

**LISA SANDITZ - 2006**

### **The New Frontier**

The myth of the frontier as a bountiful wilderness harnessable for human sustenance and profit demands revision. Real estate is the new American gold rush, as traditional economies and landscapes flatten into housing developments, strip malls and entertainment facilities. My show is named for a casino called the New Frontier. This wild-west-themed, Bugsy-Siegel-era Las Vegas relic (formerly just *The Frontier*), has undergone a recent face-lift, attempting to revitalize its reputation in the current competitive market of high-end superstructure casinos. But the New Frontier is still shabby. It defends its prime real estate location on The Strip, but can't hide the fact that it is a dinosaur. The frontier myth of eternal abundance, has rendered this casino a mere building, while the newer casinos spread out as modern temples of the Entertainment Industry. Its fate, for now, is luckier than many of its contemporaries, four of which have been demolished for newer, more expansive facilities.

The casino industry, bedazzled by spectacle, opportunity, and entertainment serves as an exemplary metaphor for real estate development in the broader American landscape. Like gambling, real estate investments involve a calculated risk, finding the margin between incredible financial gain and complete devastation. These service economy structures completely define certain cities, such as Las Vegas and Atlantic City; exist as self-contained complexes such as the Ameristar Corporation casinos, and bring the hope of economic prosperity to Native American Reservations. The casino economy offers high-wage service industry jobs. However, the shattering of New Orleans after hurricane Katrina most recently illuminated the possible perils of a city's dependence upon a service economy. With Vegas and Atlantic City's sordid Mob studded history, the lobbyist Jack Abramoff's scandals involving Native American casinos point to new waves of political greed and corruption. The current housing market's inflated scale and price is reflected in Steve Wynn's new signature luxury casinos, The Bellagio, and most recently, Wynn, whose theme favors a populist opulence.

Embedded in these gambling-centric towns and structures are the histories of places and surfaces, both built and natural, within the confines of their highly-calculated architecture. The periphery of these places reveals much about their structures too, as employees park and enter through concealed entrances, new and used building materials amass like monoliths, and desert vistas are emblazoned by their resplendent lights.

Casinos support a number of fantasies: the venues themselves can transport you to Venice, ancient Egypt, the wild west, a mythical, mystical Native America, and even the Hermitage. They offer indulgence and fun through the Bacchanalian spirit: food, booze and sex. The fantasy pretends to dissolve the American class structure, where rich and poor can simmer in the same luxurious stew, and the old song of the American Dream is playing three times nightly.

Casinos are such adaptable beasts and thrive in a variety of topographies around the world. Many of them inflict serious environmental damage in order to accommodate their legally sanctioned locales. Las Vegas, the Nevada casino system, and many reservation casinos are erected in arid desert landscapes, where air and water quality are in constant competition for last place. The Atlantic City area, built on a wetland inlet, has recently received a warning that it may be submerged under water by the year 2100, at the current rate of global warming. The Ameristar Casino's 130,000 square feet of gaming space in St. Charles, MO, floats atop a manmade moat in the midst of fertile Midwestern farmland.

The group of paintings in "The New Frontier," has multiple references to a long history of artists and painting traditions as they relate to these places: Oppenheimer and O'Keefe's New Mexico, Dale Chihuly's casino-in-residency, Jackson Pollock's explosive gestures, tourist art's economic execution and op art's vibrancy, to name a few. The paintings are constructed as organically and irrationally as the landscapes themselves. The perspective is at times exaggerated, collapsed or pictorial, resulting in a composite image derived from my own photos, drawings, internet research, articles and tourist ephemera, all gathered about actual places. Through a combination of modern information tools, this system of image-making reflects a pre-Cartesian vision of space, one that depicts the community's needs and values: but here the Medievals' church, village, and stream has been replaced by entertainment, spectacle and highway overpass.

To accommodate the complexity of the planning and chance that define these casinos, the paintings are amok with different gestural styles, as abstract and realistic forms erupt onto the canvas. The paint-handling and the imagery is at times very descriptive of the places I observe, while at other times it is loose, layered, careless and more instinctual, hoping to recall the memory of previous uses of the land. The densely painted surfaces and wide-open spaces on the canvas try to convey both a sense of hope and emptiness, a feeling both critical and celebratory of the American landscape.