



LIMBO **ARCHITECTURE** **PAINTERS OF** **MODERNISM**

Interpreted by painters in many different ways, Modernism continues to be a compelling subject matter and muse that encourages artists to go beyond notions of simple representation and instead seek to evoke something more profound

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In the *Hotel La Concha, San Juan*, the hotel hovers between grid and colour, its edges quivering to define a structure. The sky is flat, light and almost white. The light is harsh, leaving no shadow anywhere. The building seems to be empty, or perhaps either unfinished or abandoned. It is a relic of a Modernism that exudes optimism, now devoid of any hope or even life.

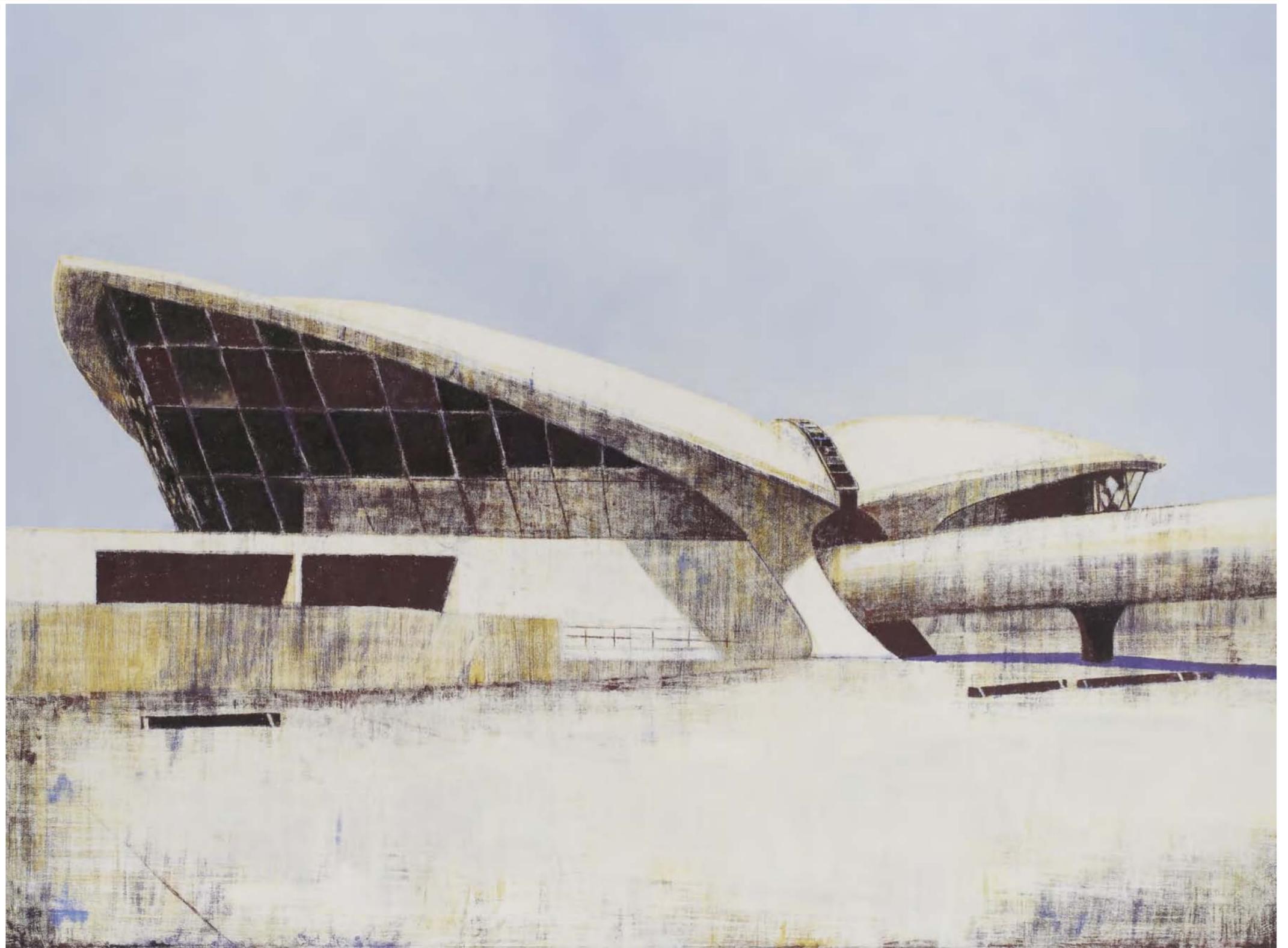
This is a painting by Puerto Rico-born, New York-based painter Enoc Perez. Over the last decade, he has created a body of work that hallucinates Modernist structures whose very reality seems to be in question by the way he paints the buildings, haunting his canvases with the sense of structures that are familiar, yet eerie. To a certain extent, this aura is the result of Perez's technique: he draws his buildings on paper, then attaches the image to a canvas, applies colour to the back, flips them over, and traces the drawing on the front side, coaxing the colour through while letting it take on the cloth's texture. Yet these images vibrate for other reasons. Based on photographs, they bring certain buildings to life that once – in the era between the Second World War and the descent of a technology-driven society into the Vietnam War and the oil crisis of the 1970s – were part of the making of a new world. Denuded of their certainty of form, they become ghosts of the belief that we could build utopia building by building.

