

PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

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ARTslanT

GALLERY HOP IN TOWN WITH DEWITT CHENG

Christian Nguyen at Patricia Sweetow

Place of Origin

March 4, 2008 - April 26, 2008



In 2000, Christian Nguyen, a resident artist at New York's World Trade Center, began to study the building itself — "the basements and dull hallways, masses of people moving around, the elevators and cubicles...the carpet diamonds at the hallway crossing, the corporate uniforms, the ID-tags that looked like rosary beads, the quiet rooms where people in shades of gray huddled,

the soft chime of phones and the distant murmur of muzak..." When not enjoying the views from the 91st floor, and the sensation of "sitting in an airplane suspended in the air," he began to see the building as a "giant organism" infused with, and symbolic of, our "social fears and desires."

The ordinariness of office life pre 9/11 seems painfully poignant now, in retrospect, yet Nguyen's insight that architecture is not merely frozen music, as Goethe declared; or a machine for living in, as Le Corbusier theorized, but a manifestation, at least in its grander manifestations, of a society's values, is correct — which is why the WTC became a target for those who hate not Americans, but American foreign policy, as well as some of the vulgarities of our culture, transplanted, and it became, symbolically, the temple pulled down by Samson, or the Tower of Babel, doomed by the folly of its builders.



Understandably, Nguyen pursued his interest in architecture as social construct. In *Ur and Assur II* he drew the ancient Babylonian ziggurats of Iraq crumbling under the weight of years back into the sand — a reprise of the old Romantic ruin, once glorious but degenerated into the terrifying haunt of bat and screech owl. Nguyen's black-on-tan drawings resemble 19th century photos of similar sites, and even earlier artist renderings. The monumental drawings depict the hypothetical interiors of such vast hubristic buildings. Panoramic vistas of ramps, walls, stairways, and platforms constructed of thousands of beams, planks or slabs, they recall both real ancient architecture —plinth, apadana and stylobate— and the various nightmarish versions of it haunting Piranesi, Borges, Escher, Kiefer and Mrs. Winchester. Robert Hughes has pointed out the convergence of fascist and corporate architectural styles, latter-day versions of imperial esthetic overkill. Impeccably drawn in one-point perspective, these precise renderings on charcoal on raw canvas (*Amphitheatre, Labyrinth, Ramparts*) have a clarity suggestive of computer-assisted drafting, although they're hand-drawn, and improvised section by section. No

one but the viewer traverses these walkways that lead nowhere, beneath a crushing smear of black pigment representing the internal darkness in which they wait; the viewer, no matter where his eye wanders, is always at the center of the labyrinth. Whether Nguyen sees these abandoned spaces as symbols of current social ideals is unclear; since he sees the ziggurats as proto-skyscrapers, combining power and spirituality, it seems a plausible supposition. Whether we see contemporary society as an inhuman landscape of pompous uniformity and absurdity depends, I suppose, on our mood and our politics. —DeWitt Cheng

(*Images, from top to bottom: Christian Nguyen, *Place of Origin*, March 4 - April 26, 2008; Patricia Sweetow Gallery, *Amphitheatre*, 2007, charcoal on canvas with acrylic polymer, 72 x 112", courtesy of the Artist and Patricia Sweetow Gallery, San Francisco. Christian Nguyen, *Place of Origin*, March 4 - April 26, 2008; Patricia Sweetow Gallery, *Ramparts*, 2007, charcoal on canvas with acrylic polymer, 73 x 111", courtesy of the Artist and Patricia Sweetow Gallery, San Francisco. Christian Nguyen, *Place of Origin*, March 4 - April 26, 2008; Patricia Sweetow Gallery, *Ur*, 2005, charcoal on canvas with acrylic polymer, 16 x 20", courtesy of the Artist and Patricia Sweetow Gallery, San Francisco.)

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