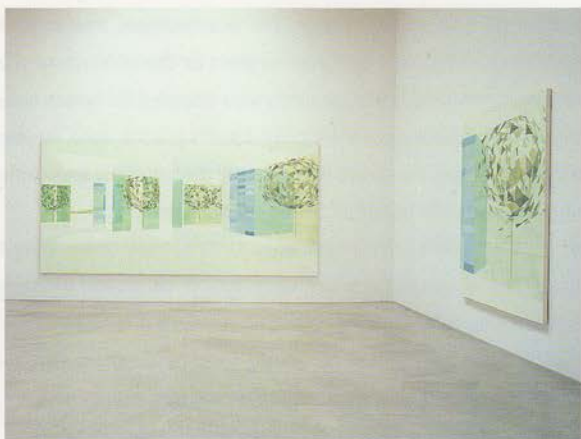


Kevin Appel

The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles
The Citibank Private Bank Emerging Artist Award

Interior Decoration and Nostalgia: The Unnatural Painting of Kevin Appel

Paul Schimmel



House, 1999

Installation view, Angles Gallery, Santa Monica

Kevin Appel's elegant paintings tread aggressively into the terrain of design, decoration, and nostalgia. His seemingly retro compositions are radical in their ability to confront, manipulate, and reconfigure issues of popular culture, interior design, contemporary painting, and virtual reality. In the nineties, when there has been a pronounced and renewed interest in painting (as if it were ever dead), Appel is among a new generation of Los Angeles artists who have an ambiguous relationship to their modern traditions and foundations. Having almost nothing in common with the neo-expressionist romanticism that characterized the European-led painting revival of the late seventies and early eighties, this new generation of painters begins with the understanding that they are living in a postmodern, post-industrial era in which the belief in the meaningfulness of painting is no longer a credible starting point when confronted by the plethora of images which constitutes the age of the internet.

Appel's slippery, eerily exquisite paintings confound and contradict the comforting effects of nostalgia through a strategy, triggered by the palette and architecture of a bygone era, that is wickedly cruel; he gives you a frame, a picture in which to look into the past, but gives you none of the fulfillment associated with that yearning. His paintings, while embracing the California modernist era of the forties and fifties, allow no human point of reference, and the seamless and synthetic environments are ultimately unsettling in their uncanny ability to visually simulate, through perspec-



Swing Door Cabinet, 1998

35 x 31 inches

tive, an imaginary space that contains no personal effects, no furniture or mementoes, no memories. In Appel's complex paintings, their lack of emotion, their bloodlessness, their emptiness, gives them a quiet edginess, as if some alien culture had received plans for the architecture of a specific time and place, but had no idea that these environments were intended for human occupation. The form without the content, the house without the home—Appel's pristine, hard, flawless surfaces with their precise, two-point perspective create an alarmingly dysfunctional environment in which to imagine yourself. This is the disruptive ingredient in the artist's nostalgia.

Similarly, Appel simulates the art of interior decoration, while fundamentally undermining its primary purpose—the adoption of interior spaces to human needs. Interior decoration and design are fundamentally based on the relationship between the room's decoration and its occupant. Without a trace of human presence, Appel's paintings echo specific social customs and environments without revealing for whom they are intended. As is often the case with interior design, Appel's interior spaces reflect, in their formal configurations, the general attitudes and ideas concerning the space outside. In his recent work *House: South View From Court*, the limits of the enclosed space are enlarged by the creation of a relationship between the interior and exterior spaces. Here the outside space is absorbed as part of the space inside and is not regarded objectively, but imagined within the room. In effect, nature is inscribed within the geometric form of the frame—a picture within a frame. Ultimately, Appel is concerned only with the architectural design of interior space, and the functional articulation of the room through the definition of form through color and hue, while ignoring in its totality the transient nature of light and shadow. Significantly, all the functional aspects of the artist's rooms are clearly delineated, including the supporting walls, and the means of communication between exterior and interior spaces, such as doors and windows.

Appel's most recent work, which began with a computer-generated model of a fictionalized house, takes you on a 360-degree virtual tour through a series of interconnecting paintings of both interiors and exteriors, seamless in concept, but rationally broken down into their component parts according to a north, south, east, west axis. Acting under a principal of strict functionalism (not formalism, as some critics claim), Appel eliminates all applied ornament, all fine and decorative arts.

In his world, Appel returns to painting the function of spatial determination that was once exercised by mural-painting and sculpture and has, since the modern era, been carried out directly by the architect through the plastic and chromatic manipulation of structural elements.

