

Reframing Urban Viewpoints

Frauke Schlitz carefully and penetratingly reacts to urban environments, using the built context as her stimulus. She is inspired and consumed by sites often situated in major cities such as New York City, Seoul, Berlin and Stuttgart. Her fascination with constructions of architecture, engineering, and abstractions of industrial remnants or infrastructure, is clear. Giving voice and shape to the conditions she experiences, Schlitz formulates her reactions through rigorous making—Intentionally moving between different scales. Possibly understood as kinds of social or psychological noise, her interpretations put forth a narrative containing both absence and presence. Schlitz, thus, actively reframes her viewpoints, and ours.

As an architect and researcher who concentrates on exploring and explaining both normative and uncomfortable aspects of urbanism and change, being introduced to Frauke Schlitz's drawn, inked and painted paper works, such as "Escaping Lines" and "Architectonical Sketches" during an opening at the Silas von Morisse Gallery in Williamsburg, Brooklyn in 2017, was refreshing. This prompted the start of many artist studio visits and dialogues, with questions percolating over the years about how art might form a discourse about urban density, city life and built objects-in-space. One is asked to ponder Schlitz's assessments and visions about the state of urbanism, as revealed through the distinct pieces of a city she chooses to focus on. We are mostly asked to view them from inside various exhibition settings, allowing her stark and complex perceptions to be experienced intimately.

Moving between smaller and large-scale work is key to Schlitz's methods for framing her urban points of view. Her artistic practice plays with architectural tools and perspectival visualizations. She documents on site, then often plans by hand, while looking at photographs, drafting or sketching; and, at times using a straight edge, masking tape, and measuring devices. These help her to create an understanding of true structure but, more importantly, her altered reality of it. And, to produce a multitude of different positions, she collages, overlaps and layers, reconfiguring lines to form edges and boundaries that suggest urban spaces, volumes, and assemblies. The work, thus, takes shape through various media, often making use of pen, paint and ink on flat paper, wall or board surfaces (working from notebook to supersizes). Schlitz also uses wood, string, and cardboard with various hardware to construct free-standing sculpture that form a dialogue with her flat works.

For a decade, Frauke Schlitz has chosen to move between Germany and NYC to inspire her artwork. In 2021, after what came to be known as the "great pause," COVID-19 lockdowns were somewhat lifted, and Schlitz was able to return to NYC. She began walking the city streets and became fascinated with the phenomenon of the "eating shed." This type of "urban interior" rapidly popped up by the hundreds, and transformed many neighborhoods with their simple yet energizing, open-air constructions. They were a result of the NYC Department of Transportation's initiative which commenced in June 2020, and was called Open Restaurants (along with another initiative called Open Streets). The city provided basic safety constraints and size limitations, so the three-sided structure with a sloped roof could be located in a street parking space, or on the sidewalk. A freeing, and also very ad hoc condition was born.¹

As an urban watcher, Schlitz began to photograph the sheds in the streets. They served as instigations for what became an ongoing series of abstracted gouache paintings on paper. Through the medium of painting, the varied shed structures were captured as reconstructed

¹ Snyder, A.B. 'The designed and the ad hoc: dynamic remakings of street space in New York City'. *Architecture_MPS* 23, 1 (2022): 2. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.amps.2022v23i1.002>.

three-quarter-view color fields. She continued this work in NYC in 2022 and 2023, completing 210 paintings.

With deciding to take on these street structures as her subject, Schlitz has represented them with more specificity than her previous urban sources. Deeply reacting to her surroundings, she created an artistic departure—a shift that appears to have been necessary. Other deviations, such as the dominant use of color, also became important to her early on in the pandemic. Though Schlitz used some coloring in her “Verstellte Welt” installation in 2018, and in her watercolor sketchbooks, the main precursor to the NYC shed work began in 2020 with her colorful paint and collage on paper and board, inspired by Stuttgart urbanism. Calling these pieces “Urban Notes,” as well as “The Frieze,” they were eventually completed in her studio in Greenpoint, Brooklyn in 2022.

We can read her decision to highlight the phenomenon of the shed structure (that acted as a city savior), as a powerful and personal social, cultural and economic visual commentary. We can also understand her series as singular moments that are abstracted and monumentalized, aesthetically. Finally exhibited in NYC in summer 2023 at the Anya and Andrew Shiva Gallery in a show called “Pandemic Architectures,” 93 reproduced and enlarged prints of the shed gouache paintings were aligned in a grid facing the street and inside the gallery. A full-size, three-dimensional shed sculpture was constructed as a composite, with multi-colored acrylic-painting on cardboard. Here, we were invited to engage with the sheds inside the gallery but also as an ensemble seen only from the sidewalk. A second showing in summer 2023 took place at the KVN Stuttgart Neuhausen gallery. The show “Tracks and Traces” featured the 210 original gouache paintings, arranged in a different gridded and tiled fashion, spread over the walls alluding to a shed-like space.

In both shows, Schlitz’s reframed realities are not only commanding, but also point to a set of urban pandemic critiques. Schlitz shows the ingenuity of how the sheds represent individual proprietor’s creativity; yet, at the same time, she simplifies, flattens and recolors them. While the sheds were designed to serve as places for experiencing open-air refuge and freedom, her renditions of these structures are colorful stills that one may not enter. Even her sculpture made site-specific, was to be seen through glazing; thus, signifying an unusable object.

Frauke Schlitz’s ultimate urban narrative is therefore one that never panders to a happy ending, even though New York City has transformed tremendously in this period of questioning permanence and temporal life. While, we have all largely removed our masks, literally and figuratively, her methods of showing us multiple views of this mundane condition embodies a presence composed of both the personal and the public collective. As a body of work, the project presents a transforming urban atmosphere that invites a distant witnessing. She only lets us come cautiously close—an attempt to rouse a larger spatial, social and psychological consciousness. Schlitz’s admiration for these places is her testament to the quiet energy along with the cacophony of the time.

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