walls end and I begin.

PHENOMENOLOGY

Life is a reflective experience and an intuitive one. My perception of the world is interwoven by both the physical and philosophical relationships I form with objects. Irish philosopher Dermot Moran has explained, “human experience is an immensely complex weave of consciousness, body and environment”⁷. It is the inter-world created through awareness and object association that allows for past experiences to lend knowledge to current situations, each progressively building upon the last. I am the perceiver of space. Architecture becomes the perceived, thus ultimately making up my perceptions.

Echoing a phenomenological approach to perception, architecture becomes an outlet for reflection of my world. A philosophy based around understanding one’s own consciousness using a first-person point of view, phenomenology is best reflected through simply “being in the world”. It is a comprehension of the world through our interactions

⁶ McCarter, p. 259

⁷ Moran, p. 413

with everyday objects: the perceiver (me), the perceived (object in question), perception (consciousness and understanding by means of that object). For me, architecture itself becomes the element of understanding, and my artwork invites the viewer to have his or her own phenomenological experience with it.



30 Hour Review Installation View, 2013 Various Media and Dimensions, Self Curated

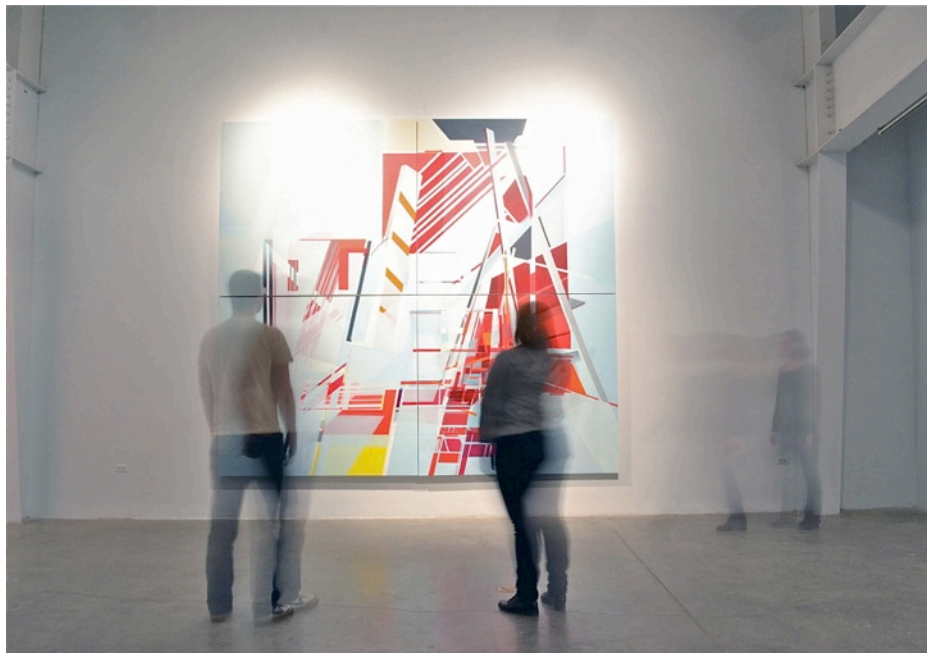
Accordingly, I am the perceiver looking upon the world around me to gain awareness. Life progressively transforms objects from memory to emotion, for “the world is the world created by knowledge”⁸. And as such, our current culture is an environment based around information tied to architecture. “We transfer all the cities and towns we have visited, all the places we have recognized into the incarnate memory of our body;” as Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa explains, “an embodied memory has an essential role as the basis of remembering a space or place”⁹. This somatic memory, memory held within the body, is an integral conceptual component of my work. I can record and translate the constant flux of my experiences into a solid and lasting painting for the viewer to experience. My paintings become for the viewer what architecture has come to be for me.