At a time when leading architects are increasingly sculptural in their concerns, Appel's paintings address the very juncture between architecture and painting. Appel embraces the architecture of the forties and fifties not so much for what it speaks about (namely, his Los Angeles and a nostalgia for the past), but for the radical elimination of the distinction between exterior and interior space, form and function, and the architect's elimination of detail. This period provided a reduction of architecture to one great covering surface, beneath which the division of interior space and its articulation proceeds absolutely free of all structural demands, much like a painting. However, unlike the sense of possibility of modern American life offered in advertising of the postwar Los Angeles home, Appel's paintings advertise nothing but their formal qualities in a stark and human, computer-generated neo-plasticism.

Increasingly, in the works of the last year, Appel's once flat, opaque colors, simulating the laser jet print-out of a computer, have become modulated through the application of multiple layers of lush green, grey, steely blue, and teal transparent washes, creating a *pentimento* effect that further confound and confuse the notions of impersonal versus painterly technique. Drawing from the traditions of the Case Study Houses and the

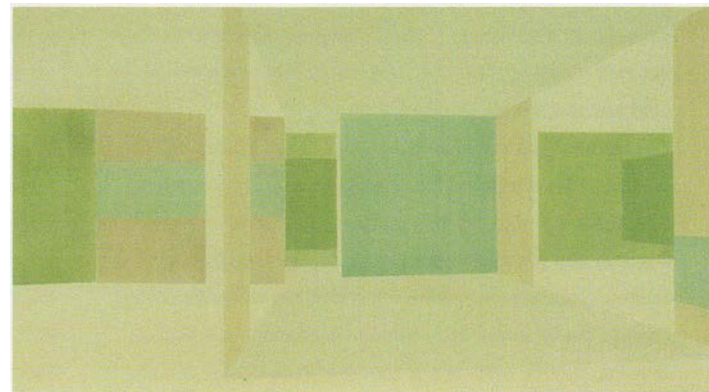
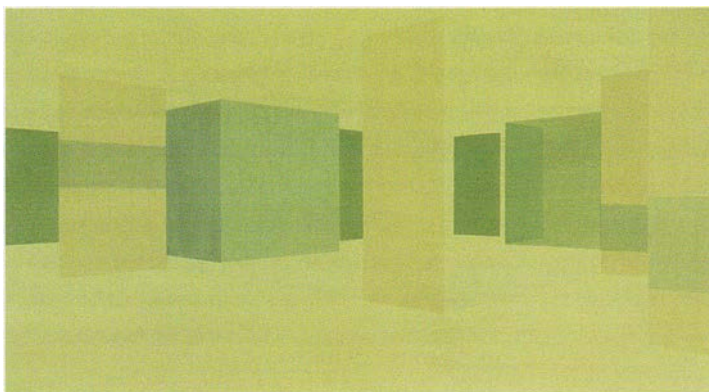
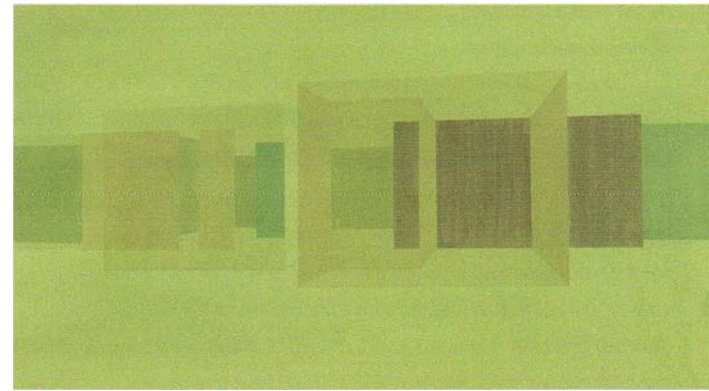
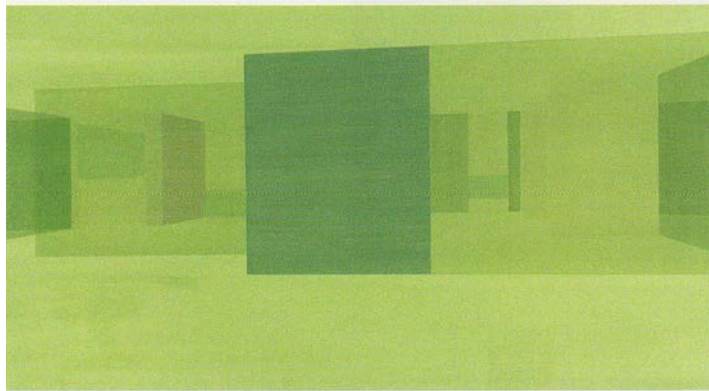
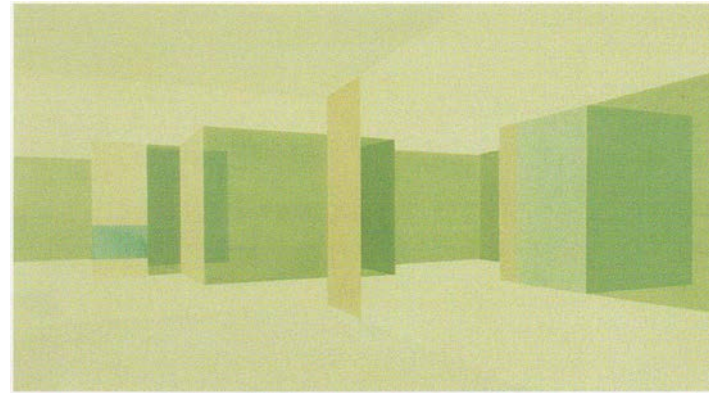
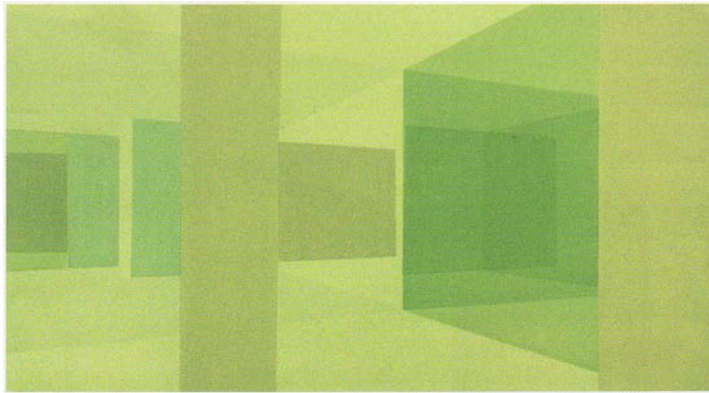


