



The Art of Building

Tjebbe Beekman

by Andreas Schmidl

Tjebbe Beekman, the Dutch artist praised for his abstraction of the experienced image, is building the rooms, the buildings and places around us while we look at his paintings and trying to find our place within them. He skillfully guides us through a state of disorientation and then reorientation, with isometric perspectives, building multiple dimensions with light and shadow, while raw brush strokes on grainy, manipulated surfaces create the almost haptic illusion of a real, touchable site. Here we have the mark of a man who subscribes to a blurred, dystopian vision, revealing an immediate future of things which we cannot see, but that are no less immersive: the politics of control and surveillance, the faking of history, dehumanization and the dictatorship of technology. Beekman discusses his captivation with architecture, emptiness, and alienated control as the motif to a portfolio that unearths the unlikely beauty of menace.

ANDREAS SCHMIDL: Your works are based on the physical experience of structures and buildings. Is that correct?

TJEBBE BEEKMAN: Well, yes and no, I guess. I like to feel a space or specific location before knowing its history. I think the city and the architecture is the one place where human beings accelerate. They are very good metaphors for the human state, or rather, they illustrate political and philosophical views of an era very well. Take for example the new American embassy in Berlin. Its position is a statement in its own right, in the middle of the Brandenburger Tor, the Deutsche Bank headquarters, and the Jewish memorial. That obviously tells you a lot about the relationship

and the history between Berlin and the US, but also about the identity of the US, or at least what they want to express towards the outside world. When you take a closer look at the building and its architecture, you see a very introverted building, almost like a fortress: small windows with a very rigid rhythm to them, high fences, the whole design concentrated or culminating in an angle to give the whole thing a very overpowering appearance. That, to me, is a good starting point for a painting. Or, in other words, the structure is more of a vehicle or useful motif than it is the leading subject of the work.

AS: You once stated that everything starts with a walk...

TB: Well, that's the way for me to discover my surroundings and contemplate them. Biking is also good, but most of the time I park my bike and start walking. The slower the movement the better, because then I have a more focused eye for surprising details and I can feel the atmosphere of a place much better. Right now, the place that inspires me most is probably the Dutch seaside. I love the combination of the harsh, biting cold with the aesthetics of the light, the wideness, silence — and, most of all — the grayish color palette during wintertime. I've been listening a lot to Brian Eno's *The Shutov Assembly* lately and somehow it's connected to this kind of landscape to me.

AS: One overwhelming attribute of your work is its suggestion of how photography and painting can unite in an orchestra, with the two mediums playing harmoniously.

TB: Normally I start by making a lot of photographs from different angles and when I get home I start to collage them in Photoshop and on paper.

Painting is a very intimate medium, while, for example, photography is more about observation. I think it's important that the medium one chooses fits the story one wants to bring to an audience. Painting is the only medium that has the ability to communicate on a deeply personal, very incisive, as well as highly conceptual level. During the process of making my work, it feels as if my ideas and feelings about the subject matter and the attractiveness of the texture of brushstrokes and blobs of paint lure the viewer into the picture, forcing him or her to contemplate the image for a longer time. To me, painting has the ability to really stop time for the complete silence it can evoke. At least, that's what I hope to achieve in my work.

AS: While the overall effect of your signature surface treatment evokes optical analogies to photos taken with a dirty camera lens, another group of works feels almost Impressionistic. Smaller brush strokes, thick in consistency and color, are applied closely next and on top of each other. This technique is most visible in the cathedral pictures but also throughout the Capsular Society series. Could you explain this shift in methodology?

TB: Although my brush strokes and the overall appearance of the paintings seem to have become more rough and ragged over the years, I guess that's a natural development. I still think there is not such a difference when it comes to my approach or handwriting. When you see the paintings in real life you'll find that there is no significant difference in approach, but when you look at reproductions, it's true that some seem to be more realistic than others. I like to play around with this thin line between realism and abstraction.

AS: Once the base of an image is prepared, you start throwing dirt, liquids, and other substances onto the canvas to distance yourself from the "image" and fight the material of "painting." Art as an art of control?

