

ARTFORUM

JANUARY 2010

INTERNATIONAL

WINTER PREVIEW

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Rebecca Chamberlain

JUDI ROTENBERG GALLERY

Rebecca Chamberlain's intensely labored, monochromatic ballpoint and litho ink drawings of modernist interiors may seem to fixate on the heroic staging of the relationship between form and function, but they are primarily engaged with capturing the residue of the lives that once animated the structures they depict. Though people are entirely absent, their affective traces permeate the artist's elegant renderings of



Rebecca Chamberlain,
*Living Corners
Arrangement Screen,
1935-39, 2009*,
triptych, litho ink on
vintage tracing cloth,
overall 46 x 96".

domestic, administrative, and factory spaces; the effect is that of a missed encounter, as if the spectator has arrived a few moments too late and must reconstruct the departed protagonist's identity from only a handful of scattered clues.

This notion of belated arrival is evident in the triptych *Living Corners Arrangement Screen, 1935-39, 2009*. Each panel features as its focal point an unoccupied armchair, surrounded by such accessories as a coffee table with a vase of flowers, a screen, or a lamp. The arrangement of objects may seem inviting, a backdrop for intimacy, but the closely cropped composition, subdued atmosphere, and empty chair create an oppressive mood. Without the body's idiosyncratic presence, these scenes expose the modernist fantasy of a universally replicable personal space as no more than an ideological assertion. As we see in *Johnson Wax Factory Screen, 2008* (another triptych), Frank Lloyd Wright's design is similarly unsuited to organic variability. In this temple of streamlined labor and administration, the only signs of life are the odd potted plants left by the missing employees. Next to such actual flora, Wright's dendriform columns—euphemistically called "lily pads"—appear overwhelmingly regimented.

Such appraisals of the gap between modernism's ideals and its material reality have been a staple of recent contemporary art (the work of artists Terence Gower, Olaf Nicolai, and Mai-Thu Perret comes to mind). And, as with many artists working in this vein, Chamberlain adopts an undecided position, one that veers between a critique of modernism's tendency toward technocratic uniformity and glowing nostalgia for its aspiration to quasi-religious transcendence.

With drawings made in series (rather than as discrete objects) or displayed on sculptural plinths (rather than hung on the wall), Chamberlain's work is premised on partial and mobile viewing. Ambling through the space in search of a narrative, the public is enlisted

in the artist's vital project for transforming hyperrational and utopic modernism into an unpredictable, living practice. At the same time, Chamberlain seems to celebrate the purity promised by modernity, rendering her interiors awash with almost divine luminosity. Especially problematic is the iridescent light infusing *Central Access Diptych, Asmara 1938-39 (After Rogier Van der Weyden), 2009*; Eritrea (Asmara is its capital) was an Italian colonial outpost, and the light here seems to glorify that imperialist ambition. Moreover, her apparently sincere decision to base the work on a fifteenth-century crucifixion suggests a veneration of modernism's sublation of the sacred into secular experience.

With this double dynamic of repudiation and affirmation as an operative procedure, Chamberlain is poised to continue excavating modernism's paradoxes while also reflecting on her own wistful sense of belated arrival. Central to this ongoing archaeology is the condition of the clue, which as a fraught historical remnant begs the artist to steer away from one-dimensional, positivist narratives and to become a detective of the accidental, the unconscious, and the unexpected.

—Nuit Banai