

Of Wallpaper and Coffee Tables

On Noori Lee's Paintings of Stately Homes and Interiors

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Buildings - the Berlin architect Hans Kolhoff complained to me some years ago - are increasingly being planned from a two-dimensional perspective. The Guggenheimization of architecture is reprehensible, i.e., construction in the service of location marketing and social prestige is the wrong way to go. Although - in view of Kolhoff's own unspectacular designs - this criticism is not particularly surprising, it does point to a characteristic development in the architecture of the last decade: to an architecture of spectacle and lifestyle and the media that increasingly define its history of influence and that, if they don't explain the paradigm of the two-dimensional, do promote it.

The interplay between architecture and its depiction had its origin in the Bauhaus. An avant-garde needs propaganda, and photography - since Alexander Rodchenko - is its medium, while Margharita Spillutini (Herzog & de Meuron, Zaha Hadid, Steven Holl) or Julius Shulman (Richard Neutra, Frank Lloyd Wright, Frank O. Gehry und Pierre Koenig) are its best known contemporary advocates. Since the self-referential reflections of Minimal and Conceptual Art began studying the spatial context, an engagement with architecture has become a major thematic canon of art; the question of which art needs which context is an ever-recurring motif in the praxis of a curator, an artist, as well as a collector.

The South Korean artist Noori Lee, in his paintings and gouaches, focuses on the point where lifestyle, art and architecture intersect and on the socially mirroring function of spaces constructed in keeping with an ideal type. His painterly architectural discourse is a multilevel metaphor for the current state of civilizational self-realization and individualist self-aggrandizement. Since 2001 and starting with mass-media's photographic models that he adopts from relevant journals such as "Wallpaper", "Ideales Heim" or "Architectural Digest" (but also finds in corporate archives dedicated to the documentation of the company's own architecture), Noori Lee, with nonchalant meticulousness, has painted just such representational areas and buildings. That the issue is one of pure architecture is easy to recognize from the absence of any human presence. No inhabitant muddies the picture, no human body upsets the modernist symmetry, and no leftover domestic object irritates the dictates of ninety-degree aesthetics. Constructed space is presented as a purged area of an almost sacrosanct purity.

A painting from 2003 entitled "state" goes straight to the heart of this modernist purism and, at the same time, exemplifies Noori Lee's methodic way of dealing with photographs: the picture shows an interior, presumably a living room. The viewer's/photographer's line of vision is directed from the inside out, showing a space with an expansive window front. Glass from the ceiling to the floor that allows a sweeping view of the garden. Outdoors it is light; life is out there and nature is out there. Inside the room, on the other hand, neatly arranged furniture dominates, post-Courbusier, on a canonically functioning grid. The perfect ambience for coffee table books. And that which made the artist Adrian Schiess world-renowned is here an integral component of the architecture: the outdoor world is mirrored in the surface of a sterile flooring kept smoothly polished by service personnel. In order to enhance the impression of structured analytics, the picture is kept completely to an abstractionist black-and-white and the gray tones it inflects. Grisaille. Alone the ceiling lights - too, an integrated component of the architecture - are for Noori Lee a point of departure for a quiet comment: he paints the (in fact) spotted light source as part of a dimly lit spider web. Psychedelics versus rationalism.

This motif of the long-threaded line, of an amorphously meandering color tape, functions like an ever-recurrent, irritating, stylistic device in Noori Lee's images of architecture and interiors otherwise so purist. At times they simulate liana that proliferate from a patio garden into the house ("encounter", 2004), at times take on the form of shooting stars shot in time exposure ("symptom", 2004), at times they are the formal element of a wallpaper ("indication", 2004) and at times a formal manifestation of steam or smoke ("indication", 2004). Such interpretations pay tribute to figuration, to the idea of mimesis as it is after all evoked by photographic models and also adapted by the artist. Only a second glance makes it clear that the lines and the amorphous forms they configure overlay the architectural motifs like an additional pictorial level. They point to the paradigm of abstraction, to Jackson Pollock or Willem de Kooning, to drip painting, to Abstract Expressionism and the Informel. Of course these art-historical values also stand in the service of a defined modernist architectural lifestyle. After all, the milestones of abstraction need a presentation framework that corresponds to them, that enhances them, in other words, a modernist setting. And when Noori Lee combines these two frames of reference in a single picture, he not only interfuses a link that is culturally and historically relevant, but essentially re-contextualizes the art-specific absorption mechanisms of the consumer and lifestyle bourgeoisie of the early 21st century.