A Console with Records, 1996

48 x 40 inches

hard-edged, non-objective, symmetrical, architectonic paintings of the "abstract classicism" in postwar Los Angeles paintings, Appel creates a beautiful, discomfortingly inhuman interior design. Unlike the "enlightened" artists of the forties and fifties, whose mission it was to order and communicate the idea of universal significance—the very foundation of the architecture, design, and painting on which his works are based—Appel, with not a trace of irony, mimics and simulates the surfaces without the idealism, the social agenda, the sense that we will live in a better tomorrow.

In a reversal of intent, the extraordinary craftsmanship and complexity of Appel's surfaces simulate the mass-produced, low production costs used to produce the architecture to which he is responding. By creating one-of-a-kind, handcrafted paintings of modern industrial production, Appel finally questions a widely held belief from the postwar period—a belief in the unity and equality of fine and applied arts. Taking the utility out of architecture, Appel dismisses the functionalism on which an ideal new world was based and reaffirms the lofty and singular position of his enterprise—its ability to make visible a conceptual strategy that ultimately undermines the functional notion of equality in the arts.



Inside/Out: On the Painting of Kevin Appel

Jan Tumlir

25



left

top: *Interior Study North View*, 1999

center: *Exterior Study Front (Green)*, 1999

bottom: *Interior Study North East (View From Entry)*, 1999

right

top: *Interior Study South (View From Court)*, 1999

center: *Exterior Study Back (Green)*, 1999

bottom: *Interior Study South East (View Through Court)*, 1999

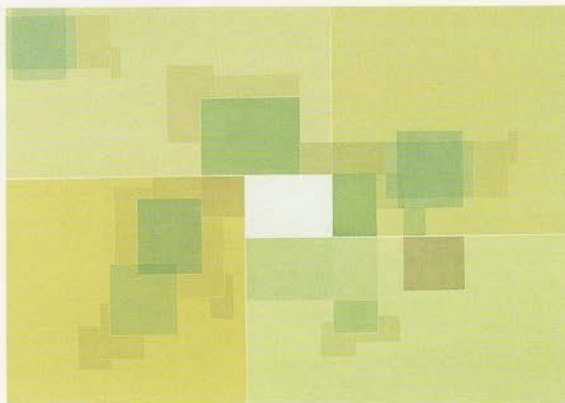
each 22 x 29 1/2 inches

It no longer makes sense to wonder if painting is alive or dead, relevant or not. The market, which always has the last word on such matters, proclaims the enduring vitality of the medium beyond a shadow of doubt. In Los Angeles especially, painting has remained center-stage and high profile throughout every new development—every twist and turn in the general course of art, whether modern or post, has here been followed, if not preceded, by a corresponding shift in the practice of painting. It was the persistence of a painterly impulse that characterized West Coast Minimalism, for instance, and distinguished it from its emphatically non-painterly East Coast models. In effect, for every avant-garde rupture in that tradition which painting exemplifies, we could probably find a counter-movement on the part of some L.A. artist or group of painterly reconciliation. Here, then, the question is not whether to paint, but what and how. Bearing in mind the quantum leaps forward that are made almost daily by the latest digital technologies of reproduction, just what is left for this, perhaps the most archaically analogue of all media?

It is a question that concerns Kevin Appel directly—that is, the question of technical relations—and his reply, which might be described as assimilationist, should at first strike us as wilfully perverse. Up until now, his paintings have been mostly representational, falling into place around a familiar range of genres: domestic still lifes, interiors, architectural views, etc. To a