⁸ Moran, p. 411

⁹ Pallasmaa, p. 72

ABSTRACTION

Using abstraction as a way to move through compositional space, I use the essence of the material to create the essence of a space. Interested in creating a bridge between abstraction and representation, my work questions each experience through an objective lens of the original structure. I create an interpretation of a space, not an imitation of it. Art critic Clement Greenberg introduced the idea that art can be “self-critical”. During the mid-twentieth century, Greenberg described American Modernism as “a process of self-criticism through which each of the arts slowly purged itself of everything that was not particular to it”¹⁰. Communicating this form of self-criticism, Abstract Expressionism was the first American art movement to emphasize a spontaneous, intuitive and non-representational response to the artist’s chosen medium. It was not about translating a realistic space, but capturing the essence of experience in paint.



141 Installation View, 2014 Studio Participants: Sarah Kasch, CJ Martin and Marna Shopoff, Oil and Ink on Canvas, Four Canvas Composition, 128” x 142”

¹⁰ Wilkin, p. 19

My artwork is self-critical. Echoing these ideas from Abstract Expressionist and other Modernist movements, my compositions imply an illusionistic sense of space but also capture the essence of the medium. Oil on canvas painting, *141*, expresses fractured planes of color and perspective intersecting with flat areas of geometric shapes and line, ultimately giving the piece quiet flat surfaces juxtaposed with vibrant implied movement.

Greenberg remarks that, “as art seeks self-definition and determines its own uniqueness, it becomes more pure, more reductive in its means”¹¹. One can make out only a few shapes in the infinity of form and color within any given experience. This is why I choose the media of paint; it allows me to make an illusion of space. Through the use of abstraction, I can translate and interpret the world around me. Just as memory often influences the way we interpret our experiences, so does our interaction with art through creation and observation. It adjusts to vision, the vision of the artist.

SCALE

Abstract Expressionist Mark Rothko noted: “to paint a small picture is to place yourself outside your experience, to look upon an experience as a stereopticon view or with a reducing glass. However you paint the larger picture, you are in it”¹². Like Rothko, my paintings invite the viewer to have a physical presence within the piece. I explore how my artwork can become a place by its interaction with the environment and how the place can become the artwork. Beginning with hand-built, large-scale stretcher frames, I set the stage for viewer interaction. Creating an image one can visually enter, an empathetic visual bridge is built between the senses: vision to touch. My work invites the viewer to have a haptic experience, to visually enter into and feel their way through the piece.

¹¹ Willette, web

¹² Kingsley, p. 42



Studio Work In-progress, Artist on Scaffolding, *141* Detail, 2014 Oil and Ink on Canvas, Four Canvas Composition, 128” x 142”

COMPOSITIONAL ELEMENTS

Abstract in nature, my working process and formal decisions begin with elements of realism. Similar to New York-based artist, Julie Mehretu, I start deconstructing an image by using a photographic reference or personal memory, as Mehretu notes, as “a point of entry into the painting” and “to inform the intuitive process of” the work¹³. Influenced by Mehretu’s concepts, I have found parallels between her approach to compositional design and mine. Using a multilayered style to construct and deconstruct my paintings, I add hand-drawn line-work to capture the perceptual experience of a space unfolding within shared, built environments. Gestural ink marks represent the energy and movement that surround them, while thin glazes of paint reflect life experiences, each building upon the last.

¹³ Vernissage, web

Illustrating these spatial conversations within the applied architecture, visual attributes that make their way into my work vary from interior to exterior public and private spaces, windows, doorways, architectural construction elements, urban development, blueprints, perspective, and geometry.

Working on multiple canvases and multiple paintings at a time, I intuitively respond to and learn from each new layer applied. Colors are added, not to reflect what is there on the surface, but to capture the feeling of the subject or my inner response at that time. I focus on transparency, composition, and geometric shapes for my oil on canvas and mixed media paintings. In *Internal Constructs*, the transparent, thin veils of paint act as a window of memory, allowing the past to be seen while still experiencing the present on the surface. Implied relationships to the constructed environment are created with straightedge, geometric shapes using taped-off sections and hardedge line-work, while the implied human qualities are expressed in color, gesture and design. Consciously I reduce the image, retaining only the information needed to support my concepts and composition.