TB: Yes, kind of. That's the point where the subconscious takes over and the painting becomes its own entity.

AS: Despite the pugnacious working mode, the final image has a distinct clarity to it. Dirt and applied chaos do not distort the picture. How do you achieve this dichotomy?

TB: After the process of "controlled destroying," as I like to call it, during which it lies on the floor, I hang the painting on the wall again, look at it for a long time and start to react to the image again. That's also the part where memory starts to play its role in the process. I love how the image appears out of all these layers of chaos. I never look at the original design after this moment. I just react to the painting itself and my ideas about the subject matter.

AS: Work titles like Identity Research Project lend a documentary feel to your practice. And the paintings, in fact, feel like documentations of remote places. Are you interested in investigative realism?

TB: I wouldn't call it realism. Despite their appearance in reproduction, my paintings have a very abstract quality to them, and yes, I have always been very interested in documentaries both in film and in literature. I like to incorporate that in my work process; it's a very challenging way to deal with the medium of painting.

AS: How do you decide about the place you visit, how do you find access?

TB: That varies a lot. Sometimes it's a feeling when I pass by a location and sometimes it's because I read something about it or because it seems to represent something I'd like to say. A lot of the time one building leads to another, like when I painted the *New Germany* painting, which represents the former state newspaper of the GDR. During the process of painting, I stumbled upon a story on local television about a man who worked there. He had had a terrible time there. Because of his homosexuality he wasn't accepted and therefore he couldn't climb the career ladder and get a better position. He is still living in one of these *Plattenbau* high-rise buildings on the other side of the street. His balcony and main window overlook the *Neues Deutschland* building, so he blocked his view by growing plants and flowers in

an almost obsessive way. This idea of blocking a view and therefore blocking out the outside world from entering the private space inspired me to make the painting called *Sehnsucht*. This painting represents a building facade that you cannot enter — you will always stay on the surface of the building and therefore on the surface of the painting. That idea led me to German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk's book *Spheres* and the Belgian philosopher Lieven de Cauter, who wrote a book called *The Capsular Civilization*. Their theories inspired me to make a painting like *Palast* — again, a painting that you cannot enter at all because of the way it is painted. It's due to the chosen composition and radical repetition but also in terms of what it represents conceptually; the satellite discs in the individual cells seem to communicate with completely different worlds, far from the location of the actual building.

AS: In contrast to your realistic observations of dehumanized places, Capsular Society seems to be more about structure?

TB: No, my work is always about humans, or, for lack of a better phrase, the condition *humaine*, although they do not appear in the actual image. What I'm trying to explain is that I'm not really interested in the pictorial or formal qualities of the structures as a motivation to make a painting. The underlying motif lies most of the time in an either political or philosophical occasion.

AS: What you take away from your site-specific visits seems like an empty snapshot. How do you explain the distance they mediate?

TB: I like the phrase "empty snapshot," thank you. I would say it's the result of a combination of the work method I've developed over the years, to destroy the painting and build it up again, and the conceptual layers and motifs that lie underneath.

AS: Human figures appear only as translucent shadows, but for the most part, the "rooms" are empty. Are they ghost paintings of ghost towns?

TB: No, not really. The reason I've chosen not to incorporate human figures is because the viewer would identify with them too much and as a result the painting would have a more narrative character than I would prefer. Now you, the spectator, will be radically left to your own devices. You are in the depicted space and thus have to play an active role in the work.

AS: Where were the museum room images "taken"?

TB: They were mostly based on the newly renovated Neues Museum in Berlin. At the time, there was a lot of discussion about what the design architect, David Chipperfield, had chosen for it. This led me to the interesting thought that there is a fashion in how we choose to install museum collections, and by doing so the choices we make color our past, which, needless to say, forms our view of our national identity in the present.

AS: What fascinates you about architecture?
TB :It's where we as the human race excel but, foremost, because it has such a huge influence on our daily lives. You can tell so much about people by depicting their architecture, it tells you so much about the identity of the people who use it, who have built them, about the political views it represents, the religion etc. I think it's the perfect metaphor for the subjects I'd like to touch in my work, without the end result being too much of a flat-out political manifesto and denying art by doing so.