House Plan 2 (Green), 1999

22 x 29 1/2 inches

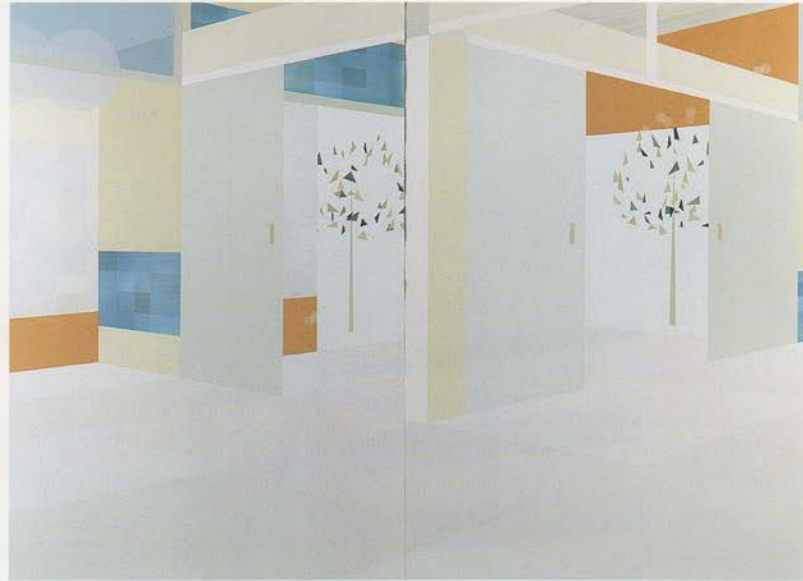


certain extent, all of them can be said to locate a subject matter outside their pictorial bounds; all confront an objectively determined reality out there in the world, although they do not, as a rule, do so directly, but rather by way of its photo-mechanical or, as is increasingly the case, electronic meditations. A measure of ambiguity is thereby built-in from the start as to just what these paintings are of, or just how deep or how shallow is their proposed imagery.

Whatever else Appel may want to accomplish here, it is the attempt to painstakingly remake by hand what a camera or computer terminal now delivers in just a few seconds that may raise some eyebrows. In the past, this sort of busywork—what might be termed the artistic equivalent of dead-labor—was performed as a desperate affirmation, or else outright rejection,

of the artist's touch, and by extension artistic agency as such. Content would tend to be chosen accordingly to either highlight or downplay the subjective element. The presence of the figure, for instance, in this way becomes fraught with philosophical implication, yet even when banished from the premises it remains a phantom focal point. Recall the chilly, depopulated vistas that were always the hallmark of the photo-realistic style, from its pop-ish inception through to its resurgence in the simulationist tactics of the eighties, and how these are inevitably haunted by the specters of "the human condition." Or in the case of the paintings that these most closely resemble, early David Hockney or Patrick Caulfield, where some of that romanticism and bathos is tipped in favor of a cool, sociological analysis, we nevertheless remain in the realm of the big message about us.

It is not so much that the implications of the act itself (manual reproduction) remain unexamined, but that these are typically decided in advance, and that the work as a consequence yields too readily to its given punchline. Depending upon how little or how much one trafficks with the source material, that is, one either stops the viewer at the surface or guides them into the



left
Interior View (Gust), 1998
 80 x 48 inches

right
Interior View (Spring), 1998
 82 x 112 inches

depths. To impede or entrance, to seduce or abandon: it tends to be an either/or proposition for painting. We can laugh at the bird that saw grapes but tasted canvas in the Greek myth of the art competition, while we still wait dumbly for the curtains to be raised on the curtain painting. Having broached the question of illusionism, what tends to follow is a process of sorting out the real and the fake. Either/or again, but what if one insisted on having it both ways? To a native Angelino like Kevin Appel—whose studio, it should be mentioned, is located just off the dark heart of Hollywood Boulevard (a locale still reserved in our imaginations for the private eye)—this is not such an odd request.

