EXHIBITION ESSAY

Use and Abuse, Art and Aftermath

Laurel Gitlen

In the West Loop of Chicago, where boxy industrial buildings are rapidly being converted into Loftominiums and ultra-modern restaurants, Valerie Hegarty 's *Hotel Lobby, West Loop* reinserts a vanishing air of dust and decay into a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood. Ironically, the exhibition space is slated for a renovation next month, when *Hotel Lobby, West Loop* will be demolished. Gallery 400 will likely become a sleeker, whiter, more pristine space itself, joining the ranks of other West Loop galleries. While the work, as a ruin, elicits nostalgia for a lost past, evidence of a reverse process employed to resurrect an image of the past (through constructive and then destructive means) brings this nostalgia into crisis. The artist 's recreation of a hotel lobby interior at Gallery 400, and subsequent rending of surface treatments (to recreate the charming yet dilapidated state of the original hotel lobby) attests to the ephemerality of architecture and the superficiality of cosmetic conversions. Collapsing both space and time, Hegarty 's *Hotel Lobby*, *West Loop* translates both the ruin and the process of renovation in painterly terms that raise a host of questions about artifice, architecture, memory, and the role of the artist in relation to history.

A funny thing happens to volume in Hegarty 's work, where architecture becomes wallpaper and the architectural elements of the gallery are rendered hollow. The walls of the gallery act like stretched canvasses, and Hegarty 's trompe l 'oeil paintings take on the skin-like qualities of (peeling) paint. Limiting her palette to paper and paint, Hegarty undermines the three-dimensionality of the installation and the viewer is invited to step into what is, in effect, a painting. In one corner of the gallery, a hole punched through the plaster wall and the resultant void creates a credible mark of three-dimensional space and "real" structural damage while simultaneously exposing the thin-walled flimsiness of the gallery 's architecture. Piles of peelings on the floor appear to be from various surfaces of the installation (representing bricks and linoleum in addition to paint) and serve as a reminder that the byproducts of decay and renovation are often just so much trash. This undifferentiated debris also draws attention to a marked absence of any real rubble. Even the dust and debris that is a product of Hegarty 's work is a sort of painting. These painted strips evoke an emotional and possibly violent destructive process that is reminiscent of Charlotte Perkins Gilman 's short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*, in which a young woman, deemed "ill," finds redemption by peeling layer upon layer of wallpaper off the walls that imprison her.

The slow crawl of rot is also laid asunder by Hegarty 's methods. While the original decrepit lobby that is the subject of Hegarty 's work was undoubtedly a casual product of time, use, abuse, and neglect, *Hotel Lobby*, *West Loop*, the art installation, has seen no ordinary wear and tear, and no visitors (save the artist) during its nascence. Instead, an abuse underscores the creative and destructive processes and the frozen and lifeless landscape that is the result. The temporary nature of art exhibitions and our "hands-off" approach to viewing further encourages engagement with the installation as a preserved and lifeless specimen. Perhaps Hegarty 's

installation is in this way most closely aligned with still-life painting, where the installation may be seen as memento mori, a reminder of death.

While ruins can elicit a sense of longing, *Hotel Lobby, West Loop* taints viewers ' nostalgia with violence, morbidity, and trickery. Further, a simplification of materials and the substitution of artifice for time evacuates "authenticity" from the artifact and threatens the viewer 's sentimentality for the past. Perhaps more importantly, Hegarty 's process equates decay with renovation, and hence suggests that both are merely surface treatments that hide the "real" stuff behind. Through nostalgia, a decrepit space can be venerated as an edifice that has endured the test of time, or as an example of the sentiment "they don 't build them like they used to." Renovations and new constructions, on the other hand, are suspect, and considered shoddy and superficial in relation to the depth and solidity of ruins. (Roman coliseums and aqueducts are a case in point for the heft and substantiality of ruins). In Hegarty 's work, architecture is treated more like a series of veils that float over pristine white gallery walls that also belie a sense of gravity.

Hotel Lobby, West Loop enters into several dialogues about art, architecture, and history. First, as a work of art, the installation plays with our romance with the past. But as an installation, Hegarty 's work also comments on the proliferation of "shabby-chic" design, where objects and interiors are made to appear "authentic" or antique-y through carefully feigned patinas, chips, and wear. *Hotel Lobby, West Loop* is thus imbued with history much like a pair of distressed Levi 's. However, the collapse of time and space in this work is disappointing in a devastating way. The installation can 't even be viewed as a good fake. Instead, Hegarty seems to have left more evidence of fakery than artifice. It remains unclear what work the installation accomplishes, but it appears strikingly as evidence of a certain deficit. Perhaps this want is in some way explicated by Hal Foster, who recently wrote that "our condition is largely one of aftermath—that we live in the wake not only of modernist painting but of post-modernist deconstructions of these forms as well . . ." *Hotel Lobby, West Loop* is after all both an aftermath of artistic activity, and a representation of an aftermath. The sense of loss in *Hotel Lobby, West Loop* is palpable and the lack of solidity and authenticity is incessantly persistent.

Laurel Gitlen, *Use and Abuse, Art and Aftermath*, December, 2002.

This essay was distributed in the gallery during the run of the exhibition.