Visualizing History and Imaging the Future

Nick Birnie, Drawing
BFA 2021 Candidate

https://www.nickbirnie.com/
Statement

I perform visual “archaeological digs” that through distortion of real buildings highlight the history of the built landscape. These can take the form of “core samples” and drawings of reimagined buildings that simultaneously reveal multiple moments from their history. Buckminster Fuller writes, “Life affects the land, and the land affects life.” When I drive around cities I see a variety of different styles of buildings on the same streets. Often I can see evidence of how people have lived left on the buildings, these include moments like stains outlining stairs that have been removed leading to a concrete wall that once was a doorframe. I am always curious about how these scenarios came to be. In my work I create illusionistic spaces that explore the transitions of the metropolitan landscape.

Using watercolor and gouache, I represent familiar spaces, like high rise apartments and office buildings, morphing and unexpectedly realigning their exteriors. By breaking down the facade of what was initially a predictable illusionistic depiction, these moments of warping and overwriting imply the various histories that have existed in a given space. Viewers are invited to visually explore this uncharted, destabilized realm, cemented with a sense of what is comprehensible. Together, the drawings include a variety of architectural facades of the built environment; facades that sometimes mask the history of the buildings depicted. Inspired by the real built environment, the final surfaces and marks in these drawings and the illustrative representation of the buildings mask my complex and layered decision making process in each drawing.
I am influenced by art historical uses of grids and windows, and the philosophies developed from their use. In my work, the grid functions as an organizational tool and a perspectival one. By depicting the “core samples” over a gridded background it is implied that the “sample” is an object of study. Historically the grid is used to organize cities, and in the realm of art history the perspectival grid calls attention to the creation of illusionistic space in paintings and drawings. Additionally, grids refer to concepts of infinite space; implying space continues beyond the edges of an artwork, further emphasizing the creation of space. I use open compositions to create windows for the viewer onto the “dig sites” and periods of architectural points of transition. I draft my drawings by using an architectural scale ruler, referencing a traditional approach to architectural illustration. Drafting and beginning my drawings in a half-inch equals a foot scale creates a believable scale of the buildings I depict, suggesting the buildings I depict could actually exist. This scale also establishes a realistic eye-level for the viewer within the depicted space. Through this first-person point-of-view, the viewer may experience a sensation of simultaneity of divergent historical periods. This sensation can be intensified by taking a step back from a single drawing, seeing all of the work in the series together in the same space revealing even more points of transition.

Through my depictions of architectural overlap, erasure, and facade I imagine a metropolitan future in which attention is paid to historical architectural decisions and care taken in future development of metropolitan environments.
Model, 19 in x 36 in, Gouache on Yupo, 2020
Render, 19 in x 36 in, watercolor and gouache on paper, 2021
Blue Print, 21 in x 20 in, gouache and colored pencil on paper, 2020
Dig Site 1, 18 in x 20 in, watercolor, colored pencil, gouache on paper, 2021

Core Sample 1 (2021), 14 in x 29 in gouache on paper, 2021
Dig Site 2
22 in x 18 in
watercolor, gouache, and colored pencil on paper
2021
*Untitled (artifact)*, 18 in x 18 in, watercolor on paper, 2021
Brick Caves, 20 in x 20 in, watercolor and gouache on paper, 2021
Back and Forth...and Back Again, 16 in x 22 in, gouache, colored pencil and ink on paper, 2021
Cave Drawing Exhibit 3021, 10 in x 15 in, gouache and colored pencil on paper, 2021
Small Worlds (Triptych), 11 in x 14 in each, ink on paper, 2021
Small world 1