

Real Estate: On Christopher Culver's 'Goodbye Houses' By Matthew Grumbach

To view Christopher Culver's paintings is to see in the dark. The works provoke an ocular adjustment similar to the physiological response by which the eye acclimates to a darkened movie theater. Once one undergoes this pupillary dilation, the paintings begin to emit a spectral glow. The apparitions that appear are houses.

Writing on the 18th-century artist Giovanni Battista Piranesi, architectural historian Erika Naginski notes, "In the battle of ancients and moderns, Piranesi sided with the former."ⁱ Culver shares this proclivity. The two artists employ a common approach to architecture, one that is both archaeological and eclectic. For Piranesi, it was the imaginative utility of ruins that compelled him to depict antiquity, asserting, "that what survived only partially or had entirely disappeared needed to be reconstructed by means of conjectural plans."ⁱⁱ Piranesi surveyed ruins and structural fragments from various periods to create imaginative renderings of ancient buildings where "truth and myth stand side by side."ⁱⁱⁱ Culver's series '*Goodbye Houses*' manifest these very same tensions. Without privilege, the works depict the frontages of buildings, some that he has become acquainted with through experience, others through reproduction. Some are embellished with additional architectural elements and others rely on a wholly combinatory assembly. They are not perfect facsimiles of the original structures nor do they purport to be. Culver strips the houses down to the bone and dissolves the opposition between exteriority and interiority. Although viewers may be privy to the symbolic power of his referents, Culver's alterations recode the signification distilled in his chosen façades.

Play House (2017) typifies Culver's meticulous design method. He began by choosing eight buildings that he had frequented in New York City, that evoked dread and desire. He then cataloged the architectural features by documenting the structures with his iPhone's camera or revisited them retroactively with Google Street View. These technologies were used to initiate the flattening we see consummated in the final painting. The artist then consolidated the various elements into a technical drawing, creating a picture plane populated by his 2D snapshots and screen grabs. The "stitching" together of windows, doorways, awnings, stairs, roofs, and walls negotiates the space through a set of measured parameters determined by the painting's surface. The building fragments combine to form a new composite structure à la Piranesi.

Each house in the series excretes a single plume of smoke, a trace of an image reminiscent of Troy Brauntuch's ghost-like compositions. The plumes constitute an analogous pictorial language that takes Troy Brauntuch's collection of handmade rubber stamps as its point of departure. Speaking to the historical ways smoke has been harnessed to transmit information and signal danger (e.g. smoke signals), the plumes emphasize the transient materiality of smoke, the quality that obfuscates the transmission of meaning. "Smoke creates ghosts."^{iv} Traces, fragments, debris, ghosts—these words compose a vocabulary of destruction. Culver's works are haunted by an anti-architecture. As Benjamin Bratton eloquently puts it, "architecture is not just becoming-to-form; it is always already the not-yet-debris."^v These emissions import further meaning by turning the houses into generators that produce an image. *Bath House* (2017) offers a plume that traces of the eye of Culver's mother. It overlooks the artist's rendering of a pre-Truvada gay bathhouse situated in a former AT&T communications building in Austin, TX.

It was the building's change in use that fascinated the artist, from the offices of a publicly traded company to a center of exchange, where bodies are codified and sex is transacted. As Leo Bersani attests, "Anyone who has ever spent one night in a gay bathhouse knows that it is (or was) one of the most ruthlessly ranked, hierarchized, and competitive environments imaginable."^{vi} In this instance, his parenthetical remark inserting the past tense is particularly relevant. The bathhouse in Culver's painting was bulldozed, sharing the same fate as the many bathhouses that disappeared in the wake of the AIDS crisis. When Bersani penned "Is the Rectum a Grave?" in 1987, politicians used the example of the gay bathhouse to assign blame and justify their inaction in combating the disease. In their public rebukes, they engaged a dialectic of the destructive promiscuity of the bathhouse contravened against the moral rectitude of capitalism, the nuclear family, and the virtue of homeownership.

