

VIDEO VILLA, New Paintings by Barbara Grad, February 4-May 28, 2011

The paintings in *Video Villa: New Paintings by Barbara Grad* take as their inspiration the dynamic intersection of worlds seemingly at odds: maps (found in a cache stored by her son) offering secret entrée into gaming worlds, and the aerial topography of the boundaries between the built and the natural world. Grad shows a stunning command of painterly abstraction, both geometric and organic, while never losing a love of the real; she is our guide. She moves us from a belief that we are in a recognizable place into an even more convincing reality of a painterly space. She never mimics nature but stays rooted in a painted, convoluted space. Her paintings engage us at a human scale, their surface imagery offering tension between abstraction and representation, choreographing our gaze.

There is a sense of what Grad calls “collision” in her paintings: of color, of form, of meaning, of perspectives. The paintings reveal their beginnings even as we view a powerfully resolved effort; there is a visual memory of what is underneath, a history of a larger shape, made up of smaller shapes. Grad sees reflected in those forms the changing boundaries of nations at war, as in *Plan B* (2010), or small companies taken over by larger conglomerates, as in *Executive Shift* (2008). In *Traffic* (2008), which seems to reference the urban hustle of Boston (known familiarly as “the Hub”), our gaze shifts to one central weighted form that appears to be suspended from the sky. Grad explains, “I was just trying to make a kind of man-made structure that somehow would be overtaken by the paint itself.”*

During a trip to Italy in 2005, Grad was inspired by the architecture of Rome—the crisp geometry of streets organized for ease of military defense above warrens of dimly lit, underground tunnels created for secret gatherings—as is hinted at in *Under Over* (2009) and *Dark Slide* (2008). The composition in each implies forms both above and below ground, accentuated by the two-canvas vertical structure. About her decision to create

two-panel paintings, Grad told me, “Nothing is stable. Everything changes and becomes something else. And I like the idea of having [the painting] moving off the canvas.”

Grad extends the concept of simultaneous meanings and duality of place and time in other multi-canvas paintings such as *Circumstantial Evidence* (2010) and *Video Villa* (2010), where stepped terraces move our gaze deep into the composition. She describes one of these geometries—a softly rounded form organized around spokes:

The shape originally came from a video game and probably stood for some kind of stairway or something. But I liked the idea that it was the same shape as the window in my studio; it had spokes just like the window in my studio. I was taking the structure of the architecture from the video games and then kind of layering landscape and building on, within that, through it, on top of it, kind of layering underneath it so that the video game was literally sandwiched in time. And I liked the idea of it being moving and almost being shoved off the canvas so that it really wasn't stable as time isn't really stable.

While still a student in Chicago, Grad became familiar with the work of the outsider artist Joseph Yoakum (1890–1972) through Ray Yoshida. Yoakum's landscapes, a combination of painting and drawing, feature bold, simplified forms; his horizon line, consistently near the top of the composition, is a shaded band toward which winding roads move but never arrive. Yoakum's vantage point, like Grad's, shifts—as if we are floating above the brilliantly hued terrain instead of standing on solid ground—and often seems too close for comfort. Another clear antecedent to Grad's shifting perspectives and fractured landscapes can be found in Georges Braque's painting *Road near L'Estaque* (1908), in which the viewer's gaze is animated by the dynamic angles, hypersaturated hues, and sense of abandon. Grad's *Erosion* (2008), for example, offers a sense of wonder and delight in the seeming abandon of a graffiti-influenced passage of fluorescent pink that seems to float atop a city grid. Here, the element of instruction—how do we find our

way?—meets Grad’s distinctive painterly gesture.

Grad also found formal and poetic inspiration in the murals of Piero della Francesca in Tuscany. His *Madonna del Parto* (1467), a detached fragment of a fresco, is a beautiful representation of elements that exist in Grad’s paintings. Solid forms verge on becoming abstract shapes with layers of translucent color applied so that the memory of creation—brushstrokes one atop the other—is visible. The angels on either edge of the painting function both as theatrical players, pulling the curtains aside to reveal the Virgin Mother, and as challenges to the pictorial space: their hands seem to push up against the edge of the picture frame, suggesting activity that we cannot see. This tension between the known and the never-to-be-seen gets at a central power of painting: The artist is our guide into not just the image of, but also the meaning of a place, a time, a form. Grad accepts that mantle: “My painting is a felt environment, a confusing, changing place creating disorientation, as if the painting is shoved out of place. The layering of shape and form suggests a metaphor for the destruction and reconstruction of environment and culture. ... It’s an isolated space separated from time and gender.”

The composition of *Boundary Shift* (2008) suggests urban sprawl and initiates a dialogue regarding gesture at the service of both control and abandon—geometric and organic abstraction in conversation. A central hub of small, banded rectangles in cool white-infused blues spirals outward toward a loosely painted atmospheric arena of ochre; the indistinct boundaries suggest that this painting has contained only a small part of this painterly universe. A middle landscape of ruddy brown is a meeting place for the grid and the atmosphere. Here, as in many of Grad’s works, we move away from the familiar, the recognizable, and become lost in the meaning and metaphor of a painterly space. Grad says, “The art I create is a synthesis of all my interests, a balance between representation and abstraction. It’s an observation of our social world, art, and cultural disturbances provoked by industrialization and modernity. They [the paintings] have neither subject nor object; they are a unification of plus and minus.”

In Grad's paintings, continuous shifting phenomena transform notions of pictorial space into impressions of instability and inherently unpredictable experience. The thrill is in how Grad trusts the viewer with the final word. The meeting of art historical precedents, decades of solid studio practice, and a singular view of where the real meets the imagined allow the viewer a deeply satisfying experience.

Barbara O'Brien

Former Executive Director and Chief Curator

Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art