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Sarah McKenzie
Transitional
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Foreword

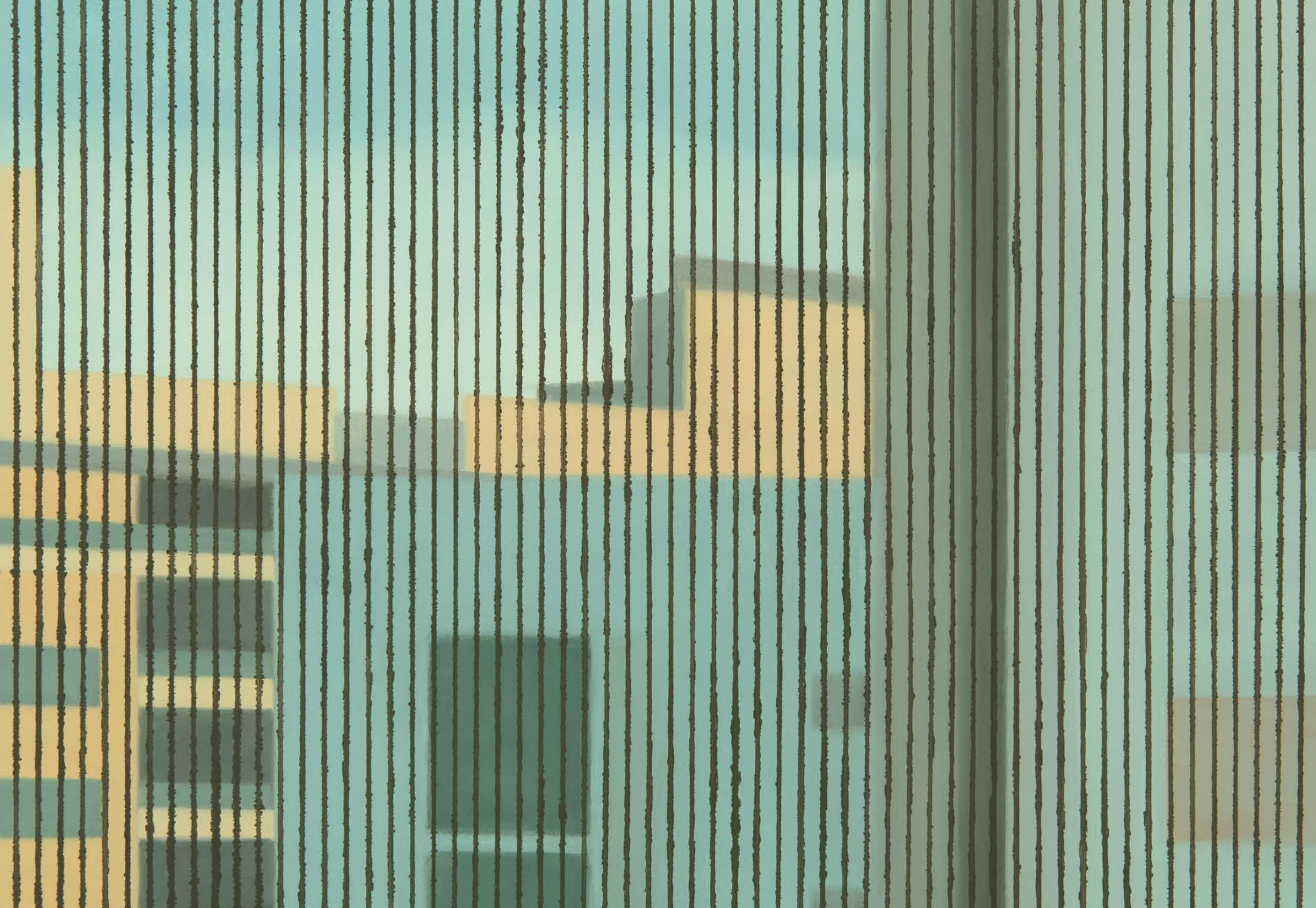
Nora Burnett Abrams
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Sarah McKenzie’s paintings in *Transitional* depict various architectural sites—private homes, an abandoned factory, a parking garage—many of which seem to be in flux. While the interior spaces of the home reveal the construction process, the paintings of the Gates Rubber factory present a building falling into ruins. McKenzie often depicts spaces of use, but there are never any figures that populate her scenes. This does not mean, however, that her paintings are without a human presence. On the contrary, they teem with details of human use and intervention. Cracked windows, a coil of yellow cord and an opened window shade—these are all the result of human activity. McKenzie’s subject oftentimes seems to be the effects of how we create and occupy the spaces that shelter and protect us. She scrutinizes how we build them up and how we tear them down or abandon them. In this sense, her works make clear that all buildings are continually in a process of transition.

