An Interview with Nick Naber

AN INTERVIEW WITH NICK NABER

By Julia Cipriano

I had the opportunity to interview Nick Naber, the artist whose work is currently on exhibition at *The Java Project*. After seeing the series and reading the description on *The Java Project* website, I had a lot of questions.

Most striking was the intricate geometry of each piece – he plays with perspective and depth, deftly manipulating and warping the onlooker's focus to create an optical illusion. It's easy to lose yourself in the abyss of vibrantly colored lines and angles, and this is no mistake. His work intends to evoke the experience of gazing up at a massive skyscraper, and mirror dislocating effect that such a massive, looming structure imposes.

Moreover, Naber's series intends to render and reimagine the power dynamics created and perpetuated by the architecture of our city. A message is imparted when we stand minuscule amid these skyscrapers – we are tiny outsiders while the structures themselves and those who inhabit them represent power, dominance, and exclusion.

Our discussion circles around these ideas of power and architecture as well as his artistic process and intention. I hope you enjoy reading this interview as much as I did having it.

This series plays with perspective and depth – the intricate geometry of the lines can create optical illusions, depending on where the viewer's focus falls. The layered lines and angular forms evoke an intricate city-scape, which was your inspiration (as read in the description on The Java Project website). Namely, the relationship between physical structures (buildings/skyscrapers) and power/control.

Yes, I use an architectural technique of parallel perspective to create these drawings. I pull my visual information from a myriad of sources; brutalism, Modernist Utopian Cities, the buildings and warehouses around New York City, prisons, and everyday visual stimulus. I rearrange the physical places I see with imagined places to create drawings that at times seem plausible, but in other instances completely improbable. In many ways, this off-kilter architectural perspective helps to reinforce the ideas of power and control within these imagined dystopias.

How do you view the relationship between architecture and power in Manhattan? What kinds of power/control dynamics are at play here? How are they spatially rendered?

That's a big question. I can only speak to my specific relationship to the city. First, I'd like to say that New York City is not a beautiful city architecturally. There are examples of great architecture here, but for the most part, it's a utilitarian architecture. Manhattan is the center of many industries, those industries commission(ed) buildings to house their workers, and to show their greatness to the city through the exterior of their buildings.

As a pedestrian, most of my interaction with buildings is from the sidewalk. I experience my movement through their plazas or faux public spaces that are required by the city. A good example of a plaza mandated by the city is the Seagram Building. I also notice their entrances,

their lower facades, decoration, and lighting. All of these elements play into how I interact with space. The most telling of course is their interiors, which I do not have access to, and never appear in my work. I'm compelled by the exterior display that these buildings knit into the fabric of the street, the block, and the entire cityscape. It is a difficult thing to imagine one building making a huge impact on the whole but each one adds their own dynamic to the complete scape.

