THE ‘PEDESTRIAN PLUMBING’ OF NICOLAS GRENIER

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_Rationalism is the enemy of art, though necessary as a basis for architecture._
– Arthur Ericson

In A Scanner Darkly, a 1978 novel by the iconic American science-fiction writer Philip K. Dick, the physical setting emphasized a starkly stratified society: the author envisioned gated and guarded communities, and oddly: a fortified shopping mall where access is gained by an elite that can afford the luxury of credit cards. Society was radically asymmetrical and guarded, reflected in an environment built exclusively for, well... exclusion.

We Enjoy the Proximity of Others (Part II of diptych). 2011-12, Oil on canvas, 24” x 24”

It was a prescient vision, something that has more or less panned out for neoliberal societies today: exurban gated communities are now commonplace in most western countries. Emporio Mall in Delhi, India, filters out vast swaths of the hoi polloi with an exclusionary entrance fee, allowing none but the rich the validating comfort of branded bling.

In his exhibition Proximities, Nicolas Grenier displays a similarly sinister take on the organizational language of architectural practice. Architecture as an art necessarily deals with the movement of humans, control of the visual environment and the channeling of economic activity into efficient physical
models. It is Apollonic in its application: it’s always there. We just live in it.

Grenier’s approach to painting transcribes the working language of architectural practice into a fragmented phraseology of building, an assemblage of structural analogies that open up fresh possibilities for social critique, something in which painting has had a spotty record of effectiveness. Painters can always paint landscapes, but at times it seems tantamount to rendering the walls of your own prison cell. Grenier guides the viewer to the disassembled guts of the operation.

His distanced, alien color sense imbues his surfaces with a dystopic (and at times toxic) patina, adding to the sense of structure gone wrong. The crisp lines of optimistic design compete with the fated nature of central planning, imbuing a tension in both surface and conception.

Peripheral spaces combine; stark axonometric drawings of buildings, communities coded and meanderingly created, like the misassembled castoffs of a Soviet Gosplan. The demographic legends that accompany larger canvases become a color-coded “spectrum” that turn the work into veneer of created order, inviting questions about the practice of an abstracted, prescribed order on both the painterly surface as well as on the activities of human beings.

“Architecture”, Montreal Architect Melvin Charney said, “is an involvement with human processes rather than designed things.” It’s a strange example of the asymmetrical influence between the two practices that the ordering of human activity – sinister or utopian – ultimately starts out as a drawing on a piece of paper.