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Citer ce compte rendu
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 an 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 underground “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 Zamyatin’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

EXPOSITIONSMONTREAL

Nicolas Grenier, Communautés unies / United Communities, Galerie Art Mur, Montreal.
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Nicolas Grenier, Inclusive Gated Community.
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 futuristic glass houses undeant of by Le Corbusier and Mies Van Der Rohe. This segues beautifully with Grenier’s dystopian housing projects.

Augé vividly portrays the psychological 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 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 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.

Vidler argues persuasively that the affinity between these two orders of warping draws its radius across all artistic and architectural practices in modernity, inside the space of the inner city. He brilliantly identifies and tracks the trajectory of a psychological idea of space from thinkers like Pascal and Freud to the clinical identification of agoraphobia and claustrophobia in the nineteenth century and from thence to twentieth-century theories of spatial estrangement, and associated feelings of angst and estrangement. He cites seminal figures like Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin in developing his argument. In naming contemporary conditions of displacement and placelessness, in the development of his thesis, as the necessary consequence of inhabiting the built world, he examines ways in which contemporary artists and architects have produced innovative forms of spatial warping. He looks at how they have radically transformed both the experience and the subject of contemporary architecture.

Grenier plays with the haptic tropes of nonplace as integers of alienation—and defining aspects of the built world. This segues with Yevgeny Zamyatin’s We, which, like George Orwell’s 1984, Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World, and Ray Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451, is a brilliant evocation of a dystopian future for the human race. The real strength of Vidler’s work lies in its over-regularly to art periodicals such as ETC, Border Crossings and Canadian Art.

The manifestly corn-pone component in Gated Community (2009)—a rainbow—is like a vast advertising hoarding in mid-air from Ridley Scott’s Bladerunner. This, but a lure, a red herring, meant to be swallowed whole—hook, line and sinker. Grenier’s United Communities collides Mao with Donald Trump, Le Corbusier with Albert Speer, Orwell’s Big Brother with the House in TV’s Big Brother series. These architectures are surely gap orders or scold’s bridles for designated dwellers, the perps on the Merry-Go-Round of an Orwellian nightmare designed by Martin Heidegger in the depths of the Old Forest. Grenier’s apparent utopianism is an effective but paper-thin mask for a far more sinister, underlying reality: architectures meant to contain, direct and restrain the many, and, in so doing, suffocate or snuff out the One.

James D. Campbell

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.

Notes
4 Ibid., p. 11.
6 Augé, Non Places, p. 25.
7 Augé, p. 31.
8 Augé, p. 36.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
Nicolas Grenier, Les travailleurs migrants.
Nicolas Grenier, Vertically Integrated Socialism (Detail).