



Greta Van Campen: *Red Square*, 2014. Acrylic on panel, 12" square.

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## *Two Exhibitions*

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BY TERRINGTON CALAS

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JOHN ALEXANDER  
*Recent Paintings and Drawings*  
Arthur Roger Gallery

CONSTRUCTING WORLDS:  
INTERSECTIONS OF ART AND ARCHITECTURE  
Octavia Art Gallery  
New Orleans, LA

IT'S HARD NOT to be intrigued by John Alexander's paintings. He submits nature as a dark beauty – detailed, meticulous, but also as something solemn. His view charges us to luxuriate in the treasure we take for granted and to do so while we can. He

speaks of a “glimpse of paradise before the wrecking ball hits.” In a sense, this is his re-issue of the famous Melville query, “Are the green fields gone?” In these new pieces at Arthur Roger, one takes his point. And despite an enveloping ominous tone, he actually re-asserts natural splendor. For a moment, that wrecking ball is inconceivable.

Formally, Alexander renders that splendor with his most obvious asset: a Manet-like painterliness. It's a fluent style with few equals today. And it is what I have long admired in his work. But he is also a shrewdly intelligent colorist. You see here an uncommon grasp of the potency of restrained color. Umbered greys and muddied ochres, as in *The Twilight Zone*, have never looked so seductive. In certain instances, he marries his muted palette to a singular brand of pictorial structure. Fra Angelico's Garden is a rigorously disposed image in which small birds — all rich-



John Alexander: *Flying Solo*, 2018. Oil on canvas, 20.25 inches high.

ly-hued crimsons and blues — flutter among dusky-green palm fronds. What struck me first was the assertive frontality of the composition. It approaches a façade-like flatness. That grabs the eye. Then, as I say, there is the painting's rigor, or, rather, its veiled rigor. Initially, the scene feels natural, as if caught in a snapshot. But every bird and leaf is part of a careful, barely-amiss pattern. Somehow, Alexander has managed the guise of liberated nature within a format of impeccable balance. The tension he achieves with this is an arresting pleasure. He repeats it again and again. Witness the rhythmic weaving of pale blossoms in *Voodoo Blues* — once more a flattened near-pattern, once more the tense beauty. With such works, Alexander obviously attempts to hold onto that “glimpse of paradise.” And yet, despite their appeal, these pic-

tures bear no relation to the calendar exquisiteness of conventional nature painting. The artist betrays his deeper concern. And that concern feels complex. The solemnity I noted above indeed pervades this exhibition. It does so by way of low tones and formal disquiet. The result registers as something like the sublime, but perhaps a variant of it — a sublime that might include a measure of poignancy. Works like *The Twilight Zone* and *Flying Solo* reveal Alexander's awe, but also a somber reverence.

IN “CONSTRUCTING WORLDS,” at Octavia, Greta Van Campen's *Kansas, Stop in Colby* has the iconic force of a William Christenberry photograph. It's a tiny building façade that signifies a



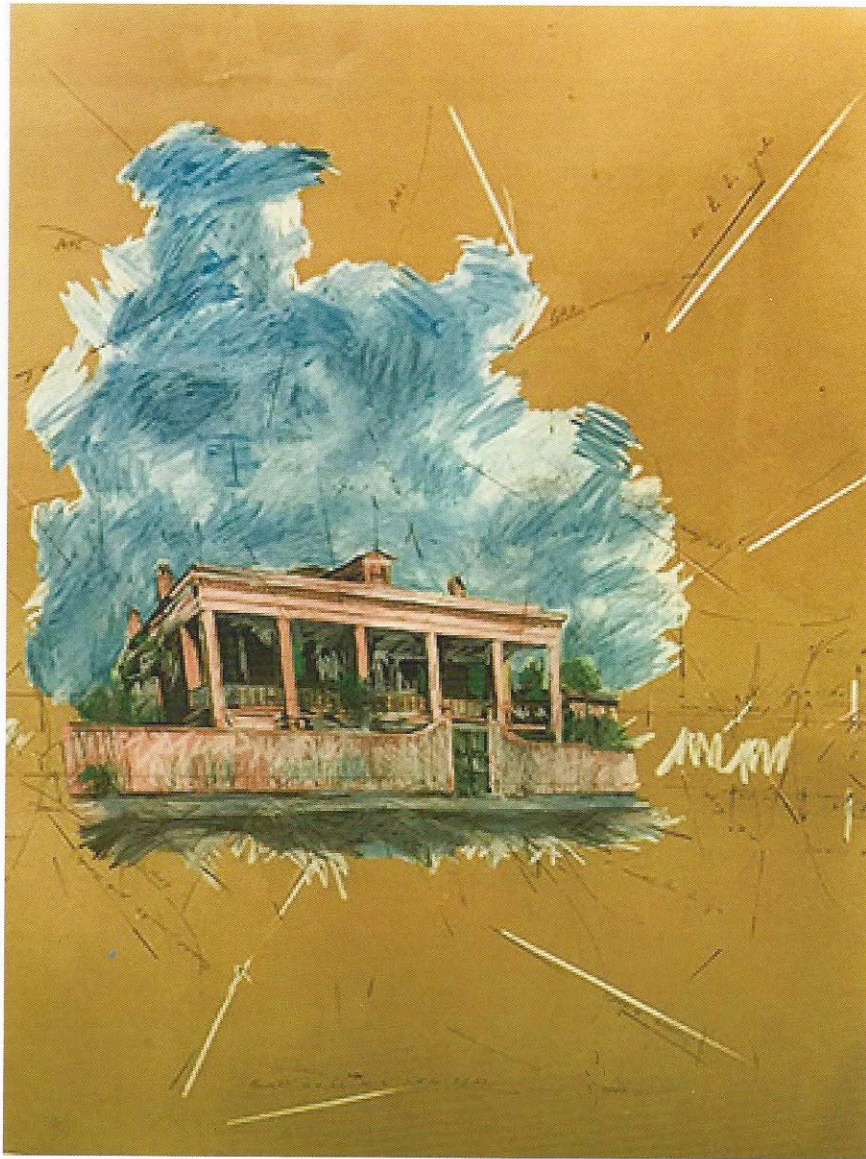
Pierre Bergian: *The Irish Country House*, 2018. Oil on panel, 20.5 inches high.