Perez is one of a group of painters spread all over the world who are pursuing this subject. Though the methods might differ, the work of – to name a handful of examples – Paul Winstanley in New York, Paul Davies in Australia, Aldo van den Broek in Amsterdam, and Stefan Kürten and Matthias Weischer in Germany, all share this fascination with postwar Modernism they express in an elegiac manner, making us pine for dream projects that have now become gravestones. Then there are other artists, such as Daniel Rich and Brian Alfred in New York, who bring this world forward into our current conditions, depicting scenes of surveillance and violence that turn the open grids of a more hopeful era into concrete bunkers filled with electronic extensions of Big Brother. The work is representational, but in its techniques and in its imagery makes an argument for such painting as a way to evoke, rather than just represent. Exactly by tracing the abstractions of Modernism, it makes it clear that what was built as a monument to evanescence remains as a reminder of the way of all things. These are memento mori for Modernist architecture.

This way of working and kind of subject has roots in the work, above all else, of Gerhard Richter. In subject matter, Richter concentrates both on the question of what makes a representation, and how you can trace existing images to create new work. He, too, started from photographs, and he, too, found ways to trace, track and make uncertain the images he presents to us in either layers of colour or monotones of a funereal cast. His subject is often the anomie of the modern city, the blankness of its structures hiding all life. When he depicts people, they have, except in his loving portrayal of his second wife, been ghosts of figures such as members of the Baader-Meinhof Gang who revolted against the determinism inherent in the technology of the buildings of Modernism.



1-3. Form that is no longer pure and textures that evoke the passing of time embed Modernism's dreams of a future that would consist of (1) clean and open lines (Peter Doig, *The Architect's Home in the Ravine*, 1991, previous page), (2) skyscraper living (Enoc Perez, *Marina Towers, Chicago*, 2011) in sensual colours and ghost-like images, and (3) flying forms (Enoc Perez, *TWA Terminal, Kennedy Airport, New York*, 2006)





4&5. Paul Davies repaints the same image of a house several times; inside and outside flow together and a pool reflects the nature all around the minimal structure in different colours (*Black Night, Black Well*, 2012 (4); *Home and Pool*, 2012 (5)) so that the nightmares and the dreams lurking in its very structure become visible
6. The architect is not innocent, and neither is architecture. For Luc Tuymans, the innocence of the skier and the X that marks the spot mask the identity of fascist death-camp organiser Albert Speer (*The Architect*, 1998)



In addition to Richter, this work looks to the photography of the 'Becher School' – the students of Bernd and Hilla Becher, including Thomas Struth, Andreas Gursky and Candida Höfer – whose taxonomies of the structures in and which we live have become icons of a modern world whose forms are repetitive, and yet can be grand and exhilarating in their ambition. Then there is the work of Luc Tuymans, whose 1998 *The Architect* – though it does not depict a building, but the man at the ultimate intersection of architecture, technology and death, Albert Speer – can stand as an emblem of much of this work. His depictions of concentration camps, empty and abstract, make his point clear. His move towards abstraction through figuration always leaves the traces of buildings, often ones devoted to death and destruction, which he transforms into eerily white and open spaces.

