

Arnold Helbling: Drop City Review

By Sarah Boggio

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From September the 7th to October the 12th, Diane Rosenstein Fine Art Gallery, Los Angeles, will host the exhibition *Arnold Helbling: Drop City*. The solo show of the Swiss artist, based in New York City, presents the paintings of his last series *Architectonics*, and also includes a selection of his previous works, made between 2002 and 2004.

In *Architectonics*, the canvases are traversed by lines of different thickness, whose intersections form grids of irregular polygons. These geometric patterns can be perceived in multiple ways: is it a city map we are looking at, represented from on high, or is it a fragment of reality placed under the lens of a microscope? Both options are left open to interpretation, as well as the hypothesis of a merely mental landscape: in Helbling's view of the world and formal practice, the inseparability of abstraction and figuration is thus confirmed.

If you look closer, the surface of the paintings reveals a thick network of micro-veins and creases, giving the canvas the subtle plastic vigor and sober elegance of silken fabric. This effect is the result of a complex method of applying color, used by the artist only in this series, which requires the acrylic medium to first be painted onto a plastic sheet, and then, once it has dried, to be transferred onto the canvas.

Helbling's previous works on display (such as *Zabriskie 5* and *From the series of places*) derive from images of housing projects on the outskirts of Paris, mostly city houses with multiple floors. These images have undergone a process of synthesis which has dissolved each representational reference: the buildings' architectures have disappeared while what has emerged is a hypothetical place, made of broad and non-continuous brush strokes, drippings and flecks of colors, airbrushed interventions.

Both the controlled geometries of *Architectonics* and the freer abstractions of his previous works rely on Helbling's luminous palette of acid and sanguine colors, the hues of which combine to produce a powerful impact, in celebration of the highest abstract tradition. An explicit homage is paid to Piet Mondrian in the use of blue and yellow for *Victory Boogie Woogie*, and in the title, borrowed from the last, unfinished work of the Dutch abstract master.

The works on display show the enduring interest of the artist in structure – meant as

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the basic layout of both the physical and the mental world. As pointed out by Demetrio Paparoni, they also confirm the closeness of Helbling's painting to Ralph Waldo Emerson's theories. According to this American philosopher, the father of Transcendentalism in the nineteenth century, there is a substantial similarity between the laws of nature and those that regulate the human mind. This is the reason why the imagery of Helbling, as seen in *Drop City*, can be perceived both as a figurative representation of the microscopic and the invisible, and as an abstraction of the macroscopic – the realm of nature as well as the artificial, man-made world – Sarah Boggio