

American Arts

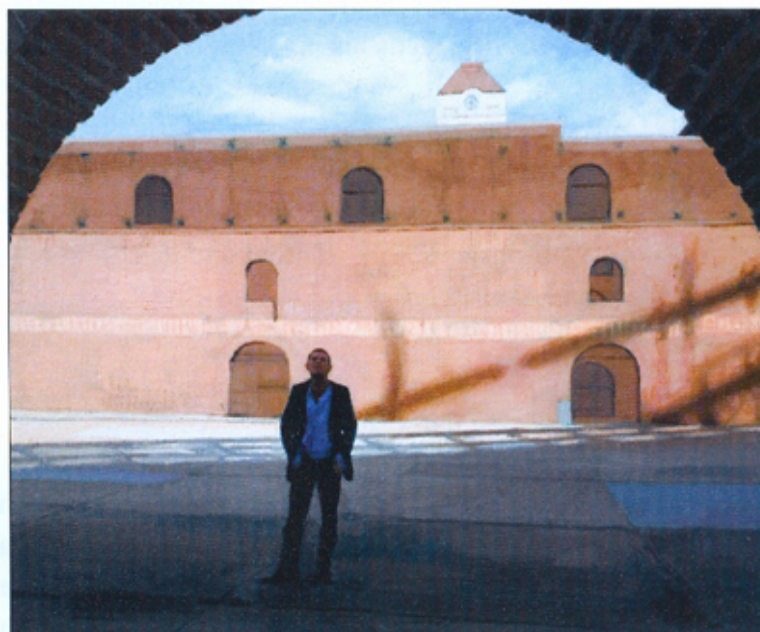
Q U A R T E R L Y

Winter 2009

Laura Karetzky

Narrative painting, that mainstay of the Victorians, emulated the novel, just as the grander genre of history painting aspired to epic poetry. Narrative was one of the things modernism claimed to have jettisoned. Yet it kept cropping up throughout the twentieth century, in, for example, Jacob Lawrence's social-history sequences and Edward Hopper's noirish scenes of urban ennui. Film, which tells a story visually, provides a model for contemporary artists interested in this tradition. Laura Karetzky's oil-on-linen paintings, at Lora Schlesinger Gallery in Santa Monica, California, in autumn 2008, were effectively cinematic. The lone protagonist in the enigmatic situation pictured across a number of paintings—there is no tidy story arc here—could be sinister or vulnerable. What matters is the way the figure, a slightly scruffy young man with a sketchy, hard-to-read face, relates visually to his surroundings.

The set for the sequence is a courtyard. In most of the paintings, the backdrop is a dusty-rose-toned façade with round-arched windows and doors, and closed wooden shutters. The criss-cross shadows of an industrial bridge fall across the empty middle distance. The space has an eerie resonance, like Giorgio de Chirico's piazzas or the street outside Jack Nicholson's room in the magnificent final tracking shot of Michelangelo Antonioni's 1975 film *The Passenger*. Karetzky's protagonist appears center stage in *Rock, Paper, Scissors, Swords* (all works 2008). She describes him as a "trapped, haunted, lone



Laura Karetzky
*Rock, Paper, Scissors,
Swords*, 2008

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persona, evoking paranoia and distrust.” She compares the setting to a prison yard, but the scenario remains unclear, and the ambiguity is fruitful. The images stubbornly resist sliding into illustration mode. The courtyard becomes an arena in *Matador*, where the protagonist thrusts out a fistful of dry branches in a ritualized gesture. The sharp lines of the branches, silhouetted against the sunlit space, are starkly graphic. In the more playful *El Toro*, the figure holds the branches up to his head, like antlers. Here, we see the setting from another angle: a cityscape can be glimpsed through a wall of arched apertures. It’s a less metaphysical, more mundane view, one that suits the larkiness of the action. Karetzky plays with the notion of an existential thriller, sometimes underlining the drama. The title of *Sniper* suggests menace, yet the figure struggling into his jacket in the foreground is, in visual terms, primarily an anchor for the smoky curves of a stone arch and the shadows cast by the industrial bridge. Most of the light is spread across the back wall.

Reading paintings in this way is great fun, and a good deal more in the way of psychological and cultural implications could be teased out of Karetzky’s images. But her primary strength is visual. Her placement of the figure in illusionistic space is both convincing and astute. The way she paints light is sensuous, a pleasure in itself, but she also uses light as a compositional element. There is no figure in *2 Steps Forward, 1 Step Back*, yet the courtyard remains a dramatic space. She emphasizes the geometry of the architecture by showing us more of the industrial bridge, which cuts across and provides a top-piece to the man-made structures framing the light-filled space at the heart of the picture. In *When You Wake Up*, the same space is enveloped in blue shadows: we have a sense of anticipation, as if the curtain had gone up but the actors had not yet appeared. Other, less theatrical spaces don’t seem to inspire Karetzky. The tractor rolling through paint-dirt in the excavation-site scene *Rock Bottom* has none of the mystery and finesse she brings to her courtyard paintings. The submerged storyline feeds her imagination with pictorial energy. The title of the exhibition, “AWOL,” both alludes to the military term Absence without Leave and suggests a wall. That she finds formally exciting ways to explore this theme is a promising development for contemporary narrative painting. Lora Schlesinger Gallery, Bergamot Station, 2525 Michigan Avenue, T3, Santa Monica, California 90404. Telephone (310) 828-1133. On the web at www.loraschlesinger.com