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Jake Longstreth

GREGORY LIND GALLERY

The American landscape has always been shaped by economic forces, with mining, drilling, and building integral parts of the country's manifest destiny. Today, as foreclosures and failed businesses spread like flesh-eating bacteria, that landscape is shifting, psychically and physically, becoming blighted with vacant houses and big-box structures. Particularly timely, then, are Jake Longstreth's nearly photorealistic paintings of anonymous, generally unpopulated built environments. Whether portraying a swimming pool, tennis court, chain-store facade, or other man-made monument, each of this exhibition's nine canvases contains an eerie quietude resonant with our current defaulted moment.

Jake Longstreth, *Sonoma*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 36".

Longstreth tends to portray architecture in simple geometry, and foliage and landscaping in controlled, abstract tangles of small brushstrokes. Such is the approach in *Campus*, 2008, a composition in which a detailed strip of verdant lawn and trees acts as a barrier between a cloudless sky and an empty, pale gray parking lot—perhaps, as the title might suggest, belonging to a corporate complex, the setting shown on a weekend, or post-layoff. The paint application in this and the other works is flat, a quality that befits the evacuated subject matter. Although the life force has been sucked out of Longstreth's structures, they maintain their identity, holding their own within the landscapes they helped to shape.

Some of the scenes feature lively minibursts of color, including *Sacramento*, 2008, with its flowering shrubs surrounding a vibrant green tennis court, and *Dealer*, 2008, in which parti-colored bunting enlivens a bleached-out stretch of dirt with an ominous white van parked in the distance, its doors ajar. These two compositions appear awash in uniform, unfiltered West Coast light, which lends the subjects preternatural clarity; others have the more humid, slightly dusky atmosphere of points east.

A sense of stillness pervades. *Appalachia*, 2008, and *Small Town In-Ground*, 2008, feature swimming pools that are placid and emphatically splash free, the canvases serving as dour distant cousins to David Hockney's early LA paintings. Longstreth's works have a number of photographic precedents, including Robert Adams's melancholy shots of parking lots and housing tracts, and, in their typological objectivity, Lewis Baltz's series "New Industrial Parks Near Irvine, California," 1974. Longstreth himself practices photography, perhaps a more common medium for the type of social commentary his work tilts toward, but he's most deeply engaged with the discourse of painting. His canvases recall Robert Bechtle's obdurate views of San Francisco streets, and, with their curving shapes, Richard Diebenkorn's compositions. A tightened version of the latter's geometric abstraction is seen in *Crematory*, 2008, which features winding paved pathways and a manicured lawn that has taken on a plaid pattern, suggesting well-regulated mowing.

Another type of regulation is suggested by *Sonoma*, 2008, which depicts the pale yellow and gray side of a big-box structure hung with a three-dimensional sign: PHARMACY. A solitary pine grows from a small traffic island, resembling a generic Christmas tree. Pills and religion. The combination inevitably evokes Damien Hirst, but here what results is less brash spectacle than demure critique, the two compositional elements relating in a serene, nearly seamless landscape.

—*Glen Helfand*