McKenzie does not *just* address architecture. What makes her paintings so gripping is that they hover

between physical documentation of a site and an exploration of pure visual forms. That is to say, she translates these three-dimensional structures into flat images of shapes, lines, and grids. McKenzie’s works are compelling for how they force us to think about *how* images are constructed or composed.

The windows and door frames of her paintings become a metaphor for the traditional notion that a painting should be a window onto another (better) world. However, McKenzie flips this notion on its head. She shows us the very spaces we inhabit everyday, and she shows how decidedly unglamorous they are. Her paintings captivate with their eerie familiarity and for the striking precision with which they are rendered. Taken together, McKenzie’s recent body of work elegantly balances the rigor of a geometrical composition with a profoundly affecting take on the architecture of contemporary life. To bring those two poles together in a way that forces a reflection on how such spaces are used—and to do so in such a visually compelling manner—is no small achievement.



Essay



Sarah McKenzie

Kyle MacMillan

Seemingly set on a reductivist course to nothingness by Minimalism in the 1970s and challenged by the rise of new technologies and artistic modes of expression, painting has been repeatedly declared outmoded, irrelevant and even dead for decades. But the medium has not only not died, it has flourished as new generations of artists from Christopher Wool to Julie Mehretu to Claire Sherman have found exciting, fresh ways to reinvent what painting is and what it can be. In this post-modern or perhaps even post-post-modern time, painters are reaching across time and geography, mixing once-segregated styles and techniques, injecting conceptualist ideas and approaches and embracing technology as not an enemy but an ally.

Making a noteworthy contribution to this rejuvenation of the centuries-old medium is Sarah McKenzie, who has been among the most compelling painters in Colorado since the Connecticut native first arrived in 1999 after earning a Master of Fine Arts degree at the University of Michigan. (She later left to teach at the Cleveland Institute of Art from 2001-2006 but returned

soon afterward.) The 42-year-old Boulder artist has made an imprint on the regional scene in shows such as *Continental Drift*, which was jointly organized by the Aspen Art Museum and Museum of Contemporary Art Denver in 2012, and she is gaining a national reputation as well. In 2011, *Modern Painters* magazine listed her as one of “100 Artists to Watch” and the following year, the Joan Mitchell Foundation awarded her a \$25,000 Painters and Sculptors Grant.

Transitional, which features ten of McKenzie’s paintings from 2008-2014, shows not only the recent evolution of her work and where it is headed, but also offers ample evidence of both her conceptual depth and technical skill. In these paintings, which depict unprepossessing places such as claustrophobic entryways, construction sites and shrouded windows, she explores ideas of evolution and impermanence and delves into the very essence of putting brush to canvas, skewing perspective, amplifying colors and blurring abstraction and realism. Though they often portray public buildings, these works are devoid of people and seem



Gallery view of Sarah McKenzie, *Transitional*, March 14 - April 12, 2014 at David B. Smith Gallery, Denver, with (from left to right) *Frieze*, 2014; *Egress*, *Tunnel*, and *Well*, 2013; *Interior 1*, 2008; *Gates Factory Window #5 (Long Grid with Pole)* and *Gates Factory Window #6 (Grid with Three Panels)*, 2012.

like private, isolated realms that feel simultaneously unreal and real—a pictorial ambiguity that gives them an emotional charge and a contemporary relevancy.

