Ben Johnson

In a recent retrospective of the work of early modernist architect Mies van der Rohe at New York's Whitney Museum, the first work on view was a gridded scale drawing laid over a colour photograph of the snow-capped Grand Teton Mountains. The drawing positioned what was then known as a 'picture' window for a private residence that, sadly, was never built. We are obviously looking out from inside the structure at the glorious landscape before us, but at a view of it that has been carefully edited by the architect, through the means of classic Euclidean geometry and modern construction technology.

Since his first show some 30 years ago at the now defunct Fischer Gallery, Johnson's paintings have been about his own concern with scenography. In the process of making them, like van der Rohe, he too employs the grid to map space and he too frames his subject in a formal way with the help of technical devices. But unlike the German architect, the view that Johnson spreads before the spectator is inward looking. Aiming to get, as he puts it, 'behind the front,' he shows us the interiors of built space. His paintings conform to the classic rules of perspective. They are true to the architectural elements in the space. But they are not portraits of buildings in any sense. In the case of 'Below the Surface,' by leaving out the timber floor, Johnson focuses on the enclosure, leaving only the elements to provide 'life.

''I'm interested in the bit between the materials of the structure,' says Johnson. For him, one of the bits in particular - light - represents the purity he seeks in his work, partly because it is the sum total of all colours. On the canvas that became 'A Place of Reflection,' before anything else Johnson painted in the strong vertical rectangles of light that structure the finished painting. 'Once you’re dealing with reflective surfaces,' he says, 'you offer alternative realities, even within the classic rules of perspective and physics.'

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According to Johnson, those rules also help him understand his own relationships to other people in the real world. Like Escher's convoluted, imagined constructions, Johnson's work provides a ready metaphor for our individual mental architectures. 'Reflection is central to my work,' he says. Johnson uses common words of architectural practice - foundation, grounding, orientation, perspective - to describe the basis on which he approaches each painting. They are, of course, also the words that are used in psychological analysis. Johnson confirms the dual intent, terming what he does in each painting an 'investigation.'

For Johnson, as for Mies van der Rohe, in the matter of the man-made it is in the details that divine inspiration reveals itself. The details are not only the physical facts about the space, but also about the experience of being in it and how its abstract qualities manifest themselves: the quality of light, for example, the shapes it makes and the distortions it creates; sightlines and their resulting tricks of perspective; the colour in white-walled spaces that is the result of light hitting the floor and reflecting off it. Like the English landscape artists before him, Johnson deals with all the elements of classic landscape - air, light, space, perspective - but within the context of the technology of contemporary architecture. Johnson turns his paintings into depictions of the experience of being in the space he frames. So he gives substance to sunlight, reflections, motes, shadows. The result is distortions that waver on the edge of abstraction, despite the meticulous representation of matter in his work that has caused him in the past to be mistakenly grouped with '80's American photo-realist painters.

The 15th century Italian architectural historian and critic Alberti was another early influence on Johnson's obsession with architecture. 'He gave plans and elevations a true sense of space,' says Johnson, 'in the same way that I use them as a vehicle for meditation... I used to draw angst-ridden images, what I call my German

expressionist work, then I realised that they were expressions of a world I don't really know... I'm insulting people if I claim to show their emotions and know their thoughts.'

Johnson leaves people out of his paintings of building interiors also because, he says, 'If I were to put in the human figure, it would give scale to the architectural elements in my paintings and would suggest, wrongly, that I am aiming for illustration.' Instead, Johnson considers the real interiors he chooses to work from, however beautiful they may be, merely prompts. 'I am aiming for a transformed space in my work that human beings could not inhabit.' Yet he insists that people are central to it, as 'without people there would be no architecture.' He acknowledges that in his depiction of an abandoned Palladian villa, 'romanticism may have taken over' because there is no human presence. 'The Inner Space' presents us with a magnificent work of architecture in all its beauty, but in all its poignancy too. The space was made for human use and occupation, but it is 'empty,' it is bereft.

According to artist Paul Klee, among others, we can never look at work without bringing our own experiences to it. Johnson shows us spaces and makes space where, however big and numerous those experiences may be, we can play them out. To describe what he does, he quotes the narrator from American playwright Tennessee Williams' 'Glass Menagerie': 'I am the opposite of the stage magician. As opposed to offering illusion as reality, I am offering reality in the pleasant disguise of illusion.'

For the past 12 years Johnson's paintings have gone directly from his studio into predominantly private collections. This exhibition represents an ongoing response to 'pure' spaces that has been developing alongside the commissions. His response makes Johnson a rarity in the contemporary art world because of his ability to

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marry the normally opposing concerns of art and architecture in his work. It is a talent that links him directly with the great tradition of English landscape painting, but one that is not universally appreciated in this modern age of high-tech machismo.

Johnson became attracted to the artistic issues raised by architecture in 1973, when he first saw James Stirling's Leicester University Department of Engineering building. He contacted the architect and said he would like to make a painting based on the building, and Stirling expressed interest in commissioning it. Johnson declined the commission but offered the architect first viewing and option to buy. Some time later, he duly presented the finished painting. After a few moments of silence, Stirling walked up to the canvas, tapped it with his fingers, turned to Johnson and said, 'Too much Ben, not enough Jim.'

Doris Lockhart Saatchi