

Kevin Appel BY R. ASHER

Angles Gallery, Santa Monica CA September 8 · October 14, 2006

Over the last 12 years Kevin Appel's inquiry into the connections between architecture and painting has proceeded along two parallel trajectories, one describing the slow and messy dissolution of the structural integrity of the house, the other involving a gradual flattening of the picture plane. With the five large paintings and several supplemental collaged drawings in his sixth solo show at Angles Gallery, the artist stretches these two narrative threads to the breaking point—the strange tree-house structures seen in his *The Unholding Center* (2004) reappear, but just barely. Now they've been reduced to rubble, compacted by the same force of nature that reduced his perspective to one of pure surface.

Appel doesn't like to talk about his work. He'll gladly talk about yours, or Adam Ross's, or the history of painting—but when it comes to his own stuff, he's happy to let it speak for itself. I was only able to extract a brief but telling comment from him during the recent Angles opening. It was in reference to the cartoon pipe with two sad little drips appearing in a couple of the large paintings, and the three little chocolate-brown "waves" flowing down along the "wall" of one of the "houses" that occasionally materialize out of the flotsam and jetsam swirling around their epicenters. I wanted to know if the apparent references to plumbing—bluntly, piss and shit—might signify a dramatic shift in his work, hinting at the very thing always absent from his house paintings, those tell-tale traces of human habitation. But he cut me off before I could finish my spiel. "You know," he said, pausing ever so slightly, "a house is more than just pretty surfaces."

And indeed, his offhand remark bears consideration. In the four main paintings in the west gallery, *Country Home 5*, *Cabin Essence*, *Country*

Home 4 (Bridge) and *Country Home 6 (Grumpy)* (all 2006), one or more barely recognizable thatched-roof tree houses can be seen dissolving into or rising out of an exquisitely rendered, painstakingly detailed trash heap. The resulting piles are made up of shards of wood paneling and floorboards, swatches of textiles, wallpaper and linoleum, some of that tacky contact paper once used to line kitchen drawers, those 1960s Vera bed sheets today found in the back of linen closets, and yes, pipes and plumbing hinting at unseen inhabitants. It is as if some sort of terrible crisis has occurred, or at least the aftermath of one. This would not of course be a material crisis, for Appel's canvases veritably bristle with consummate skill. Nor would it be a crisis of imagination, for these are smart, extremely intricate works, both inside (the painting) and out (the picture). No, the crisis depicted here feels personal, far beneath the surface.

A house *is* made up of more than just pretty surfaces. But those other aspects, those dark and dirty discharges, are supposed to be kept private, internalized, tucked out of sight, masked by drywall and wallpaper and paint, reduced to the made-up or made-over surfaces we allow the world to see. With these new paintings, Appel exposes what is meant to stay hidden. His emblematic house has been turned literally inside out. And the results are stunning. Rarely has demolition looked so gorgeous.