Internal Constructs, 2014 Oil and Ink on Canvas, Diptych 64” x 142”

Loyal to the fundamentals within the traditions of art, my studio practices are classically rooted. Employing methodologies surrounding an academy approach to painting, I use techniques such as imprimatura, glazing, Gestalt and perspective principles.¹⁴ My artwork captures the essence of an experience without portraying the tangible reincarnation of it. Illustrating my own phenomenological experience of space, my memories are moderated and turned into an image, thus allowing others to have a similar experience of their own. Moving “away from representation toward purity, abstraction, reductiveness,” the artwork visually invites the viewer in “before noting the content”¹⁵.



Color and Compositional Studies One and Two, 2014 Oil on Canvas and Linen, 12” x 12”

The physical act of painting and drawing one stroke after another holds meaning. Through repetition, the artwork itself becomes experiential. Painting is sensational; it is everything to feel the work. As I intuitively respond to each layer, a new composition

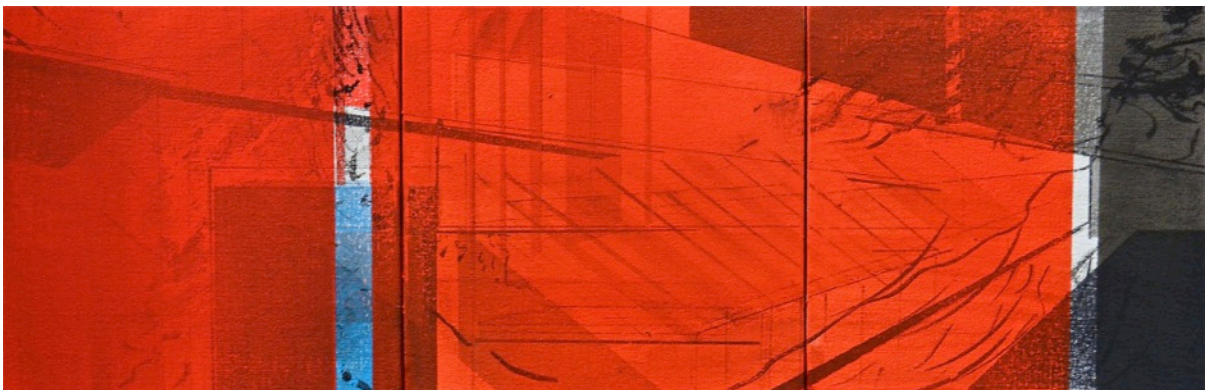
¹⁴ Imprimatura is a classical painting technique first employed during the Renaissance. Loosely translated from Italian for “first layer,” imprimatura is used as a compositional under-painting or initial stain of the canvas when oil painting. Glazing is the application of thin transparent layers of paint that give the illusion of light reflecting from within, while Gestalt Principles give the viewer a visual perception of a unified whole by use of elements including: similarity, continuation, closure, proximity, and figure ground relationships. Perspective is a technique that gives the appearance of a three dimensional illusion on a two-dimensional picture plane.

¹⁵ Willette, web

emerges. Over time, more meaning is created in one's life, as such it is echoed within the layers of my work. Showing these existential influences in my artwork, the experience of making each piece illustrates its importance, just as much as the finished composition does. Beginning with an idea that is continuously modified, I react to each new layer that is applied before.

MULTIPLE PANELS

Working on multiple paneled compositions, I think of my paintings as metaphoric siblings: my sister and I represented through memory on a canvas. Whether the painting starts out as a diptych or a six-paneled canvas composition, the under-painting or drawing starts out as one single unit. Over time, as I improvise and intuitively respond to the piece as a whole, I begin to rotate and pull apart the canvases to work on them as individual units. Maybe the panels come back together again to make a holistic composition, or maybe they stay as singular pieces. I like the idea that they are their own entities, with a life force of their own allowing the layers of applied paint to morph and change them as the composition emerges from emotion and memory. The paintings start out together; whether they become their own entities or not, they will always share some form of commonality.

