

Art in America

The High Modernist Drawing Board

By Quinn Latimer

March 31, 2010

Lever House, the glassy green box and ur-skyscraper of New York architectural Modernism that Skidmore, Owings and Merrill erected on Park Avenue in 1951, has also been the site of some of the city's more interesting contemporary art installations of late. Since 2003, Aby Rosen and Alberto Mugrabi have commissioned artists including Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons, and Sarah Morris to make new works for the Lever House Art Collection. This past week, the latest commissioned artist, Los Angeles-based Karl Haendel, mounted an installation of his signature, stunning graphite drawings on paper—one series depicting cracked light bulbs, mirrors, and eggs; another, the fortunes from fortune cookies; another, abstractions that riff on Mondrian's "Boogie-Woogie" series—all of which cover two 20-foot-long walls that cross the building's famed glass lobby.



DETAIL OF THE LEVER HOUSE INSTALLATION. PHOTO BY JESSE HARRIS. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND HARRIS LIEBERMANN NEW YORK.

The artist also has a concurrent exhibition at Susanne Vielmetter in Los Angeles, where he is presenting a similarly discursive body of drawings. These variously explore the infamous 1914 Shackleton Transatlantic Expedition to the Antarctic and the artist's own household clocks. The show includes an artist book, Karl's Little Red Book, which features photocopies of personally significant texts (to-do lists) and images (Dorian Gray). We spoke with the artist about his new work on view in New York and

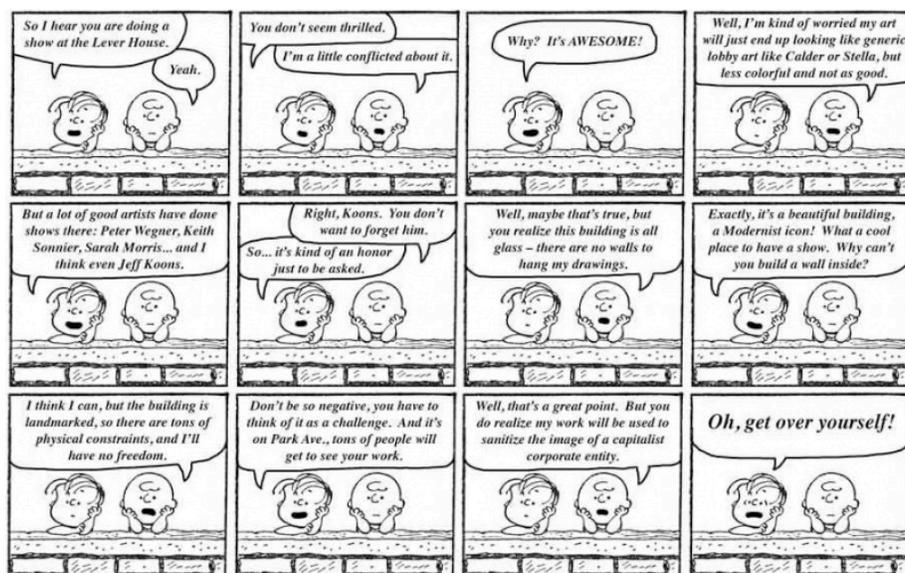
Los Angeles; about the Lever House's place in the history of High Modernism, the freedom Mondrian found in the US, and why institutional critique doesn't apply to a corporate lobby.

QUINN LATIMER: How did the Lever House's Modernist history—its place as the first curtain-wall corporate building built in the US—inform your work?

KARL HAENDEL: I've known about the Lever House since college art history, and that Park and 53rd Street, with the Seagram building across the way, is the hot corner of Modernist New York architecture. It's a beautiful building—elegant, clean, balanced—and compared with contemporary corporate buildings, it's actually rather understated and intimate. It's also rigorous, in concept and form, and I'm attracted to that. Of course it was daunting, having a show in a "masterpiece."

LATIMER: It's been said that Lever House changed the paradigm for the use of the International Style—moving from Europe's public, socially oriented buildings, to the American use of it, for corporate edifices. Did this turn, and the ideology of co-option, resonate with you?

HAENDEL: I'm not sure that one can blame the architects or architecture for this shift, or really find any evidence of the shift in the building itself. The relationship between a dominant political ideology and the formal innovation it seems to "produce" might not be causal so much as correlated. But, yes, it was on my mind that the building's history is tied to that of Capital's. I'm a good boy and I have read my Marx. Sometimes I wanted to play with that history, and on days when I was feeling particularly Hans Haacke-ish, critique it. But the terms of that debate, that of orthodox institutional critique, aren't applicable here. This is a corporate lobby, one that isn't masquerading as a cultural institution. It's just a corporation, and there is nothing for me to "reveal." But the glass in this building is clear, just as the tenants' profit-motivation is clear. So there is a degree of honesty in this show because there are no illusions. And pretty much every building in New York is financed by private capital, first among them its galleries and museums.



