

Letter from Vermont (excerpt)

Catalogue Text by Lori Waxman

For the group exhibition On paper, Gahlberg Gallery, Glen Ellyn, Chicago, 2009

Curated by Barbara Wiesen

Artists:

Felix Malnig
Robyn O'Neil
Melissa Oresky
Claire Sherman

Yesterday we had lunch down in the village, at Jamie's sandwich shop on Main Street, where they make the best chicken salad sandwiches. The village is classic New England: white clapboard church with a steeple you can see for miles, steep-roofed houses with wide front porches and painted wood trim, a couple of basic shops and cafés, an inn, the town hall. Everything's within walking distance of everything else, and there are always people about—the very opposite of the kind of places pictured in Felix Malnig's paintings. No one seems to live in any of the houses he depicts, be they in Flint or Gumpoldskirchen, nor the apartment complexes, in Jerusalem or Chengdu. And the difference can't be laid solely at the door of architecture—Vermont village homes may look nothing like faceless concrete high-rises, but they don't look so unlike single-family suburban dwellings, with their covered porches and gabled roofs. No, the difference goes deeper than stylistic, to the level of urban planning, of geopolitics, and their quotidian spiritual results. The homes in Michigan may once have been full of life, but their owners lost out on that dream when General Motors closed the local plant and laid off thousands of workers, who in turn had no choice but to leave their comfortable shelters behind, to grow dark and derelict. Those in the suburbs of Vienna have met no such financial fate; no, theirs is sealed by the car-centric life of highways and traffic that living outside a city entails. The comfort or lack thereof of apartment blocks raised on the outskirts of Jerusalem and in the West Bank is irrelevant: these are dwellings built on the offensive, less to meet the needs of homemakers than of national security and the Zionist project. Those in China reveal none of the promise of living in the sky, in a flourishing zone of economic growth; their faceless, unfinished facades loom forebodingly, perhaps never to be finished now that the world markets have crashed. Malnig conveys the effect of these situations through paintings of an almost ironic beauty, with thin washes of magenta and sapphire, razor sharp edges, and tearful drips, punctured by windows and unfinished window banks of bottomless black, haunting holes that would suck the soul out of anyone who happened nearby, or already did.