AS: Are you interested in the optical-decorative or cultural-political dimension of anonymous housing complexes?

TB: The dehumanization it dictates for its inhabitants says a lot about capitalism. It does shape people's self-image in a negative way that has been proven over the years. So naturally, I support new ideas about building and social housing, which is already going on in a lot of big cities. For example it's very interesting to see what developers will accomplish in a city like Detroit where there is so much scope for experimentation. Alternative solutions lie wide open there.

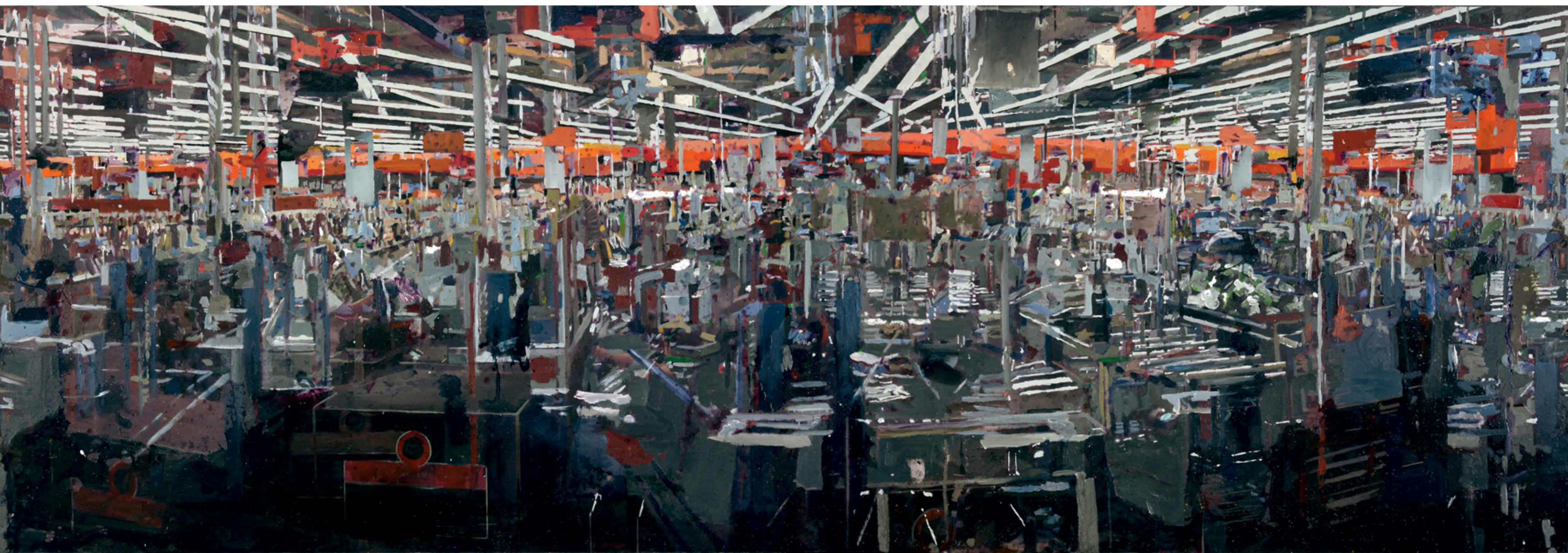
AS: When does the facade of a building you pass by begin to evolve into an artwork in its own right?

TB: When it radiates some kind of tension.

AS: Do you believe in the soul of a place?
TB: Yes, I do believe that there is a certain energy connected to places and landscapes.

AS: What motivated you to move to Berlin?
TB: We went to visit Berlin around 1999 or 2000 because our upstairs neighbor in Amsterdam tipped us. He was German and had lived in Berlin before coming to Amsterdam. I was going on about moving to NYC but my wife didn't really like the city all that much. So we checked out Berlin and fell in love with it immediately. First we rented

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Tjebbe Beekman,
Identity Research Project (2010)

a room in somebody's house with a few friends, but soon after we knew we wanted to stay longer and rented a place of our own. It was such an inspiring city with such an incredible energy that we wanted to be part of it.

