

Binocular City:

Karen Brummund and Carolyn Swiszc

By Christina Schmid

In Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise*, two of the main characters, Murray and Jack, take a road trip to visit the "most photographed barn in America." Busloads of tourists swarm around the building, busy taking pictures and thus creating and confirming the barn's superlative status. Spellbound by the spectacle, Murray proclaims, "no one sees the barn Once you've seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn. . . . We see only what others see. The thousands who were here in the past, those who will come in the future. We've agreed to be part of a collective perception. This literally colors our vision."¹

Unlike Murray, DeLillo's oddball scholar of the invisible streams of cultural production, we typically do not pause to become aware of the tacit agreements our collective perception depends upon; the coloring of our vision itself remains invisible. But this collective perception, along with the manifold ways it shapes our vision, is precisely what the work of Karen Brummund and Carolyn Swiszc explores, suspends, and, at times, interrupts.

The two artists dare us to see something else in the spaces their work represents or occupies—most of them are a little derelict, a little forlorn, and oddly iconic—and thus effectively stage a temporary intervention in the regime of perception that subtly dictates what we, as viewers, see—or, conversely, habitually fail to notice. The exhibition's title, *Binocular City*, points to the distance necessary to view the familiar in unfamiliar ways. Rather than focus on the distant and exotic, these artists zoom in on what is ordinarily overlooked.

Their interest in the mechanics and machinations of our curiously selective collective perception is shared by creative projects such as the Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI). A seventeen year old project, the Center documents how we, as a culture, choose to inhabit, use, and perceive man-

made environments. How do we agree on what is worth noticing? And what do we collectively agree to ignore?² But while the Center's priority lies in documenting the often elaborate frameworks set up to direct our perception, Brummund and Swiszc take a more proactive approach: their work ultimately questions why and how we see what we see, and provides us with opportunities to look again.

Karen Brummund's installations temporarily transform the façade of a building and turn an ordinary structure—a barn, for instance, in *Storm Road* (2008)—into an unfamiliar object: a drawing of the barn, almost to size but from an oblique perspective, is affixed to the wooden surface, covering it in a fluttering grid of letter-sized paper. The building not only serves as the substrate for displaying the drawing but takes on a curious life of its own, transformed from a piece of everyday rural architecture into something un-nameable, an object that resists easy categorizations and tempts us to look closer: beyond what we expected to see—and at those expectations.

Her installations live a double life: the first unfolds before the initial audience who witnesses the transformation of the building on site; the second results from the installation's documentation on video and photographs. More than mere documentation, this "after-life"³ poetically extends the reach of Brummund's work and condenses, accelerates, or arrests the drawing's on-site existence. The three untitled digital prints in *Binocular City* offer a detailed look at the fate of the individual pieces of paper in degrees of increasing intimacy and abstraction, focusing on the minute interactions between the site, the structure, and the ephemeral curling, drifting parts of the drawing. These interactions foreground the contrast between a fleeting intervention that temporarily suspends familiar perception and the seeming permanence of the building.

But Brummund questions this putative permanence of the architectural substrate. In *Before*

1190 Huff Road (2010), a project based in Atlanta, Brummund's drawing represents an old family home that did not survive the industrialization typical of 1950s Atlanta. The drawing, affixed to the façade of a nondescript commercial building that replaced the Huff home, briefly conjures up a different time, when family homes rather than warehouses lined Huff Road. On video, the installation becomes a melancholic apparition in black and white whose short-lived presence serves as a ghostly reminder of urban de- and reconstruction.

Commercial urban spaces also feature prominently in Carolyn Swiszc's works on paper. Mundane strip malls become objects of a sly and often humorous nostalgia which, rather than sentimentalize, captures and amplifies their character. But Swiszc does not simply dwell in nostalgia for the outdated and un-gentrified. In the days and age of online shopping, her interest stems from the sheer unlikeliness of these spaces.

Her pieces function as colorful time capsules of an almost bygone era, which is just not quite gone enough yet to allow for a collective perceptive shift into vintage and retro cool: "If something outdated becomes cool the hundredth time we look at it," Swiszc explains, "I am interested in the ninety-sixth or ninety-seventh time of looking." Despite their emphatically mundane motifs, several of the works on paper share a quasi-hallucinatory, fantastic quality: ordinary scenes unfold under glowing, golden skies, or a background streaked and patterned with vibrant color. Her style has been described as "faux-naïve"—although, clearly, the pieces themselves are "anything but naïve."⁴

Technically, these works on paper combine printmaking, collage-ing, rubberstamping, and painting that, together, create layered, complex surfaces. Conceptually, Swiszc's naïve aesthetic sensibility suggests a way of looking not yet seamlessly aligned with the tacit consensus required of collective perception: Swiszc's work embraces an indelible irreverence and thrives on being at odds with the habitual filters and priorities of a shared vision.

If her work masquerades as child-like, the point is to suggest a point of view not yet absorbed and colored by DeLillo's specter of a collective perception. But more than that, her choice of local motifs not yet swept up in the perceptual logic of vintage chic points to a certain anticipatory quality that asserts itself in the particular circumstances of this exhibition: these works on paper resonate differently in 2011, in the midst of a recession, than when first shown in Boston and New York in 2006.⁵ When Swiszc articulates the dread her pieces evoke as the kind of anxiety on a Sunday night before the start of yet another work week on Monday morning,⁶ in 2011, this dread has given way to an altogether different anxiety: the agonizing realization that, Monday morning no longer signals the beginning of a work week for many Americans.

Swiszc's amalgamated shopping plazas are almost entirely devoid of human figures—and full of small promises of escape. In *Four Color Fantasies*, two silhouetted figures load a station wagon underneath a golden sky, as if packing up at the end of a long day that might as well be the end of an era. Only a giant striped balloon, tethered to the ground and promoting a sale, offers some colorful relief in the drab environment, as does the sign for *Four Color Fantasies*. In *Sherwin Williams*, a small burst of color in the corner of the *Movieland's* store window reminds us of the fantasies available for rent. The colors reflect on the damp pavement, streak across the sky, and re-appear on the *Sherwin Williams* sign, where a can of red drips over a globe, painting the world, not just the town, red.

But hyperbole aside, these small promises of better things to come seem feeble, sincere, and a little sad. In *Binocular City*, parakeets for sale at *Birds'n Stuff* promise a flutter of the exotic, while the binocular store next door appeals to the desire to look at—not travel to—faraway places. Nostalgia meets melancholy here, affection dread. Playful resistance to prefabricated ways of looking mixes with a laconic sense of futility. But this very