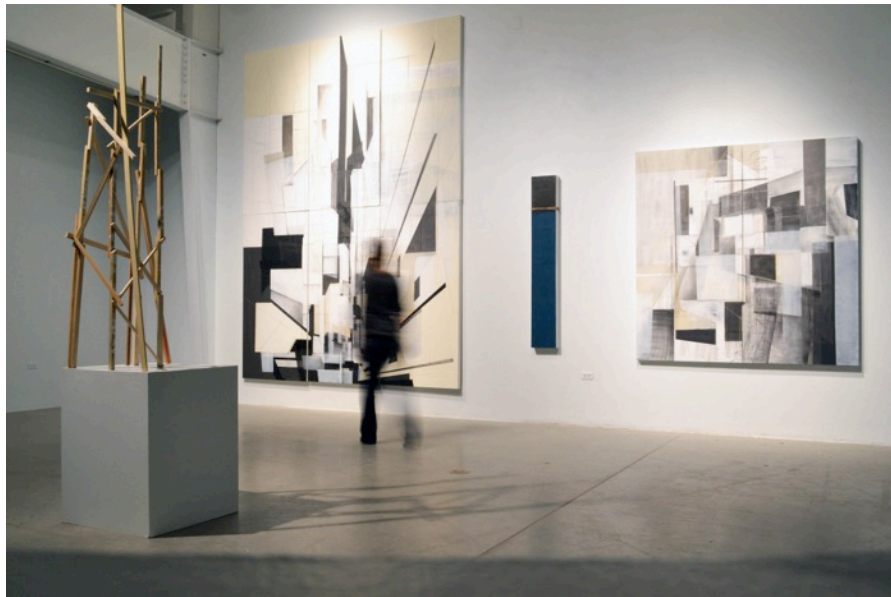


Then and Now, 2014 Oil, Ink, Graphite on Canvas, Triptych 8" x 24"

The multiple panels create a relationship and a physical divide. The panels invite the audience to view the space while capturing a phenomenological experience of the space. My work is about capturing these relationships and inviting the viewer to experience their own. It is not just about the geography of the physical place but exploring the geography of the mind.

PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY

My work also expresses a sense of playfulness, getting lost within a space and finding my way out. Borrowing the idea of psychogeography from Situationist International artist, Guy Debord, I allow myself to be adrift in environments both intimate and urban. “Based on the psychological effects of places on people,” I “conceptually navigate” my way through a space¹⁶. I find that I have a tendency to wander within my everyday surroundings. Getting lost in a space. Getting lost in a piece of art. Getting lost in the creation of it.



Installation View, 2013, *Layered Between*, Acrylic, Oil, Graphite, Conte, Ink, Charcoal on Canvas, Six Canvas Composition, 144" x 108", *Into the Windows*, Acrylic, Graphite, Ink on Canvas, Diptych 60" x 60"

¹⁶ Clark, p. 20

To me, there is a similarity in getting lost in a space and getting lost in a painting, whether viewing it or making it. There is something exciting, unknown, and confusing that occurs. Experimenting with media, having fun, and compositional exploration is an important part of my studio process. It happens because of my constant inquiry of the unknown. This “formal” escape influences my overall practices. It is through getting lost that I can find a new way to solve a problem, a newfound knowledge of not only the place but of myself is obtained. I can find the answer to a question I did not even know I was asking. And the outcome is always the same: I want to share my experience with others.

CONCLUSION

Just as Sartre asserted, that the world is without a plan and reality is reliant on human experience, my work reflects the belief that it is the decisions, reactions, and experiences in life that give meaning to it, each building upon the last.¹⁷ The experience of making each piece illustrates its importance, just as much as the finished composition does. I am constantly touched by the built world surrounding me and as such, the visual abstractions of my architectural structures act as a metaphoric voice for these experiences: building, reacting, responding, deconstructing and interacting.

My perception is what marries architecture to abstraction and my artwork is a way to actively take in the world, interpret it and in turn give back something new. By creating art, I have found that I can interweave by experiences with others. My work allows me to share my individual perceptions through art and gives access for others to experience a new view of the world through my paintings, sharing intimacy within a public space.