Then there are painters such as Peter Doig, whose 1991 *The Architect's Home in the Ravine* takes its place in any survey of such work. Seen from behind, through a dense array of tree trunks and branches that the artist has rendered as white, ghostly images of themselves, the house appears to be a place of leisure, its expanses of gridded glass sheltering under sweeping gables and looking out to an empty, kidney-shaped pool. This image, too, is based on a photo (as is most of his work), combining a depiction of domesticity fed and sheltered by technology with a sense – which the artist produces with perspective, colour and a painterly density and impasto – that all is not well.

Beyond such specific precedents, this work is part of a movement to art as being an attempt neither to escape into abstraction or politics, nor to mirror everyday life, but rather to operate in the realm of derived images: to work with memories, traditions, published pictures, snapshots and architecture, where reality, and a perspective on the future caught in the reality of what was made, whirl around each other.

It is fitting that the first artist to make his name with such work started from the particular case of Tropical Modernism. Perez grew up in Puerto Rico, which became part of the network of tourism that inserted bits of modernity, mainly in the form of hotels, resorts or apartment buildings, in less-developed countries around the world. Because of its climate, these buildings also shed some of the cloaks that entombed the grids, glass planes, layers of space, and plays of solid and void of which architects such as Le Corbusier dreamed. In the case of Puerto Rico, these outposts tied the island further to the United States of which it was part, and which promised to make it into a modern place. Instead, the island became a place from which people fled, and which continued as a place of low-cost manufacturing and sun worship by rich people from elsewhere. Perez's early paintings, such as *Normandie* (2005), present what was left as ruins.

Once Perez moved to the United States, he began to focus not just on structures that by their very function were expressive of a lack of content or work, and whose site made them more open, and instead painted parts of the canon of Modernist architecture: the Seagram Building (2006), the United Nations secretariat (2009), and, though more of political than aesthetic interest, the Watergate complex in Washington, DC (2011).



'The neutrality of the architecture, which the photograph reinforces as an object of interest that has been mass produced, turns out to create a vessel the artist can fill with his own memories, dreams and hopes'

Most of these are buildings whose geometry is simple, and whose facades are dominated by grids. What gives Perez's depictions their particular power is the saturation with colour the buildings' skeletons barely control. A lushness pervades the canvas, even though the colours, because they seep from behind, give you the sense that they have been eroded, by time rather than by this process of painting, and fade away at the edges. Dematerialisation, in other words, becomes something beautiful and sensuous.

Perez has depicted sculptural buildings as well, ranging from the TWA Terminal at JFK (2006) to some of Niemeyer's buildings in Rio de Janeiro, but these images seem more related to another line of work that depicts female nudes. The images that interest me most are those of the Marina Towers (2011) or the IBM Building in Chicago (2009) where colour almost completely takes over the buildings, burning out their form in a blaze of reds and oranges or a flood of blue that belies the neutrality with which they were designed and with which they appear to most onlookers.

If Perez is the master at creating images that tease out Modernism's promise as well as the sense its utopian aspirations are now well worn, Paul Davies has a flatter, more neutral interpretation of some of the same sort of structures. He also goes back and paints the same building in several modes, but all the versions are clear and precise, even if, as in *Black Night, Black Well* (2012), they depict a nocturnal scene. In that painting, the house rises up in forced perspective towards a night sky reflected in the oval pool in the foreground, a tree in the yard in front of the structure becoming translucent while the slender black columns are etched out of the same material as that inky background. In *Home and Pool* (2012), the same

image takes on a different cast: the sky is a matte blue, while the reflection in the pool, which is still black, becomes purple and the tree is a solid black. Davies then shows the same house again in *Family Portrait* (2012) from a different angle, where we are looking at the house through a forest. One building, its architecture supposedly neutral in intent and an open frame for living, takes on a variety of different qualities through a combination of perspective and paint.

Davies also paints structures familiar to students of architectural history, such as Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye, but in *Displaced Villa* (2013) he gives it a swimming pool and colours the surroundings that suggest a magic realist version of the tropics. In all this work, the artist works from photographs, rather than from his own sketches, a technique that is common to most of the artists discussed here. The photograph becomes a flat and neutral surface they can manipulate, build on, and transform to highlight qualities that are the true subject of their paintings. The neutrality of the architecture, which the photograph reinforces as an object of interest that has been mass produced, turns out to create a vessel the artist can fill with his own memories, dreams and hopes, and thereby evoke our own associations and emotions (it is worth mentioning here that none of these artists is a woman; I wonder whether this is an effect of Modernist architecture's macho culture). On the other hand, you can also treat these images as pure pictures, which is to say, as pretty compositions devoid of sensation,

much like Modernist architecture claims to be. It is all background for a modern life.