Although it might ruffle the trainspotterishly modernist sensibilities of its presumed residents, Appel has gone ahead and furnished a large painting from 1998, titled *Landing*, with

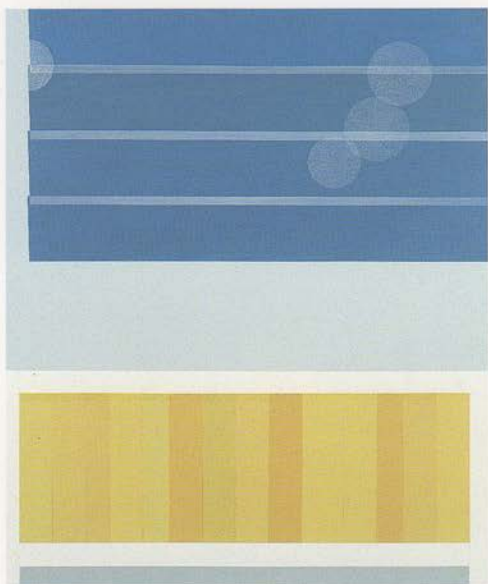
(what looks like) some curtains of his own. As a lone patch of rendering in an otherwise sparse, verging on schematic, composition of interlocking pastel planes that ventures just beyond a suggestion of space (but not far), it stands out. Its finely modulated tonalities of blue promote an impression of cascading folds; a passably convincing effect, though one that is not likely to be confused for “the real thing.” In fact, it is not obviously a curtain at all, and could instead be an abstract pattern on a glass partition, for instance, or yet another painting or a fabric mural signed Vera. Like almost every component of a Kevin Appel painting, it is at once specific in terms of its form and function and wholly diffuse, both fixed and shifting.

If one wanted to trace a line of development from the early paintings to the most recent, it would probably involve a slow pendulum swing from (closer to) one pole to (closer to) the other; inclining more toward the given, early on, and then increasingly more toward the variable. The interiors grow evermore sparse as we approach the latest works. Emptied of objects, they begin to suggest a shifting modular abstraction, which makes perfect sense since the rooms they depict do not as yet exist. Increasingly, the paintings take on the characteristics of architectural plans and



Landing, 1998

72 x 64 inches



Louvers (Dusk), 1998

36 x 30 inches

renderings, notes toward a potential reality, something that may or may not be built. This particular course is underwritten, not incidentally, by a momentous shift in the evidentiary status of the image itself as it is converted from the currency of the camera to that of the computer terminal—a shift that these paintings commemorate in an almost indexical fashion. But the point to be made here is that, while the proportions may change over time, both modalities, both potentials, are present from the start, and the act of painting remains a kind of ongoing mediation between them. Even at the height of their photographic determinism—an implicitly historical, even nostalgic, regime under which the image can only attest to the way things were—they nevertheless look forward to the endless adaptability of a digital future. And then, conversely, upon arrival, they remain

willingly tied to the specificity of reference, still positing some vestige of concrete reality outside their virtual bounds.

