

The lure of the empty office space

Mansel's haunting images have an inviting beauty

By ELISSA BARNARD Arts Reporter

Since The Chronicle Herald has moved out of downtown and I'm missing an old office building, it's easy to relate to Shelley Mansel's large paintings of vacant urban spaces.

Mansel is an artist who keeps shaking things up in her own imagery though her style of smooth, sleek paint application remains as does her palette of lovely blues, reds, ochres and pale olive greens.

Her subject, in *Urban Cathedrals* at Gallery Page and *Strange* to Oct. 3, is the contemporary, constructed landscape of empty offices, warehouses and parking garages as well as high rise buildings under construction.

Her subject is also light and Mansel's use of light adds a warmth and even passion to these typically cold, decrepit spaces. The painting, *Windows*, is the most-familiar looking space like an abandoned office or school with a rich red carpet, pillars, old radiators and windows of many small squares. Two panes are pushed open and the light floods in.

In *Train Bridge* Mansel makes a normally sinister structure of receding metal columns not spooky at all with a suffusion of white light. This painting has a lovely mottled green and rust texture on the top side of the bridge.

There are cool water-like spaces in paintings like *Turquoise Warehouse* with neatly piled boxes and soft ceiling light, and hotter, yellow and ochre spaces.

Mansel's most dramatic paintings are of partially constructed buildings with the dense architecture in cranes and jagged wood, billowing tarps like Renaissance drapery and black-hole spaces the eye vanishes into. They are like partly living monsters in a state of becoming, both in *Red Tarps* and *Building Up* which is all in blues with subtle shifts in colour and a sky like a bruise.

There are opposites here, in haunting images which have an inviting beauty though in reality an empty parking garage is a bleak, threatening space. The spaces are inbetween being occupied and not occupied, inbetween vacant quiet and urban noise. They are spaces of transition and, ultimately, decay.

Mansel is interested in "a seductive view of modernity while simultaneously alluding to the ill-fated stability of development," she says.

"The depiction of space, light, and reflection — is akin to the aesthetic considerations of American painter Edward Hopper. He portrayed the polarity of Nature and Civilization, and ultimately, Nature's reclamation of the urban domain."

She calls the show *Urban Cathedrals* because a "large structural expanse such as a warehouse simulates that of a cathedral, but functions without a spiritual objective. The contemporary warehouse can be characterized as the secular incarnate to the traditional church; it has become the 'urban cathedral.' "

From berries to birds' nests, landscapes to psychological interiors, no matter what her subject, Mansel is able to stretch her territory and focus a viewer's mind and eye on her view of the world.

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