AS: How does it compare to your hometown of Leiden, or even The Hague or Amsterdam?

TB: There's a certain feeling of freedom biking through a city as big as Berlin but, above all else, there's the fact that recent history exists on every street corner — it oozes out of the pavement, so to speak. That really inspired me. I grew up during the Cold War. This view on the world formed me — as it did Berlin, being one of the symbols of that era. It's the perfect city to explore this and makes for a perfect motif to investigate in my art. In Leiden and Amsterdam, one grows up surrounded by the aesthetics of seventeenth-century cities, which have a different look and feel. There you can find the origins of humanism, liberalism, and capitalism, which is also very inspiring, hence the move.

AS: Now you are back in Amsterdam?

TB: First we thought about moving to Lanzarote — one of the Canary Islands, a very volcanic landscape — but in the end we bought a houseboat on one of the canals in Amsterdam. We wanted to live a bit more freely, or off the grid, if you like. We've renovated the whole ship with the help of some very dear friends. Inside it's very spacious now and has an almost lofty feeling whilst still being very nautical. We're waiting for spring to start building a rooftop vegetable garden but in the meantime there will always be small projects going on inside. It is an active way of living, but also very relaxing and luxurious.

AS: Which images are mounted on or leaning against the walls of your home?

TB: At the moment not so much because we are still in the process of decorating and figuring out where our stuff should go. And of course we have less wall space than we had in the Berlin apartment where we could do a salon-style hanging of our collection. So right now there is this drawing of our son Illya and a work by our friend Alon Levin on the wall.

AS: In your work, even the skeleton of an elephant, as displayed in a natural scientific museum, becomes a sacred site. Do your visual observations seem otherworldly to you?

TB: No, not really. The painting you refer to is part of this search within the subject matter of identity and the assumption of truthfulness it represents through the way we install museums. In this case, I was thinking about these assumptions we make about how dinosaurs might have looked, and then I read in the newspaper that one shinbone of one of the dinosaur skeletons in the museum of natural history in Berlin had been wrongly placed for years. I thought it was funny and a worthy starting point for a painting.

AS: So you are also a little boy who likes to play with the images you present to us?

TB: Every man should have a bit of a Peter Pan complex, yes.

“Every man should have a bit of a Peter Pan complex.”



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AS: Your ethical and ethnic portraiture also incorporates depictions of African woman and rural tribes. What is the source, the origin for these works?

TB: I stated once that, as an artist, I am kind of a lazy philosopher; I have to look for the right questions, the answer lies somewhere in the dialogue between the viewer and the work. The small paintings on paper are part of the *Identity Research Project* and have their origins in these *Time Life* books from the seventies. I found it interesting that countries and people we now consider terrorists and depict as evil, or at least in a very aggressive way with guns etc., were formerly represented very romantically, as noble savages of some kind — beings that were very pure and, what we in the West would claim, close to what life should be about. So it's a search on how media does influence the way we see the world.

AS: Then, suddenly, we encounter David Beckham's infamous Calvin Klein underwear ad within a series of smaller, grayscale vignettes. What is the story behind these thirty-two images?

TB: The black-and-white paintings on A4 paper in this series are explorations on various subjects — in this case, identity — and they depict various standpoints I was looking for. In the case of David Beckham, he represented that whole metro-sexuality thing that the glossy magazines were trying to sell and therefore his appearance said a lot about the identity of men. But he also stands for the illusion that by creating a godlike body you find the Holy Grail to successful living, the perfect marriage, wife, children etc. Inside this particular series of drawings, as I like to call them, are three self-portraits depicting me in various ages. A certain pattern of dress also comes back several times to state that identity isn't a static thing, but

very fluid and should be questioned all the time.

AS: Which principles led you to choosing those exact motifs?