DRAWING FOR KARL HAENDEL'S PRESS RELEASE

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LATIMER: You mentioned the elegance and "cleanness" of the Lever House's design, which you somewhat disrupt with your drawings of cracked light bulbs, mirrors, and eggs. Can you talk a bit about the process of making these drawings

HAENDEL: These drawings are all very flat field (in the Harold Rosenberg sense), making that 90-degree turn when the image goes from tabletop to the wall, and they have a scatter-art feel. The images began by breaking objects on top of the scanner's glass (which is a plane parallel to the ground, not the wall). For example, I crack an egg and open it up on the scanner as if it were a frying pan, and scan the results. Then I make an inkjet print of the scanned image, put it on the copy stand, and make a slide. I put the resulting slide in a projector, blow it up, and draw the results. It's a long and complex process—for a reason. I do it to insert the mechanical and photographic into the process of drawing, as well as to insert the handmade into the photographic and technical. I'm interested in defiling the purity of both the handmade and the photographic, to fold them into one another.



COURTESY SUSANNE VIELMETTER

LATIMER: How do you see the abstraction of your "Boogie-Woogie" series working with or against your more illustrative drawings?

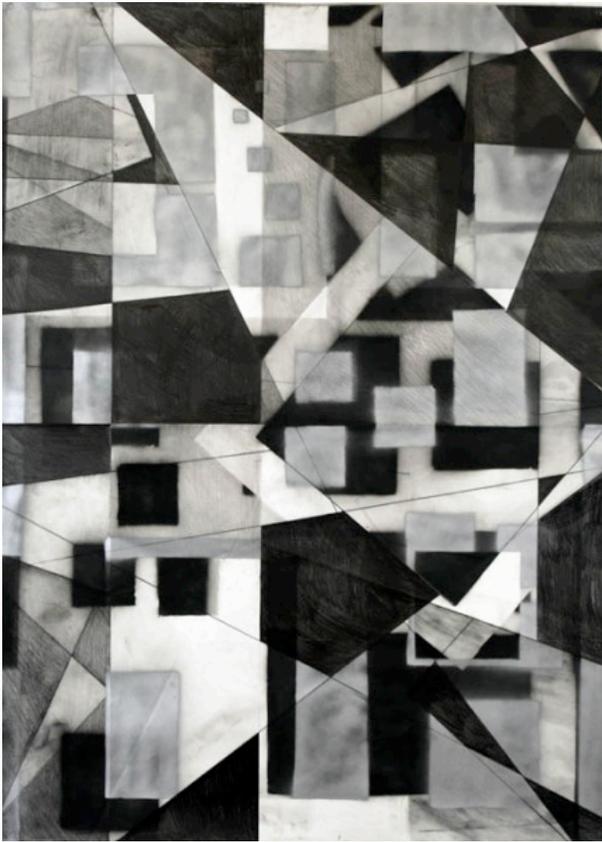
HAENDEL: I think they work together well, as different points along a continuum. I'm interested in all types of images: photographic, illustrational, notational, abstract, indexical. It's almost a typological enterprise. The "Boogie-Woogies" are classically "abstract" in that they appear to be non-objective. But by referencing Mondrian they take on a referential aspect.

They become images of "something," which challenges the "purity" of the abstract. Likewise, if you get close to my representational drawings, you see how loose the pencil work is, how "abstract" they are. I am not invested in any one aspect of drawing in particular, but in drawing as an idea that encompasses all types of mark making.

LATIMER: Do you see Mondrian's late work, that era's jazz, and the Lever House itself as emblematic of postwar New York and a certain Late Modernist ethos that you wanted to explore?

HAENDEL: Mondrian's best work came about during the war, and it looks like he found a particular freedom and inspiration in the US. And he was one of many European modernists who came to America at that time, greatly affecting the course of intellectual history, American Modernism and Modernism in general. So there is no doubt that a certain formal mid-century gestalt was on my mind.

But as to those ideals, they seem far away today. I wonder if people living in that time ever really believed in them anyway, or at least spent much time worrying about them. How could they? Many of these émigrés were Jewish, and left their homes and lives, and they were the lucky ones. Didn't they have more important things to worry about? That's why I think fiction, in literature, theater, and film, is so important to an understanding of time period. It gives us an understanding how people felt. Neither art history books nor rectilinear glass structures do that very well.



BOOGIE WOOGIE #5, 2009. COURTESY THE ARTIST

LATIMER: How did your research for the Lever House installation compare to the research done for your work dealing with the Shackleton Expedition at Susanne Vielmetter?

