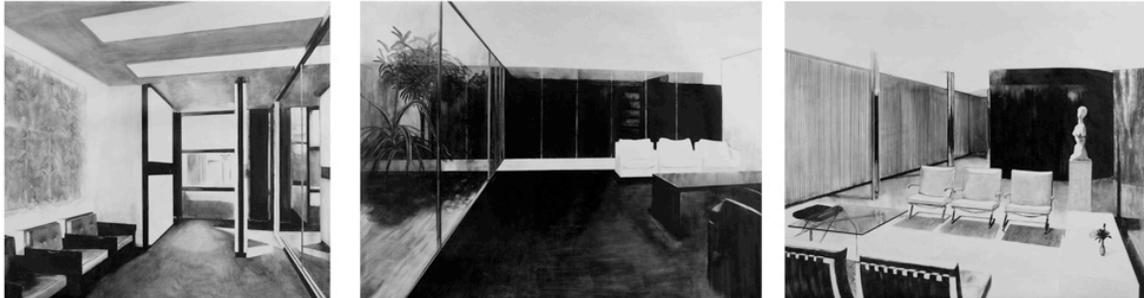


Bauhaus Blues: Rebecca Chamberlain's Dreams of Reason

by Christian Viveros-Fauné



Analyze this: “Architecture is frozen music.” Penned by the German Idealist Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, this phrase rings especially felicitous if we consider Walter Pater’s equally dreamy formulation: “All art constantly aspires to the condition of music.” Expressions of a muggily classicist, even Romantic order, these constructions prove to be as much about aesthetic values as they are about a proto-modernist tidiness. They also turn out to be perfect notes for considering Rebecca Chamberlain’s drawings.

Cast back for a minute to boring old college philosophy. Deep thinkers like Kant, Fichte and Schelling abjured the notion of “things in themselves,” preferring the idea that these things—say, office chairs, signature buildings and architecturally bespoke homes—depend on an individual mind, a perceiving subject, to discover their true properties. Nothing is inherent, these 18th century geezers proposed; despite the seeming solidity of any one thing or its representation, they judged, every little something is drawn from what we make of our experience.

Wooden sticks are Loos chairs, a brick and stucco pile may be a Corbusier building in Paris, sheets of marble can take the form of the Barcelona Pavillion, a Club Med lobby or, in another case, a Futurist-inspired villa in Africa. Why, you ask, bring century-old musty ideas to bear on Chamberlain’s moody drawings? That’s simple: to point out, in part, that her painstakingly ruled monochrome renderings of sleek, buttoned-

up interiors contain loads more than the lifestyle magazine spreads which they superficially resemble.

Practicing what could be called an *overstated realism*, Chamberlain freights her ink drawings of interior spaces with their own conflicted histories and, also, with a looming shadow play of intrigue that veers, by turns, from the philosophical to the hard-boiled. Her latest raft of saturated images, for example—drawn as they are from original photographs directly onto vintage architectural paper—plumbs the unreality of an especially bizarre historical anachronism: the existence of a crumbling modernist city designed by Italian colonials in Asmara, Eritrea.

No ordinary group of interiors, Chamberlain’s drawings of sweeping staircases, deco desk sets and lonely office spaces literally function like a blueprint for the failure of modernist ideals. Contained among the washes of lights and darks of her inks are the irresistible charm of symmetry, the overblown pronouncements of Bauhaus architecture (take Adolf Loos, whose delirious fantasy of progress led him to link “ornament” with “immorality” and “crime”), as well as the moment when the worm turned on this particular utopia: registered here in the anxiety of rectilinear rooms built to contain Il Duce’s fascist treason. Deluxe spaces floating in an association soup that today dredges up Last Year In Marienbad as breezily as it does the TV series *Mad Men*—among other cultural detritus—Chamberlain’s drawn rooms for the blues appear at once drop dead gorgeous and also as the ruins of a botched civilization.

References to film and television are, in point of fact, especially fitting for Chamberlain, as her drawings are confectioned to be, quite precisely, theatrical in the extreme. Part of their charge is that their dream-like scenarios give the consistent impression of arrested action. The idea that somebody is just about to enter the room, that some drama will soon be enacted, haunts her pictures, suggesting mysteries both pedestrian and elegiac. Take her large *Staircase Diptych*, which features two such staircases, one ascending, the other descending. Inspired by and Rogier van der Weyden's *Crucifixion Diptych*, Chamberlain's drawn spaces mimic the movements of a fainting Mary (not so incidentally kitted out in royal blue) and an ascending Jesus, while of course invoking the fundamental narrative of Western Civilization by means of empty rooms—devoid of everything except, of course, directional light and shadow.

Therein lies the nub of Chamberlain's cool, enigmatic and, ultimately, nettlesome work: the fact that she thematizes the subject of architecture in much the same way the Romantics did nature in Ruskin's time. For this artist, plainly, architecture is no mere subject matter; it is, instead, *the fundamental subject* of an unfolding story rich in remote triumphs, tragedies and betrayals. Chamberlain's sleek rooms are for her what mossy headstones were for the English poet John Betjeman: capitalized Architecture, not just "a house, or a single building or a church, or Sir Herbert Baker, or the glass at Chartres, but your surroundings; not a town or a street, but our whole over-populated island."

Synecdoches for an unspooling drama that is at once past but always present by ghostly omission, Rebecca Chamberlain's elegant drawings of stylish empty rooms are skeptical, deliberative and handsomely generous pictures of monuments to human failure. Alive with dashed hopes but literally vacant, they hold a hell of a lot of space for the blues.

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