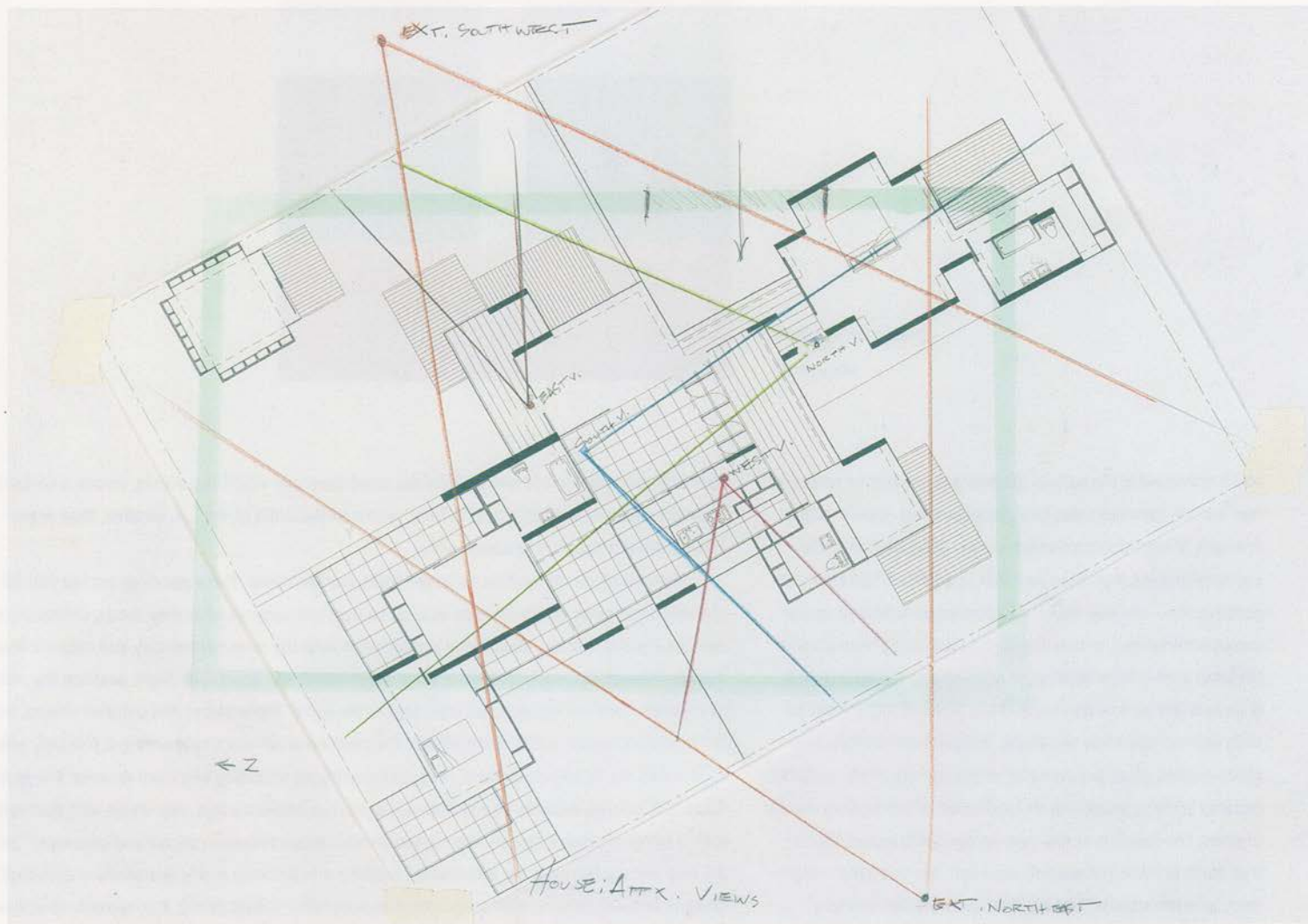
This holds true for the paintings overall, as well as for every objective element that they comprise; all temporally cloven in this sense between past and future, subject to the same condition of intermediacy. The curtain in *Landing* stands out as exemplary for the way that it morphs through some of the highlights of Western art history, from Greece to Clement Greenberg, and then still further to where the dream of the perfect copy, the simulacrum, no longer adheres to the folds of a curtain, but rather the guided spills of pigment streaking the surface of a Kenneth Noland or, more appropriately, a Callum Innes. From pre- to postmodern, from illusions of depth to illusions of flatness: given their radical inconsistency, it is perhaps curious that Appel's ambitions for this work should remain essentially identical to those articulated centuries ago at the very dawn of this civilization. He wants them to disappear, that is, to get swallowed up by their scenery. This is no mere delusion or trumped-up claim, but a function they are scrupulously designed to perform, somewhat like Pollocks but with the emphasis now placed on reception, on the space of

display rather than production. Through a chameleon-like mimicry of the interiors they hope to occupy, they consume their settings so as to be consumed by them in turn.