distinctive culture – in this instance, a culture seeking to blend vernacular architecture with modernism. But this is Van Campen’s most severe work on display here. She mostly has gems. Her *Connecticut*, *Yale University*, *Purple Morning*, and, most notably, *Red Square* are rigor-braced architecture paintings mitigated by unusual broken color and the mysterious poetry of shadows. And her *Moon Over the Neighbor’s Barn* is itself a dark poem cloaked in Magritte-like surrealist overtones.

This exhibition, as the gallery release states it, “focuses on the relationship between architecture and fine art,” noting that artists “utilize the medium not just to document the built world, but also to reveal wider truths.” It features works by Belgian artist Pierre Bergian, New York-based Jeff Goldenberg, New Orleanian Grover Mouton, and Van Campen of Maine.

Of particular interest are Bergian and Mouton, who offer images of architecture to different ends. Bergian’s work is deceptive. It appears, at first, to focus on decaying, once-opulent interiors. Such a subject immediately invites comment regarding the aesthetic problem of “ascribed value” — the notion that art

is sometimes defeated by its subject, especially if that subject is quaint, or sentimental. (Here in the South, faded antebellum mansions and old barns are the usual offenders.) But Bergian is possessed of a masterly, insouciant technique. You have the sense of a very up-to-date Franz Hals. In fact, his brushwork seizes your notice quite as much as his subject. Thus, upon closer viewing, it seems probable that these rooms are not so much in decline as they are recast by the artist. His brush roughens them – in effect, romanticizes them. Noble pilasters are now fiercely blurred, doorframes staggered, tall verticals offhandedly curved. And all of this results in a sort of “picturesque” room portraiture. Genuinely appealing, but it delays the essential thrust. Bergian’s rooms are empty. Empty, apart from an occasional piece of furniture, and, strikingly, large abstract paintings on almost every wall. A number of Rothkos are implied. They add considerably to the romanticizing. But what matters, finally, is the cogency of grand spaces, lushly depicted — with an air of finality — and yet empty. There is an intimation of heady human lives impeded or heady ambition unfulfilled. At best, as in *The Irish Country House*, the canvas-



Grover Mouton: *New Orleans House in Space*, 1986. Collage, graphite, colored pencil, 30" high.

es radiate a crushing melancholy not unlike that in those rare vacant-room images by Edward Hopper. Bergian's implied luxury intensifies the feeling. So does his suavely unkempt technique. Somehow, in consequence, our own fundamental isolation seems underscored.

Mouton's works here are also governed by technique, but it is technique in the service of something entirely different: his long-standing, visionary design concepts. In spite of this, his architecture-in-space drawings enthrall for other reasons. Among them: an unmistakable surrealist quality. *New Orleans House in Space* and *Pass Christian, MS in Space* are magical images. Again, Hopper might be invoked, but not for his tenor of isolation. One thinks immediately of those aloof New England houses — towering, monumental, and rendered with an intensity taken to the point strangeness. In Mouton's work, you feel something of this too, but the result is even more enigmatic. Whereas Hopper worked within an essential realism, albeit a heightened one, Mouton offers the uncanny. This clearly has to do with his space-bounding specula-

tion — something he suggests by myriad jottings and directional notations and, signally, by a sense of hovering. This is key to the surrealist tone. What you see is a prepossessing building hovering in a limitless expanse. Placement and negative space, in these drawings, are everything. They not only declare an ethereal context; they exalt the subject. These houses assume a transcendent aspect.

The mood is furthered by color. (Mouton's easy adroitness with colored pencil is truly revealed here. The technique is essentially a breezy, yet somehow marshaled, lashing of strokes.) In this instance, color is a question of clarion passages — jolts really — within otherwise monochrome schemes. In the New Orleans piece, the building is canopied by a light, translucent cerulean; in the Pass Christian piece, a fiery cobalt. More than denoting sky, these passages confer an otherworldly airiness. What might have been prosaic, black and white images — mere documents — are now strange and riveting spectacles. □