HAENDEL: I don't do research in any directed manner, and research isn't my "practice." That kind of practice reeks of orthodoxy, much like the institutional critique I mentioned earlier, and I'm wary of orthodoxies. The research I do never feels like research because I only explore things that I find appealing. I read a book on the Shackleton expedition and then I watched a program on PBS about it, and that's how I learned that there were surviving photographs in the British Museum. My research, much like my conceptualism, might appear purposeful, but it really comes from the gut. For the Lever House, I visited the building three or four times and felt it out. Is that research? My friend Florian Maier-Aichen calls practically everything research, but I just call it living.

LATIMER: Do you see your extremely labor- and time-intensive drawing process as another form of research?

HAENDEL: I think I see where this question is coming from. For many, research is a practice. For me it isn't, but drawing is—very much so. Labor is a theme in my work, but also a material component of it. It is important for me to come to the studio every day and put in my drawing hours, just like any other person punching a clock. It's ritualized and repeated. Hard work was important to my parents, and this

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

must have soaked into my psyche as a kid. Of course I tweak it a bit, as I'm not actually doing "manual labor," even though the labor I do is manual.

LATIMER: How is the idea of time explored in your Vielmetter show? How do you see the disparate elements—the expedition drawings, the clock drawings, and Karl's Little Red Book—working together?

HAENDEL: Well, I suppose time is represented literally in the clocks and more narrativized with the Shackleton works, and is evidenced in all of the drawings by the labor it took to make them. I started making the Shackleton work in 2007, when Bush was "staying the course" in Iraq and the war wasn't going well, and I was thinking about stubbornness versus flexibility. I was amazed that Shackleton and his crew, once their boat sunk, were forced to change their plans minute to minute, based on the wind, weather, ice, the strength of the men. Only once I started to draw did I realize how much of their journey was about waiting. Waiting to get there; waiting out the winter when they were iced in; and ultimately, waiting for Shackleton to return to Elephant Island to save them. But the Shackletons and clocks are also just a play of simple contrasts: old and new, then and now. There is nothing brilliant in the juxtaposition; in fact, it's rather dumb, which I like. I have an aversion to work that uses obfuscation as a substitute for content, that requires a press release or a dealer's schpeal to provide meaning. That kind of work depresses me. I try to make work that can be entered without too much backstory, where the content is in the work, not outside nor pasted on.

LATIMER: Has living in Los Angeles, which has a famously laidback approach to time, influenced your ideas about it at all?

HAENDEL: That's a good question. When I moved to Los Angeles from New York I had more time to just be in my studio. I didn't have to work as much because it's cheaper to live here, and that's when I took up drawing again as a series practice. And I never drive during peak hours. I don't leave my studio if I can help it, between 4 PM and 8 PM. So I structure my life in LA in such a way that it enables my studio time. I don't know if living in LA has changed my idea of time, but it has changed my approach to it.

LATIMER: Can you talk about the images from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that are featured in Karl's Little Red Book in your show at Vielmetter? Did you include them because of the novel's inquiry into time and decay?



*INSTALLATION VIEW OF HAENDEL'S
CURRENT EXHIBITION AT VIELMETTER.
COURTESY SUSAN VIELMETTER*

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HAENDEL: They are photocopies of two drawings Allen Ruppersberg made of the actor who played Dorian Gray. Neither Wilde's book nor the movie interests me as a text. I don't care about London dandies, and I don't idealize youth or fear getting older, at least not in a visceral sense like Dorian Gray does. But intellectually, I am interested in compromise and regret. I am also interested in Al's revisitations to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, because revisitation, as a component of artistic practice, resists the notion of forward progress or development within an artist's work. To my knowledge he visited the book three times, first when he wrote out the entire book by hand on a series of canvases in 1974 (again, labor here), then in a drawing he made in 1984 of Hurd Hatfield, the actor who played Dorian Gray in the 1945 movie of the book, and then when he drew the same actor again in 1991. Al is a very important artist to me, and we share a lot of interests and techniques, especially a predilection for rendering particular "found" images and texts out of books and newspapers. And like Al, I often come back to images I've used beforehand. I suppose we are both interested in how when one returns to a source image, it remains the same, yet we have changed, and thus the drawing changes too.

WORK BY KARL HAENDEL IS CURRENTLY ON VIEW AT LEVER HOUSE, LOCATED AT 390 PARK AVENUE NEW YORK. SIR ERNEST SHACKLETON AND ALL THE CLOCKS IN MY HOUSE IS ON VIEW AT SUSAN VIELMETTER THROUGH APRIL 24. THE GALLERY IS LOCATED AT 6006 WASHINGTON BLVD, CULVER CITY.