

HYPERALLERGIC

Artists Remix and Riff Off Oberlin's Architecture

As part of FRONT International: Cleveland Triennial for Contemporary Art, artists have transformed the Oberlin College campus with sculptural reflections on architecture

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THE RENDERING (H x W x D=) (2018), a new commission by Barbara Bloom for the FRONT International site at the Allen Memorial Art Museum in Oberlin, OH. (all images by the author for Hyperallergic)

OBERLIN, Ohio – While the primary hub of the inaugural FRONT International: Cleveland Triennial for Contemporary Art offered a diverse range of interactions with the city of Cleveland, the three-site offshoot of FRONT, based in the nearby college town of Oberlin, unified its offerings around the broader theme of architecture. The Oberlin programming centers around a commission of a site-specific Barbara Bloom installation in the Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin College, titled *THE RENDERING* (2018). In creating one of the many special exhibitions hosted by the Allen (such as Fred Wilson's 2016 collection intervention, *Wildfire Test Pit*), the artist decided to feature selected objects from the museum's prodigious collection – but Bloom was also inspired, upon arriving in Oberlin to begin her process, to engage with the challenging and unusual confines of the Ellen Johnson Gallery, where her new work would be shown. Created in the 1970s, the space was named for Oberlin modern art professor Ellen Johnson, and designed by the architect Robert Venturi. It includes a large picture window wall, a glassed-in reading room high above the main floor, an elevator bay, a small corridor, very few 90-degree corners, and numerous other elements that make the architecture an unavoidable consideration for artists working in the space.



THE RENDERING (H x W x D=), installation view, in the Ellen Johnson Gallery at the Allen Memorial Art Museum.

Leaning into these surroundings, Bloom has covered one entire wall floor-to-ceiling with selections from the Allen's collection, redacted to showcase only the architectural features of the picture, via custom lids painted a neutralizing gray that blends them into the wall, revealing details through cutouts that resemble building footprints. The small corridor that flanks the back of the gallery features an assortment of photographic works from the collection – sans redaction, as these images depict entirely architectural subjects. The rest of the gallery is dominated by 4½ freestanding sculptures, each positioned in conversation with works from the collection. In each of four cases, Bloom has recreated a scaled architectural aspect of the picture in the same matte grey as the rest of the installation's infrastructure – a kind of open-framework pergola; a whimsical cloud-bridge; a painted screen that depicts a mountain landscape within a painting; and an entire walled garden, respectively. The half-work is a case that presents a large book cataloguing different types of decorative column styles, which Bloom has cheekily positioned in front of the picture window that frames a large wooden Asian-style column on the gallery's exterior.

In some instances, the dimensional recreations feel additive to the figurative inspiration, as with the pergola that frames the Japanese print of a scene on a pergola so precisely, it forces the perspective of the image into the gallery space. Because the bridge in another image appears to float in space, due to the original artist's use of cloud forms to obscure its grounding points, Bloom's recreation of a bridge segment that sort of hangs alone in the surrounding gray-on-gray of the gallery space makes a kind of intuitive sense. In others, Bloom's recreated screen entirely obscures the view of the little print it is adapted from – the viewer has to walk up close and look behind it to find the original. The walled garden takes a definite turn between image and reality, with the lush colors and flat perspective of the original giving way to the blank tonal neutrality and structural integrity of the scale reproduction. Bloom seems to be making a point about the difference between representation and reality, real and imagined spaces, knowing the path and walking the path. We all understand, implicitly, that there is a divide between looking at a picture of a building and negotiating the physical reality of a building, but our minds are surprisingly adept at translating image to imagined experience, and in some ways it takes a side-by-side comparison to appreciate the difference.



Above, Kitagawa Utamaro, *The Palace of the Moon*, from the series *The Moon-mad Monk*, 1789; below, Bloom's construction of the cloud bridge depicted therein.

There is certainly a subset of artists that are control freaks, when it comes to user experience, but it appears to be nearly a precondition of architects. This makes sense, in terms of the necessity of designed space to safely hold its occupants, but for many, design goes beyond that, and into the realm of the totalitarian. Every human environment that exists outside of nature has been designed, and these designs dictate what can and cannot be done with them. The poster child for this mentality is, of course, Frank Lloyd Wright. Oberlin's second FRONT location features new works by Juan Araujo, performing one of his trademark spatial-collaborations with the Weltzheimer/Johnson Usonian House, which Wright designed in 1947. The house was originally built for the Weltzheimer family, but eventually bought by the same Ellen Johnson for whom the first site is named, and served as her primary residence and home to her art collection for many years.

Wright was notoriously obsessive about his designed spaces, dictating down to minute detail what could and could not exist within them, and his Usonian houses represented a kind of Platonic ideal, in Wright's mind, of the middle-income family home.

The strong exterior and interior connections that are fundamental to Wright's idea of design are evident upon approaching the house – it almost seems as though the tall trees around it were designed to hold the low, single-story building – and Araujo's careful placement of color-block canvases on the lawn provide visual punch without disturbing the tableau. The works inside are more subtle, in some cases because of their mostly small scale. However, on a large canvas leaning in the entryway, Araujo has so cannily painted what looks like a large, slightly indistinct photograph of one of the home's architectural details, that it was frankly startling to realize it was a part of the new installation, rather than a dated part of a home-turned-tour.

And yet, between Bloom's clinical adaptations, including white-line directives and compass points mapped out on the floor in vinyl, and Araujo's attempts to insert himself into the hermetic confines of one of Wright's unhomey-homes, it was a breath of fresh air to step away from the oppressiveness of designed spaces, and into the fanciful and wildly evocative paintings and sculptural renderings by Chinese artist Cui Jie at the Richard D. Baron '64 Gallery. Located in a separate installation site on the Oberlin campus, it's the final component of the town's FRONT architectural trifecta. Cui creates her compositions through an intense buildup of paint layers in murky pastels and shiny finishes, then slashes back through the paint strata with sharp, black, gestural lines that define the imaginary skyscrapers she takes as her subjects.

These are elaborations or combinations of existing buildings in Shanghai and other major metropolitan areas in China, but Cui pushes them into magical realism with the incorporation of propaganda symbols, like stars and storks. Her work manages to be both gestural and precise, and the 3D-printed architectural models of her ideas blur the line between possibility and reality. In contrast to an architectural ethos that seems determined to control behavior, Cui presents architecture as a conduit for imagination and alternatives. It is the perfect counterpoint to the other works at Oberlin, and rounds out a challenging and multi-dimensional FRONT experience there.