The idea of becoming debris is fundamental to the "terroristic imagination," an instinctive way of seeing the world aroused by the simple fact that "the increase in the power of power heightens the will to destroy it."^{vii} *Brutal House* (2017), a composite of Osama Bin Laden's compound in Pakistan, underscores this paradox. Beyond destruction, the modern terrorist act cannot be decoupled from its own mediatization, as violence becomes spectacle. September 11th, 2001 represents the confluence of these symbiotic phenomena: "the twentieth century's two elements of mass fascination [were] combined: the white magic of the cinema and the black magic of terrorism; the white light of the image and the black light of terrorism."^{viii}

The black and white paints that demarcate Culver's *'Goodbye Houses'* materialize the dualistic magic of cinema and terrorism. This is in part due to the technique Culver has developed to create his paintings that builds on the legacy of camera-less photography. The majority of the process takes place on a horizontal plane using wet enamel as a negative image, a fixer (Gamsol), and a stop bath (cold water) akin to photographic processing. Culver plays with light and shadow by fixing the wet enamel onto the linen before applying black pigment spray paint. He washes portions of the canvas using squeegees and sponges before repeating the process over.

Culver first became interested in Bin Laden's house when Pakistani authorities razed the building in the months following the U.S. Navy SEAL raid. By embodying Bin Laden, the house precipitated its own destruction for the killing of the referent is never quite enough. The act of demolition therefore constitutes the conceptual basis of the painting. Inspired by Kathryn Bigelow's obsessively detailed reproduction of the house in *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), his painting offers a coda. In the film, viewers encounter Bin Laden's house from a number of different vantage points and under various conditions: in daylight viewed from the adjacent field and the surrounding mountains, in a scale model presented to the C.I.A. director, in the satellite images on the monitors at the base, in the air with the helicopters as they make their approach in the dead of night, and, finally, through the lenses of the Navy SEALs's night vision goggles on board the helicopters and inside the house. The multiplicity of viewpoints informs Culver's painting. The integration of speed and movement into a one-point perspective is what Paul Virilio describes as *cinematism*. His critique being that cinematism inculcates a "ballistic perception," the optical perspective of the bullet and the bomb.^{ix} The slashed zero plume that hangs above the house like crosshairs only magnifies this sensation. It is this ballistic perception that lays bare "the architectural nullity of all buildings" and inducts "the zero degree of architecture."^x

Culver's painting *Well House* (2017), is a composite incorporating elements of Buffalo Bill's house from *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). Hybridization is one of the reasons why critics of the film found Buffalo Bill so grotesque: "[Buffalo Bill] is a jarring billboard of discordant signs—

a figure *stitched* together like the Frankenstein monster.^{xi} As an amalgamation of architectural signifiers, Culver's house paintings verge on discordance too. The recombinant nature of composite architecture treads a fine line between ingenuity and its grotesque flipside.

The smoke plume in this work displays the killer's hand reaching out to grab Clarice, the protagonist, in the pitch-black basement. The house featured in the movie was recently sold after the owners significantly reduced the asking price in order to find a buyer.^{xii} It is not difficult to speculate that the association with the film's villain hampered interest in the house.

Culver originally conceived of the houses with respect to the inhabitants inside: men who take the concept of negative freedom (freedom from interference) to its disturbing extreme. The houses are governed by "aberrant liberalism" where "private vices work towards the general vice."^{xiii} Ultimately, these are not meant to be houses viewers want to inhabit. *Goodbye Houses* alludes to the song Buffalo Bill plays when he videotapes himself dancing in front of a mirror mumbling, "Would you fuck me?" One reply is "goodbye houses," a refrain that captures the anguish of Culver's architectural monsters.

Matthew Grumbach is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley.

ⁱ Erika Naginski, "Preliminary thoughts on Piranesi and Vico," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 53/54 (2008): 157.

ⁱⁱ Naginski 158.

ⁱⁱⁱ Naginski 159.

^{iv} Jannis Kounellis

^v Benjamin Bratton, *Dispute Plan to Prevent Future Luxury Constitution*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015: 95.

^{vi} Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?", *October* 43 (1987): 206.

^{vii} Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, New York: Verso, 2002: 7.

^{viii} Baudrillard 29-30.

^{ix} Thomas Lamarre, *The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009: 27.

^x Paul Virilio, *The Lost Dimension*, New York: Semiotext(e), 1991: 100.

^{xi} James Hoberman quoted in Janet Staiger, "Taboos and Totems: Cultural Meanings of The Silence of the Lambs," *Reception Study: From Literary Theory to Cultural Studies*, New York: Routledge, 2001: 288. Italics are my own.

^{xii} Tony Raap, "Silence of the Lambs' house in Fayette County finally finds buyer," *Pittsburg Tribune-Review*, 7 July 2016. <<http://triblive.com/news/regional/10755746-74/buyer-lambs-silence>>

^{xiii} Chantal Mouffe on Marquis de Sade in *The Democratic Paradox*, New York: Verso, 2005: 132.