In the work of Stefan Kürten it is difficult to remain neutral. His paintings are small, replacing Perez's and Davies's sweep with a precision in the way he renders every surface and every shadow or gradation of colour. In recent work he also gives his images an aura all of their own by painting with gold, so that the images shimmer and are precious in their very materiality. In *Breathing Purple* (2013), for instance, we see another mid-century modern house Kürten found in a magazine, its frame and glass windows filling the picture behind a swimming pool. Instead of the abstraction of only those forms in silhouettes, Kürten gives us every colour in the pool's reflection, a sky whose purple consists of myriad shades, and foreground rocks whose pores and ridges convince you of their geology. This time, we actually see into the house, where the lamps are on and the furniture, not all of it conforming to the Modernist dogmas the architecture represents, is arranged for family living and entertainment. The party is about to start, or has just ended, and the perspective draws us into that world where you are sheltered while remaining open to a nature that is full of beauty and variety.

Kürten has a predilection for night views, even if, as in *Exposed* (2013), they are filled with light that comes from a source we can't see. His technique reinforces the sense that we are looking at dream images, which the artist remembers from a long stay in Los Angeles and travels through the United States, recaptured through images he found in magazines, and then re-crafted to make his own. That sense that painting is a realising of your past becomes even stronger when you survey Kürten's other work, which recaptures scenes from his childhood in suburban Germany with the same attention to material specificity he teases out of a combination of photographic documentation and his skills as a painter and drawer.

Stefan Kürten's work is at the core of what such work has accomplished over the last decade. It combines three elements that supposedly are meant to be more objective than subjective: architecture as the representation of a technologically driven, abstract world in a geometric container; photography as documentation; and painting as the representation of what is in a manner that gives that reality back to us. These artists then make us realise how personal all three of these building blocks are. They heighten the emotive qualities inherent in the architecture, reinforce and manipulate the perspective and focal points in the photography, and turn painting into vessels for memory, hope and fear.

Other artists create more distance between themselves and their subject, and between us and their images. For instance, Matthias Weischer gives us not a view in, but a hard corner in *Corner* (2004). Green walls jut towards us and recede past a yellow curtain to what appears to be a yard on one side, while on the other a brown wall closes off our view. There is no sense of distance, and the colours are definite. The image is heavy and obscure – even the glass that must separate the room we are in from the outdoors disappears in favour of a yellow wall that convinces us it is solid and impenetrable. We are in the reality of what



8. For Martin Weischer (*Untitled*, 2002), architecture is a harder reality, coming straight out at us with all the banality of a corner in an anonymous building



ESSAY

Modernism left us after it built its experimental homes and skyscrapers for the rich. We live in cookie-cutter rooms whose manmade materials and air conditioning enclose, rather than liberate us.

When Weischer shows us a dream, he presents that vision as something that could only be unreal, instead of painting in ambiguities about what is there and what he has imagined or remembered. In *Living Room* (2003), we are in a Modernist home again, its glass walls showing a scene of palm trees and the kind of wall of rough concrete blocks you find in Palm Springs. The glass is gone here as well, and the furniture jumps around the room in diagonals Weischer reinforces in the diamond patterns on their surfaces. Each of the elements of the domestic landscape becomes an isolated icon, while every surface confronts us with its artificial nature. The whole painting glows in blue, while the sky outside is purple. This is a place far away from reality, in which reason and its products, such as buildings and furnishings, become rearranged in unstable patterns.

Paul Winstanley takes us even further into dystopia, showing us spaces of limbo, like waiting rooms and conference centres. His *Station* (2007) shows us what it would be like to wait for the bus to or the doctor from hell: under fluorescent lights, green plastic shell chairs sit empty, a television bolted to the ceiling looking right at us with an unblinking eye. The floor is either granite



10&11. Living in limbo is the subject of Paul Winstanley's work; the emptiness of a waiting room bathed in fluorescent light, dominated by a blank television screen and populated by empty plastic bucket chairs (*Station*, 2007, (10)) or a corner in an office building where three chairs and a potted plant linger (*Interior with Chairs in Three Primary Colors*, 2010, (11)), make emptiness palpable and strangely beautiful





of space, function and building materials, and each sporting bands of windows, structural elements and signage. This is the world we live in. There is no nature, not even a sun. It fills the canvas. There is only the definition of form gathering into density and covered with messages we cannot read. There is no open space here, and, as in all this work, no human presence. There is no beginning or end to this city.