TB: They function as a vehicle to order my thoughts in the way other people would use a diary. I make them at the start of the day, sometimes two or three, sometimes just one, with the intention of exploring varieties of one subject and resulting in a block of black-and-white paintings that function as one work.

AS: The appropriation of found images functions as a popular, legitimate means of contemporary art practice. How do you incorporate its principles into your own work?

TB: The black-and-whites are often found footage and sometimes I use the Internet to find photographs of buildings I couldn't enter in any other way, like the NSA headquarters, for



Tjebbe Beekman,
Illya's Birthroom (2008)

example. But I prefer to make the photographs I use myself.

AS: Which scenes and depictions are taboos to you?

TB: None.

AS: Your fascination with physics and technology is apparent in pictures with scenes from a control room, a TV studio, and the stock exchange. Why do you like to take the viewer to these places?

TB: Because they scare me. Their main function is to take over all control — they are very political places of course. To me, the technology that features within my paintings depicts apprehension and anxiety.

AS: What about the Internet?

TB: Addictive, wonderful, boring, mediocre, handy... I haven't made my mind up yet. When we moved to Amsterdam, I made sure not to have Internet on my phone anymore because I thought it was too demanding. Everybody wants their mail to be answered within an hour...I hate that.

AS: Abstellraum (storage room) strongly evokes images from mainstream horror movies such as Saw, Silent Hill or Resident Evil. Humankind has been erased by some kind of virus, zombie, or serial killer, except one smaller group of somehow resistant beings. Do you feel we are already living this dystopian future?

TB: In some ways I'm afraid we do, yes. But that particular painting was a reaction to a painting I had admired called *Gas Chamber*, by the Belgian painter Luc Tuymans. His small paintings don't really provoke anything at first, until you read the title. I mean, it radiates a nondescript sense of unease when you look over it quickly, just catching your eye. I was interested in what would happen if you were to turn things around, so I took a place of no importance and tried to take away its innocence and then turn that around again by giving it a title that debunks that tension, or even makes it a bit banal.

AS: What makes us resistant? What is the cure?

TB: Humor and perspective.

AS: The Limbus Drawings seem to stand out from your body of work in both technique and theme. Would you say that the thought of disembodiment is an integral element in your work?

TB: It's the one series of black-and-whites that originated as a real diary and when I realized how this body of work was turning out, I decided to give it the title *Limbus*, as in the biblical term "limbo." It had a lot to do with political events at that particular moment; President Bush signing laws where he was able to spy on everyone, to arrest people before they were suspects etc. I saw a lot of similarities with the GDR of course, so I had to paint that anger out of my system.

AS: Illya's Birthroom is the square-framed image of an incubator bed and clinical equipment that threateningly winds itself towards the ceiling. Quintessentially a

place where new life is born, the birth room suddenly turns into something else, it becomes an alien-like structure.

TB: This painting is probably my most personal painting. It shows the birth room of my son, Illya, in the old hospital in Friedrichshain. His birth wasn't the easiest one and all my hopes and fears ended up in the painting.

AS: Which other artworks share this personal connection?

TB: That is the only painting I've made that has this immediate relation to my personal live, I think. I've tried to make a painting of my mother's house when she died but until now I haven't been able to do so. Things like that have to come naturally, which doesn't mean that I do not have a very personal relationship with my other paintings and subjects — that's just a different motivation to make art. I wouldn't want to make art as a means of therapy.

AS: Which is your favorite artwork — the one that is dearest to your heart — and why?

TB: I have no favorite but *Illya's Birthroom* is, of course, very dear to me. It's now in the Gemeente Museum, The Hague, as a long-term loan until my son is old enough to make his wishes known for it. It's the only painting that wasn't and will never be for sale; it belongs to my son anyway.

AS: What are you currently working on?

TB: I'm looking for motifs that have to do with modernism since my last show dealt with the ruins of modernism. I'm also busy making a book together with a poet in which we react to each other's work. And some other projects which I'd rather keep to myself for now.

AS: Which themes or investigations can we expect from your upcoming projects?

TB: I'd like to paraphrase David Hockney here: Never trust a painter on what he says, only on what he does.