That this will occur when the colors match and the lines of perspective join up almost goes without saying. To a certain extent it will happen regardless—some degree of absorption and disappearance is in the cards for all painting, especially when it is chosen with an eye to the sofa. We might recall in this regard that famous quip by Matisse about art as an armchair for the harried businessman; a monstrous capitulation to the powers-that-be, no doubt, but also a quite realistic assessment and, furthermore, perhaps a singular nod toward what remains for painting in the still relatively virgin terrain of site-specificity. It is not surprising that this medium would tend to shun the sort of basic everyday truths that Matisse took for granted as they only seem to get in the way of its self-centered discourse. More than just a low priority, context amounts to a massive blind-spot running right through the history of painting, all the more absent when its topics turn political. This said, it is clear that where paint is concerned, the prospects for a practice of insurgency or resistance have been all but eclipsed, and it is not even in a remotely critical spirit that Appel now takes up the challenge of locating his work. He, too, is a realist in this respect, as immune to the initial utopian thrust of the Bauhaus and Danish Moderne designs that pervade his paintings as are its knock-off retailers at Ikea and Pottery Barn. Dispensing, once and for all, with what Gilbert Durand has termed the “imagination of opposition,” he opens his practice to charges of complicity, yet he does so intentionally. In other words, Appel’s ambivalence is entirely strategic, challenging the viewer to reexamine the question of art’s social purpose within a shifting and contingent, rather than politically polarized system of relations. Ultimately, it is left up to us to decide just what is the difference between a work that is positioned contextually and one that is simply “placed,” as the dealer or the gallerist might say. Or, more to the point, we are asked to account for both forms of disappearance simultaneously.

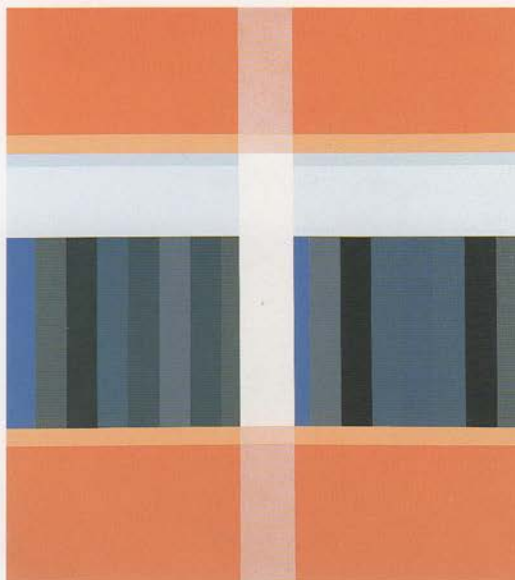
It would be too easy and more than a little redundant to simply reproduce the inventory of objects and styles comprising a collector’s home, for instance, as a sort of social portraiture. Instead, I believe that what interests him here are the more general questions of object relations, of composition and structure—how space is itself articulated through our actions upon it, how it is contained, subdivided, channeled, and filled, and how all these decisions bespeak a particular condition of perception and consciousness, even reality. This is one set of questions, and it is continually being cross-referenced with another, these having more to do with matters of form and medium. Here we may consider the various means by which three-dimensional, architectonic experience may be transposed to a two-dimensional plane: sketches, plans, renderings, photographs, right up to the latest computer-imaging techniques. All of these are here deployed toward a painterly end. The tools and techniques of architecture are invoked in all their specificity—increasingly so, as Appel begins in effect to collaborate with an architectural firm on his most recent project—but also as a kind of metaphor or conceptual screen through which painting may be reacquainted with some of its original concerns and/or fascinations for spatiality and depth.

Just as painting may serve to structure and decorate architecture, so too may architecture serve to structure and decorate painting. In practice, however, this is far from a fluid transaction,



Orange Storage, 1998

48 x 40 inches



and it is instead in the various glitches and translation problems that intrude between these two disciplines that Appel's project emerges. In regard to his newest works, Appel describes the painterly process from start to finish as a kind of "infra-mince" construction—the way that the picture-plane is broken up and compartmentalized, or that the surface is built up from ground (canvas) level in layer upon layer of translucent green pigment, is comparable to how the house there depicted might itself be built. Divided into areas of varying thickness and density, the green washes seem to cover almost the entirety of the available pictorial surface, promoting an impression of overlapping sheets of glass. The object is in this case recognizably a glass house—that much is made immediately apparent. Yet this initial congruence between signifier and signified quickly gives way to a

mediation on difference as one projects the same elements which, in painting, inspire a sense of luxurious coolness onto an actual building where, in the midst of the L.A. summer, they might instead serve to roast its residents alive.

The analogy of the window no longer holds, nor the mirror. These paintings are not faithful to an optically determined reality so much as a conceptual one because what they depict, ultimately, is a decision-making process, ideas being actualized, in both the most rudimentary and sophisticated manner, through our manipulations of living environment and decor. One might question the viability of a *trompe-l'oeil* technique at this late stage in the game. Those airless and petrified visions, that sense of monumental stasis which attends the tradition of architectural painting is precisely what Appel's own works seek to explode, raze, and reconfigure according to a more dynamic and protean scheme. It is finally more by way of abstraction than resemblance that they merge with their referents, a series of spaces that are themselves always caught between concept and concretion. Between the map and the territory, the plan and the building: it is precisely in this intermediate zone that he seeks to reinvest painting with some sort of an authentic—I want to say, autonomous—purpose.



