

## Ebb and Optimism

The crumbling homes, vacant garages and stark, stagnant skylines of Felix Malnig's oeuvre are sourced from all over: Chicago, China, Vienna, Tibet, New York. Malnig renders his structures, from the derelict to the extant and the newly built, with the same loose but sure hand.

Abandoned two-story houses sport gaping holes and collapsing gutters, while washy planes of the outer walls blend with a greying sky—mass and atmosphere one indistinct entity. Deserted checkpoints of the former iron curtain are reduced to collections of monochromatic rectangles, floating within a murky ground. Even the artist's subjects of builders and cranes in the midst of construction are depicted as tenuous. Resonating most thoroughly from Malnig's series of manmade structures is a sense of idle futility, and nowhere is this more obvious and poignant than in the artist's representations of Detroit.

While to the eye, much of the architecture in Malnig's paintings are of an anonymous, ubiquitous type, examples from Detroit are glaring in their specificity. Though Malnig doesn't pass up the opportunity to engage with the infamous blight of the city (there are eight works in this volume of deserted homes; in Malnig's hands they're stylized and poignant), he hones in on two of the most widely reproduced and disseminated symbols of Motor City toughness: The *Monument to Joe Louis* fist sculpture and the erect, cylindrical General Motors Renaissance Center Towers. Here, the gleaming Renaissance Center towers are depicted repeatedly, and from afar. Punctuating the seemingly picturesque cityscape in *Skyline (Detroit)*, the towers are grand, appearing much as they do on postcards and in travel ads. Similarly, in *Joe Louis (Detroit)* the "Fist" is t-shirt-worthy, with Malnig underscoring the sculpture's machismo. However, within the context of his oeuvre, it's clear that it's not these images' intended strength and optimism that engages the artist, but the deflated vision that their presence in the struggling city has come to represent.

Inactivity permeates the works in this catalog, even those few scenes in which figures are present. In works like *Building Site*, shadowy, faceless men look out upon a construction site of towering cranes. Though clearly the structure is in process, what Malnig has captured is no scene of flurried activity or industriousness. Instead, the figures linger passively at the edge of the scene while the machinery remains frozen and unmanned. *Concrete* features a pair of workers preparing for a pour in what the palette suggests could be an early morning hour. Rather than a scene that emphasizes that on which the men are creating and laboring, what reigns in this picture is the emptiness that surrounds them.

Strangely enough, the most lively of Malnig's pictures are actually those featuring the structures that have been devoid of human engagement the longest—and again, the most striking examples contain imagery of Detroit and other southeast Michigan towns. In *Derelict Factory (Detroit)*, an acid green light pours from pane-less windows into a room that has long been scavenged of any object with even the slightest suspicion of value. The natural, outdoor light bounces throughout the vacant space, reflecting off the glassy surface of a huge puddle of stagnant water. *Derelict House (Detroit)*, as the title suggests, features a crumbling two-story; with windows and doors long gone and a collapsing roof, the structure is practically skeletal as

the daylight shines through its gaping holes. Unique in this work on paper is the animated, gestural quality of Malnig's hand in rendering the surrounding plant life. The overgrown yard undulates while painterly splatters and blotches fly through the air as though swept up in a swirling wind. The flora around the static building seems as if it is overtaking the structure, reinforcing the notion of nature's resilience over the manmade.

Though pessimism and loss factor greatly in the work of Malnig, his oeuvre is no mere exercise in the allure of despair. The artist's structures are often fallen, yes, invariably unoccupied and abandoned; however, significantly, they are not gone. If one can again take the presence of Detroit in Malnig's works as a case-in-point regarding contemporary urban decline, so then can one surmise that the glimmers of optimism in that city—the recent Grand Bargain resolving its bankruptcy, the small but significant growth in businesses, real estate and creative communities—might well apply to Malnig's narrative, too. In several pieces, the artist pictures (albeit with a fragile touch) the '60s-era Mies van der Rohe and Ludwig Hilbersheimer high-rises in Lafayette Park, a residential section of town that has managed to avoid the dire situation to which the rest of the city is subject, and still retain some of the urban renewal vision of their architects. However, much of Malnig's structures, like the derelict home series, are indeed on their way to certain ruin, but inherent in them too is the possibility of rebuilding in their place and reimagining what could be. There remains the potential for things to be different and better the next time around.

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