From McKenzie's early exploration of far-flung suburban subdivisions to her newfound interest in the tents and other temporary structures that house art fairs such as *Frieze* London (*Frieze*, 2014), architecture has been in one way or another the subject of all her work. Her mother is a land-use planner, and already by age 8, McKenzie wanted to be an architect when she grew up. While she never followed that career path, McKenzie has nonetheless always been conscious of the built environment and its impact on the surrounding world. While she claims as influences other contemporary artists like Leipzig New School painter Matthias

Weischer and photographer Andreas Gursky, who are both centered on architecture as well, her paintings have gone in their own original and distinctive direction. Rather than grand edifices, McKenzie zeroes in on the ordinary and generic, and instead of static, functioning structures, she is more interested in ones that are still being built or have fallen into disrepair. Thus, in 2005 she began a series of paintings of construction sites, such as *Interior 1* (2008) and *Egress* (2013), where she focuses as much on the dangling wiring, stained floors, trash piles and crumpled drop cloths as the structural geometry of the spaces. She captures a moment in time, an inevitably messy workplace that is never the same from one day to the next. In 2012, she completed six paintings, two of which are included here, depicting broken and covered-over windows in buildings of the

old Gates manufacturing plant in Denver that is being razed for a high-profile, urban redevelopment. For her, architecture is not solid and permanent, but fleeting and transitory, hence the exhibition's title. It is a place where order and disorder collide, and constant change is inevitable.

Offering another aspect of this notion of architectural transition are some of McKenzie's recent paintings about looking through windows or down corridors at something visible in the distant background. In *Scrim* (2011), the viewer is forced to look through a textured translucent curtain at anonymous high-rises in the back. The focus of the painting is not that background scene, but in fact this intervening, in a sense transitional, space that mediates the viewer's gaze from the front

to the back of the composition. Much the same is true in *View* (2011), a kind of trompe l'oeil image, in which only after a few seconds does it become apparent that the subject of the painting is actually a window that is partly blocked by a curtain and partly reveals a line of windows in a building beyond.

While architecture and its contextual dynamics provide an intellectual foundation for McKenzie's paintings, they also provide a formal pathway into their very composition and construction, with representation sometimes sliding into abstraction. Structural supports and gridded facades transform into compositional geometries (*Gates Factory Window #5 (Long Grid with Pole)*, 2012), windows and corridors provide ways to compress the depth of compositions (*View*, 2011) and

a ribbed scrim becomes a vehicle to tantalizing texture and transparency (*Scrim*, 2011). Along the way, McKenzie sets areas of light washes against sections of hard-edged, opaque paint and matte finishes against glossy applications of color.

Nowhere is this more technical virtuosity more evident than in *Tunnel* (2013), in which the viewer gets an almost vertiginous rush by being thrust into the flattened perspective via a sharply receding hallway. Visual treats abound—the painterly modulations of gray on the left wall, the delicate washes of color on the ceiling and an amazing impressionistic garden scene in the seemingly distant background. Another example can be found in *Well* (2013), where McKenzie borrows a page from the Old Masters, who often used the folds and ornamentation on dresses or robes as showpieces of painterly skill. In this case, McKenzie does the same with a billowy drop cloth hanging in a stairwell. And not be overlooked is *Gates Factory Window #5 (Long Grid with Pole)* (2012), in which the wall surfaces around the window are subtly stained with a thinned wash that McKenzie allowed to drip, emulating the effects of rain on the concrete. She evoked the hints of rust on the window frames by using a palette knife to scrape flecks of rusty brown color onto the gray.