Daniel Rich portrays a very similar scene in *Tokyo* (2013), which at least tells us we are looking at a real place. The scene is just as bewildering as the ones in Alfred's paintings, but it replaces browns and greys with shades of blue and shows us forms that are fragmented into blocks, fire escape stairs and mansard roofs, all of which modulate and break down the image's scale. The result is an urban landscape that is denser than Alfred's but by that very token more specific and thus identifiable. We could live in this place and know where we were.

Rich has also concentrated on Modernist masterpieces, though they tend to be of a later age than those the painters above have chosen. *Lloyd's of London* (2014) shows us only the bathroom pods and stairs clinging to the outside of that box, so the building becomes a collection of machined parts. Rich makes the pieces gleam and stack with precision. In *Foxconn Shenzhen* (2012), however, he presents us with a staircase that could be anywhere, its concrete steps and metal railing crisscrossing in front of a green wall. Only the title tells us that it is part of the factory complex where Apple products are made, and where employees have regularly committed suicide. Is there something about the image that makes us aware of the reality of this place of repetitive motion and lives? Does the colour make us feel as if life is in fact gone from here? Rich does not make any obvious comment beyond the title, but in images such as *Downtown Crossing* (2012), computer mainframes working away on a gridded floor under a ceiling filled with more grids and wires, show how impossible it is to see how technology works, and how impersonal it is. We see only the black slab from Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, replicated over and over again.

Where the humans have gone is central to all this work. They are not there as figures, but humanity is there above all else in the hand of the painter, who chooses what and how to make the images, and who even tells us what they are, but who then leaves us hanging. These images all have a sense, but not more than that, of something that was or could be there. They are waiting for the fulfilment of Modernist dreams, or to be reborn after those dreams faded away in hard reality, or they are merely waking up or going to sleep after just another day of mundane existence. This work depicts both the central monuments to the dream of building a better world, and personal spaces where such dreams might have been lived. They make us love these spaces as the painter does, tracing their every contour and caressing them with paint. Ultimately, they give us back reality, or a certain perspective on it, carved from the blur of everything that we experience every day. We look, notice and wonder. What we make of what is implicit in those views depends on what our own dreams for or fears of that modern reality might be.

or linoleum, polished into abstraction, while the walls might be white, but take on reflections that make them seem worn and uncertain of hue.

Interior with Chairs in Three Primary Colours (2010) presents a less forbidding but equally forlorn scene. The walls are still dirty pale shades, but a window gives, if not a view, at least daylight. A single plant sits in its pot, and appears to be alive. The chairs have upholstery in different colours and wooden bases. They are also singular. The floor is parquet. We are not in a place of mass and undifferentiated waiting, but we are in limbo still, with no humans present, no action implied, and no sense of any life lived. It is a scene not of the future or the past, but of an uncertain present built out of the remnants of Modernism that the painter presents without any particular purpose.

Both Brian Alfred and Daniel Rich are more explicit in form and message. Alfred has long been fascinated by surveillance, making security cameras and pieces of electronic warfare the subject of his paintings. In 2004, he did a series of paintings of the checkpoint in front of the old American embassy in Berlin. The white wall, the barbed wire, the fragments of an office building and the sandbags show us technology under siege and as a defensive mechanism. In *Blue Screens* (2006), we see the monitors of what could either be a war room or merely a classroom, each with a blank, pale blue face and the same putty-coloured containers, lined up on desks with green office chairs and mouse pads. There is nobody here, and the computers give no information. There is no source of light or modulation of any of the forms. We do not know what is known on or through these computers.

With titles like *Endless City* (2007), Alfred makes it clear what he wants to think of the world he portrays. It is a collection of blocks, each the result of the rationalisation

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12. Brian Alfred (*Blue Screens*, 2006), focuses on a more recent modernity dominated by the presence of electronic equipment always watching, but never legible to us
13. Daniel Rich (*Foxconn Shenzhen*, 2012), in depicting the plant where Apple products are fabricated, makes visible the reality of construction and fabrication lurking behind our minimal and space-denying tools of connectivity