Storage Unit with Magazines, 1997

36 x 30 inches

I think of the series of bookshelf "studies" that Appel began producing in 1996 as a response to Greenberg's idea about literature being the chief enemy of the fine arts. The way that their contents surge up to meet the picture-plane, the painting's literal surface, would seem to negate both narrative and illusionism in one fell swoop, or almost. The book spines are rendered as text-free bands of solid color, the overall effect verging on minimalist pattern, were it not for the occasional inclusion of a disconcerting shadow to spoil this effect of ideal hermetic containment, somewhat like a fissure revealing the medium's counterfeit past. It is in this sense, as well, that these works appear intermediate or transitional. They affect a return "back to the future," an historical revision, but one that is thoroughly mediated by critical theory. Confronting the

modernist high-water mark, the apotheosis of painting according to Greenberg when all the planes of illusion are pushed forward and fused together in a "literal delimitation of flatness," these new works fall into place just a moment before or after, just to the right or left, so as to begin prying the planes back apart. One might label this initiative "deconstruction," except that, again, it is absent of the critical aspirations that tend to come with this territory. Here it is more a question of simply seeing how painting once worked and might work again; an authentic inquiry that replaces the didactic end of the project into the actual hands-on doing of it.

Appel's paintings are haunted by history, though probably no more or less so than is any other part of our present-day experience. His particular aesthetic is well-chosen in this respect, the consistent foregrounding of a streamlined Case-Study chic suggesting both nostalgia and an up-to-the-minute contemporaneity. Time-travel without ever leaving the living room: our temporal coordinates may become scrambled but never to the point of indecipherability, and this is important, as I don't believe Appel is interested in simply adding to the confusion. While it is most probably true that a Julius Shulman photograph of a home from the fifties could be laid over the

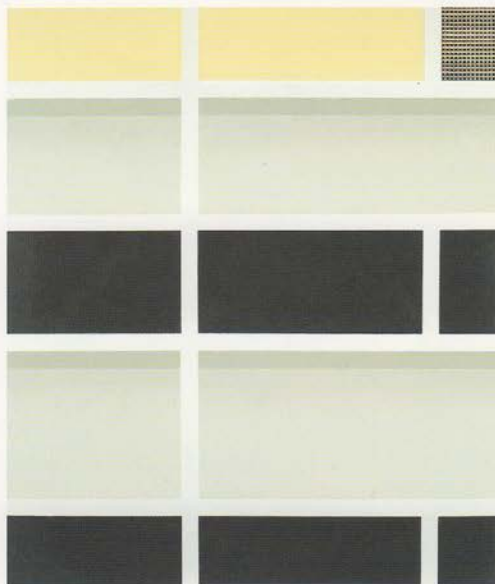


Indoor-Outdoor Living, 1996

82 x 138 ¾ inches

very latest statement in open-plan living with no significant loss of registration, this does not mean that nothing has changed. To the contrary we will find, at the most basic level, that what precedes reproduction in the first instance, follows it in the next. Between the one and the other, our experience of space will itself be impacted. Whether flattened out or perspectively augmented, hyper-realized, or abstracted, these are just the sorts of subtle, in some cases invisible, distinctions that Appel's paintings seek to materialize and grasp.

Only in marketing is a new medium capable of completely supplanting the old. In actuality it is more a process of assimilation, of mutual redefinition and leveling out. Often enough, the old medium will even manage to retain all its original functions, on the condition of performing them more vividly. For instance, the CD did not replace the vinyl disc so much as it enabled us to see, perhaps for the first time, just what it essentially is: an analogue mini-archive of sound. In much the same way has painting been revitalized under pressure from the photograph and now, again, the computer. I began this essay by suggesting that it is only the most perverse kind of painting that competes with technology over control of the representational image, but this is to ignore its strongest asset—namely, that it is always both image and surface. Painting comes with its own built-in thickness, volume, and weight, its own topography and history, and what counts for us here is not how this insistent materiality may be reconciled with its graphic or pictorial components, but how these remain always somewhat apart and inconsistent. By the same token painting cannot be distilled down to one or the other; regardless the degree of one's desire and skill, it cannot be "purified" in this way, because it is always a product of this incompatible mix. It is this very basic truth that Kevin Appel now works to his advantage, with a series of paintings that become



Shelf with Speaker, 1996

36 x 30 inches

increasingly relevant as they confirm and crystalize the suspicion shared by so many of us who live in this city, that what we call reality is itself a negotiation between flatness and depth.