
James D. Campbell
Nicolas Grenier births the architectural Uncanny with extraordinary thematic consistency and finesse in the works exhibited here—and succeeds in a stellar haunting of the built world, with inbuilt lessons for the future. His United Communities proposes a pristine and radiant—say better, radioactive—architecture situated somewhere between utopia and dystopia, between abodes of outrageous affluence and the taxonomy of ‘perfect’ slum dwellings and housing for the poor. Migrant Workers Are Accommodated Directly in the Fields and Share Communal Apartments Designed in a Spirit of Social Equality is like a isometric diagram of George Lucas’ cinematic dystopia *THX 1138* (1971), with the presiding architect Le Corbusier co-opted as robotic flic or Big Brother on the design side. Or consider Vertically Integrated Socialism, with its brilliantly rendered belowground “inclusivity apartments” for impoverished subjects, which speaks so much of an asphyxiating order of control, a totalitarian universe undreamt of by Stalin. The idea of an “architectural uncanny” was developed by architectural historian Anthony Vidler in his attempt to relate how our understanding of architecture is often pervaded by and implicit in complex, unfathomable and even threatening personal existential experiences. His concepts build upon Sigmund Freud’s classic 1919 essay on the uncanny, explaining how the German word *unheimlich*, of “un–homely,” effectively embodies the sensation of the uncanny as being estranged from the comforts of home. Grenier gives us homes, the putative comforts of which are themselves uncanny and imaginatively grounds us within them. The radioactive palette heightens our sense of exposure. Alongside Vidler’s uncanny, Grenier’s work can be fruitfully explored in terms of Marc Augé's notion of non-place and the central tenets of the totalitarian state in Yevgeny Zamytin’s dystopian—and visionary—novel *We*. Indeed, within the points of the triangle marked out by these commentators, we have the proverbial nub of Grenier’s paintings: their implicit *thema*. It is, of course, consummately strange that Grenier’s ‘architectures for work and inhabitation’ remind us of the non-places that the French anthropologist and theorist Marc Augé developed in his seminal book *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, after all, these are places for human dwelling rather than the vast portable parentheses of the airport or ATM machine precincts. Not so strange if we understand that it is precisely because they register a potent thematic of estrangement built up from bifurcated tropes of the built world and nature that requires deconstruction on our part as viewers complicit in the making of meaning. And all the windows and doors are closed. We are looking at blueprints ostensibly built upon utopian signifiers that are in fact harbingers of the apocalypse: humans under total control. Architectural eugenics. But while human agents are conspicuous by their absence in many of these paintings, we project them—ourselves—in there, and with
The narrator of this remarkable novel is both number and address D-503, and is chief architect of the One State’s construction of an instellar spaceship, the Integral. Zamyatin describes the buildings where his subjects live as being futurist glass houses undreamt of by Le Corbusier and Mies Van Der Rohe. This segues beautifully with Grenier’s dystopian housing projects.

If Zamyatin’s unsettling fiction pits the individual subject against the social order, Grenier does the same, by extension and implication. It is in this context that his work also pivots again towards the writings of Augé, which are important for identifying the nomenclature of non-place in the human milieu. Augé brilliantly assays the topological and psychological particularities of site, both local and exotic, which are at one and the same time everywhere and nowhere today. He argues that supermodernity is a new tense that effectively generates non-places, quite like those depicted in the paintings of Grenier, phenomenological bracketing-outs of the natural environment in which humans are emplaced—and that are transposed into the language of brick, mortar, stainless steel and glass with a suitably “green” aura. Augé identifies three species of accelerated transformation. In terms of temporality, he specifies an “acceleration of history,” which ineluctably brings on an overabundance of events. He identifies a palpable surplus in the realm of space: “the excess of space is correlative with the shrinking of the planet,” which brings on spatial overabundance. Finally, he identifies a specific figure of excess, as “the figure of the ego, the individual.” Grenier offers an autoreflexive critique central to which is a dialogue critique that dovetails with Augé’s negative definition of the non-place: “If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place.”

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James D. Campbell is a writer and independent curator based in Montreal. He is the author of several books and catalogues on art and artists and contributes regularly to art periodicals such as ETC, Border Crossings and Canadian Art.
Nicolas Grenier, Les travailleurs migrants.
Nicolas Grenier, Vertically Integrated Socialism (Detail).