While never beholden to it, McKenzie is not afraid to draw on mid-20th century modernism, sometimes even making conscious or unconscious homages to artists of that period, such as black-on-black master Ad Reinhardt, in a work titled *Black Box* (2010). In this show, it is impossible to look at the brown-and-blue stripes in *Interior 1* (2008) without thinking of the geometric canvases of Gene Davis. Even more dramatic are the haunting echoes of late Mark Rothko in *Gates Factory Window #6 (Grid with Three Panels)* (2012), a work that is both an ode to a modernist master and to the fading modernist architecture it depicts. This sumptuous painting is a four-section grid, each with an identical window that comes off as a kind of framed painting of its own. The one on the upper right is a fetching field of monochromatic blue, while the bottom two can be seen

as Rothko-like color field paintings, each with a fluffy charcoal gray patch of color seemingly floating over a light gray backdrop. The final coup de maître is a tiny red rectangle in the lower center that vividly sets off the rest of the painting—a touch reminiscent of French landscape painter Camille Corot, who was famous for his touches of red.

This exhibition comes at a pivotal moment for this up-and-coming Boulder artist, when she has the momentum of her recent honors and accomplishments behind her and this strong body of new work to propel her to the next level. While these paintings of easily ignored architectural realms have a complex intellectual dimension and an undeniable contemporaneity, they are, perhaps most importantly, visual pleasures, with their sensuous push-pull of tantalizing surfaces, fluctuating perspectives and shifting geometries. In short, McKenzie makes clear that painting is anything but dead.

Kyle MacMillan served as the fine arts critic for the Denver Post from 2000 through 2011 and has written for such publications as Artforum, ARTnews, Public Art Review and Sculpture. He is currently based in Chicago, where he freelances regularly for the Chicago Sun-Times and Wall Street Journal and serves as a corresponding editor for Art in America magazine. MacMillan was also a major contributor to the catalogue that accompanied Nick Cave: Sojourn, a large-scale exhibition that was on view in 2013 at the Denver Art Museum.

Gates Factory Window #6 (Grid with Three Panels)(detail), 2012



In Closing

Kim Dickey

There is a constructed-ness about the urban landscape that we grow so accustomed to that we neglect to observe its boxing effects. I often felt, when I was living in New York City for 13 years during my early career, that I was inside even when I was outdoors. Sarah McKenzie draws our attention to the interiority of the urban, and inhabits the abandoned, or yet to be completed, industrial sites that make up our contemporary cities. She is able to find beauty and order in its seeming chaos, and poetry in its reductive architectural language. Windows, whether dirty, broken or missing, function as entrances to the souls of these spaces, while suggesting a route for our escape. Corners, basements, tents, parking structures are no longer seen in their brutalist utility or obsolescence but revealed to us as metaphysical and archetypal.

McKenzie achieves this through her keenly observed compositions, her rich palette that rewards us with unsuspected gifts of bold color, and through her sensitivity to the changing light of the landscape as captured in moments of twilight, late afternoon, or the brilliant flat light of midday. Additionally, McKenzie constructs these sites with paint, building her surfaces through impasto or glazing techniques to match the tactile sensation of the landscapes she observes. The physical nature of these paintings comes to life before us, and celebrates what great painting can do—locate us in their space, and invite us into these transitional spaces to revel in their close material lushness, and their psychological power.

Painting here and now in Colorado, Sarah McKenzie brings an attention to the way this landscape, long understood in terms of the western panorama, could now be seen in its more recent urban development. In our rush to meet the economic demands of contemporary society—this later day “gold-rush”—we may leave behind the hurried architecture and unfinished project of another vanished boom time.

The philosopher Gaston Bachelard, in his famous text, *The Poetics of Space*, describes the power of images that are burned in our psyches, stating, “A house” (here one could insert any building) “constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability.”¹

Kim Dickey is an artist and professor at the University of Colorado Boulder. She has exhibited in Australia, Denmark, Germany, Japan, Korea, Sweden, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and in the United States at MASS MoCA, Everson Museum of Art, the American Craft Museum (now MAD), and the MCA Denver, among other venues.

1. Bachelard, Gaston, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 17.