¹⁷ Lehan, p. 14

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Beacon Press, Boston. 1969. Print.
- Benjamin, Andrew. *What is Abstraction?* Academy Editions. 1996. Print.
- Birot, Albert-Pierre. *Les Amusements Naturels*. Denoël. 1945. 1st Edition Print.
- Bois, Yve-Alain. *Painting as Model*. October Books. 1991. Print.
- Bruno, Giuliana. *Public Intimacy, Architecture and The Visual Arts*. The MIT Press. 2007. Print.
- Clark, Robin. *Automatic Cities, The Architectural Imaginary in Contemporary Art*. Distributed Art Publishers. 2010. Print.
- Kingsley, April. *The Turning Point*. Simon and Schuster. 1992. Print.
- Lehan, Richard. *A Dangerous Crossing: French Literary Existentialism and the Modern American Novel*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press. 1973. Print.
- McCarter, Robert and Pallasmaa, Juhani. *Understanding Architecture*. Phaidon Press Limited. 2012. Print.
- Moran, Dermot. *Introduction to Phenomenology*. Routledge. 2000. Print.
- Osborne, Richard and Sturgis, Dan. *Art Theory for Beginners*. North American Edition Copyright. 2009. Print.
- Pallasmaa, Juhani. *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*. London. John Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*. Citadel Press Kensington Publishing Corporation. Copyright 1957, 1985. Print
- Vernisage TV. *Interview with Julie Mehretu*. Web. Retrieved 2013. From <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k04kA7hJ8x8>

Wilkin, Guenther. *Clement Greenberg: A Critic's Collection*. Portland Art Museum
Princeton University Press. 2001. Print.

Willette, Dr. Jeanne S. M. *Art History Unstuffed*. "Modernist Painting" by Clement
Greenberg. Web. Retrieved 2013. From

<http://www.arthistoryunstuffed.com/modernist-painting-by-clement-greenberg/>

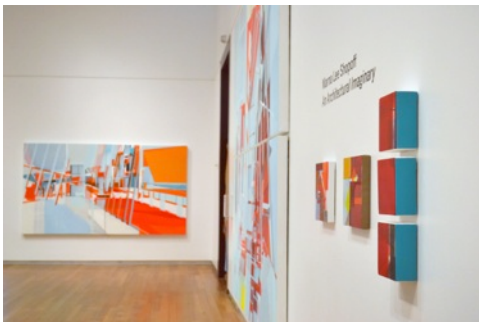
ADDITIONAL IMAGE LIST



141, 2014 Oil and Ink on Canvas, Four Canvas Composition, 128" x 142



Internal Constructs, 2014 Oil and Ink on Canvas, Diptych 64" x 142"



Installation View, 2014 Oil and Ink on Canvas, Various Dimensions



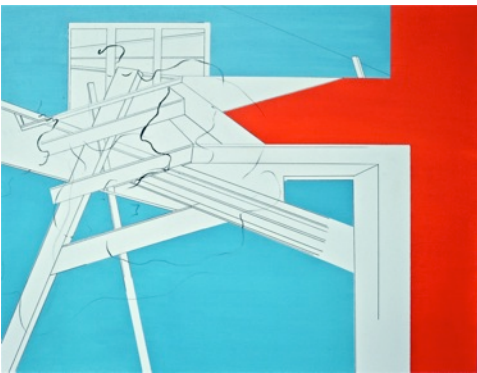
Installation View, 2014 Oil and Ink on Canvas, Various Dimensions



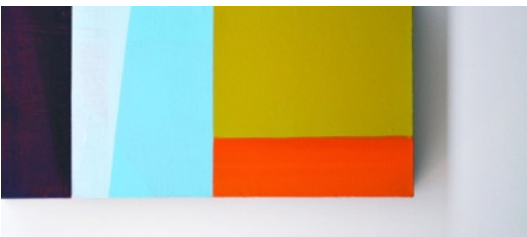
Under Construction, 2014 Oil and Ink on Linen, 12" x 12"



Sub-terrace, 2014 Oil and Ink on Canvas, 12" x 12"



Complementary Sides, 2014 Oil and Ink on Canvas, 30" x 35"



Color Study One, 2014 Oil on Linen, 12" x 24"