

ART REVIEW

Cityscape as seen through modern filter

Kim Schoenstadt gives life to an unreal, topsy-turvy mélange of architectural styles.

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Like Canaletto or Bernardo Bellotto, Kim Schoenstadt is a view painter. Her work records complex urban landscapes.

Unlike her 18th century forebears, however, who lived in a world where visual perception was being elastically stretched by telescopes, microscopes and other ground-glass lenses meant to aid the limited range of a human eye, the Los Angeles artist surveys very different terrain. Her knotty work charts the intersection between the bricks and mortar of actual city streets and the effervescent elements of virtual reality. That's where we live now.

At the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art here, Schoenstadt's expansive and engaging mural "Odd Lot Series: Hartford/Fiction" runs almost the entire length of a narrow gallery. Painted as part of the museum's long-running Matrix program of temporary artist projects, it rises over a doorway, slides up across the ceiling and down the opposite wall before landing in a puddle that oozes out on the floor. A few feet away, a small, independent patch of mural ends the enveloping sequence like the period at the end of a sentence.

Linear black contour drawings of architectural fragments, turned every which way including up, are interspersed with geometric

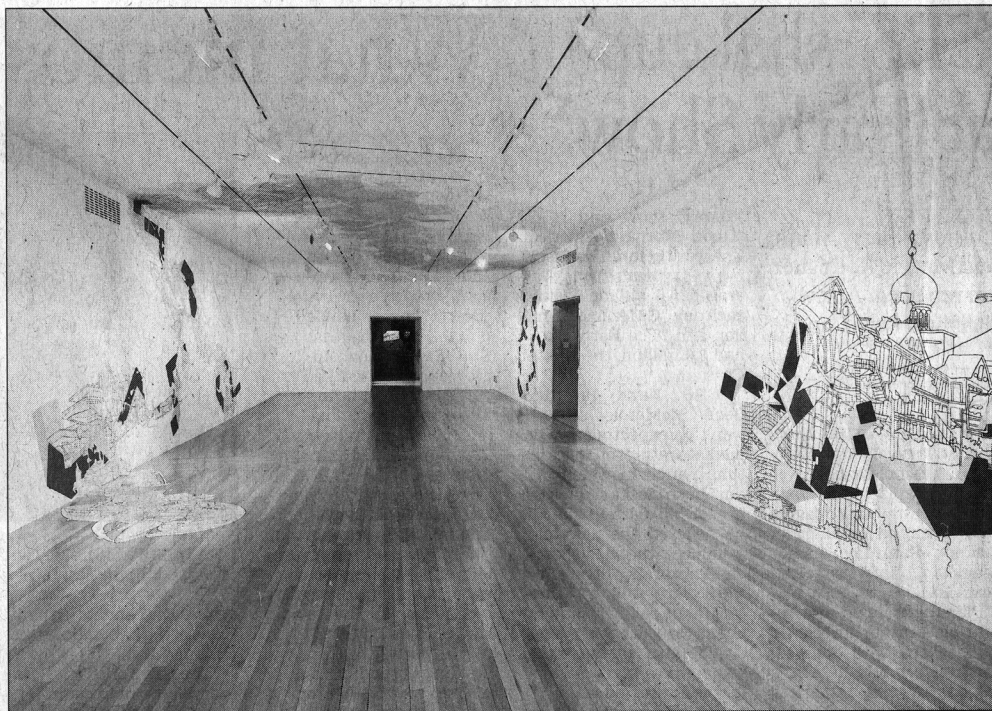
shapes. While flat, their primary palette of red, yellow and blue gives those squares, triangles, trapezoids and rectangles the chunky illusion of sculptural volume. (They derive from sculptures by Tony Smith, the leading architect-artist of the postwar era.) The result is a drawing that visually oscillates between two and three dimensions, here and there dissolving into atmospheric clouds of gray connective tissue.

Akin to Julie Mehretu's exploded vistas but more staid, the imagery that Schoenstadt draws begins with what you can see out the windows at the end of the ground-floor room: bland corporate office buildings in Hartford's ordinary central core. These evolve into various fantasias.

There's the famous onion dome of Colt's Manufacturing Co., whose firearms began to be produced in the city a few short years before Daniel Wadsworth founded the museum. Futuristic structures recall "Star Trek" and the Spacely Space Sprockets factory in the old "Jetsons" television cartoon. Federalist-style buildings with fancy cupolas may or may not refer to actual places in Colonial Connecticut.

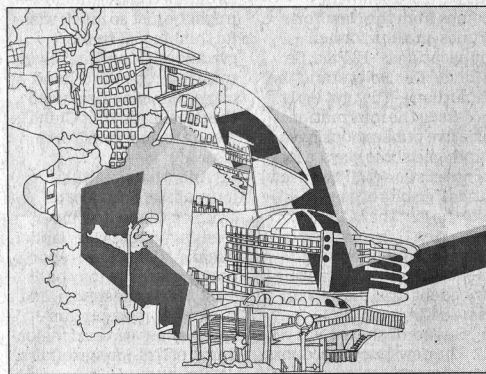
And there's much more. The real merges with the unreal and the hyper-real.

The distinctive crenellated Gothic Revival castle of the Wadsworth Atheneum's original building, which dates to 1842, is an ideal package for this topsy-turvy, enveloping mélange of fantastic, morphing architectural styles. The Gothic Revival, with its quixotic pre-Renaissance forms and emphasis on skillful, artisanal handcraft, grew out of a distrust for the roaring machin-



Photographs by Wadsworth Atheneum

ENVELOPING: Kim Schoenstadt's pieces slide up across the ceiling and down the opposite wall before landing in a puddle that oozes out on the floor. The "Odd Lot Series" runs almost the entire length of the gallery.



DEPTH: Linear contour drawings of architectural fragments are interspersed with geometric shapes.

ery of the sober new Industrial Revolution. Schoenstadt's imaginative wall drawing gives no indication of Luddite preferences for a pre-digital universe — her wall drawings were obviously first plotted on a computer, after all — but it does thrive on the experience of Web-surfing, where linked serendipity is a hallmark.

Compare that to other, older landscape depictions of Hartford upstairs in the

Wadsworth's permanent collection. They offer related though very different conceptions.

Four panoramic panels by Joseph Ropes, painted in 1855, show urban vistas facing due north, south, east and west from the city center, and sliding into countryside. An observer is put squarely in the middle of the local universe — literally master of all he surveys — while the rural landscape is

subservient to perspectives from the city.

Or take Charles De Wolf Brownell, who studied with Ropes. When old New England's English governor tried to seize the Connecticut charter in 1687, Daniel Wadsworth's ancestor is said to have hidden it in the hollow of a massive oak tree. The famous old oak fell in 1856 and Brownell, working from memory, painted its likeness a year later, adding a florid picture frame carved from the tree's wood and showing the Colt factory's famous blue onion dome peaking over a ridge.

Brownell's painting "The Charter Oak" commemorates local legend, endowing it with the authenticity of a landscape observed. A legend, a memory and a fantasy are enshrined in the form of a realistic landscape. Schoenstadt's mural bristles with Information Age variations on such themes.

In Hollywood — the partly real, partly fictional landscape where many cinematic fantasies are fabricated but most are launched into global consciousness —

Schoenstadt is also midway through a nine-month project, ending in March, titled "Public Interest: Painted Over/Under." In the rear gallery at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, the mash-up involves a variety of participants.

The artist asked three guest curators to invite writers, artists and architects of their choice to create wall drawings based on their ideas of urbanism. Once each wall drawing is done, Schoenstadt paints over it in patterns and colors taken from photographs of the graffiti abatement program on L.A.'s freeways.

First she tapes over parts of the wall drawing, so that abstract layers of urban history are revealed when the tape is peeled away. Then the next mural begins. As in Hartford, where the show remains at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum through Jan. 9, the LACE project constructs an architecture of post-urban memory, deep and full of surprising resonance.

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