In NYC I'm drawn most specifically to buildings that appear odd, or out of the ordinary for some reason. Examples of this would be: The Elephant's Foot, Long Lines Building, The Verizon Building, Chatham Towers, Marriot in Times Square, Woodhull Medical Center, to name a few. They somehow break the traditional building techniques of the city, or they are heavily brutalist and have no relation to anything that happens around them. They have an intrinsic power because they are so out of the expected program for the city, in that they have a specific power over me, and the communities in which they are situated.
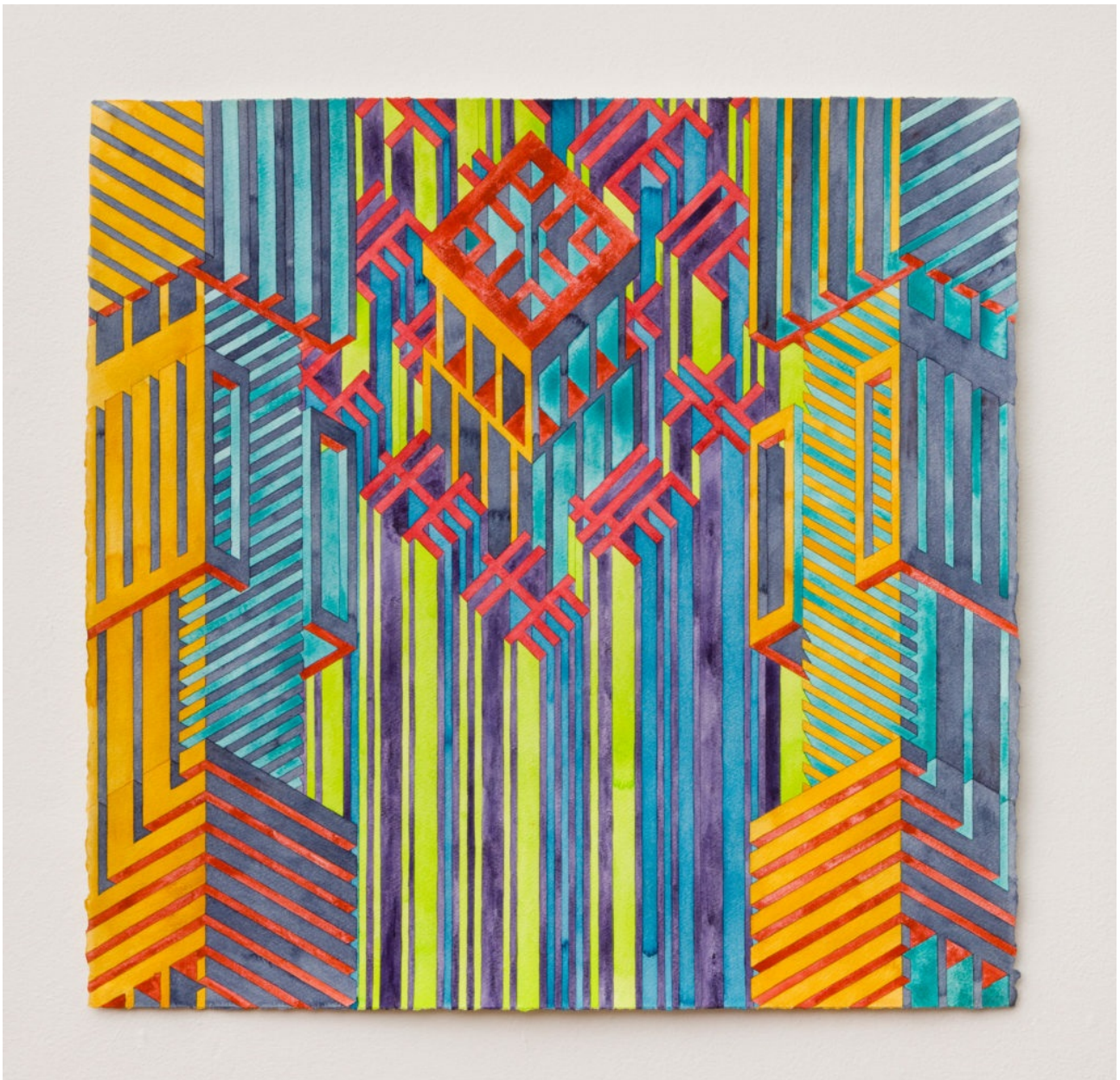
The description of your series contained language that lead me to believe that you've read Foucault – namely, *Discipline and Punish*, that discusses the panopticon as a symbol of surveillance, discipline, and control. The donut shape of the panopticon – a circular building with an atrium or "hole" in the middle – allows for constant, unobstructed sight and surveillance when positioned in the center, the locus of control. Do you find these concepts reflected in Manhattan's architecture? In turn, how does your work reflect your observations?

Discipline and Punish is one of my favorite reads. The idea of the Panopticon is evident in our society, not just manifest in architecture but in the social fabric as Foucault discusses. We are constantly under surveillance via video cameras, social media, and people on the street. I'm not sure that NYC is one giant panoptic project, but in a lot of ways, the architecture and infrastructure lends itself to surveillance. Think about the condos that line the High Line, people can see right into those multi-million dollar apartments; or say you're in a car traveling into the city from Queens on the bridge you're stuck in traffic, you can see right into offices, and apartments. I think this is true in many large cities, you are never really not being observed in some way or another.

In my drawings I think about this quite a bit, in some instances I do create panoptic situations, where towers are much larger than the lower units. I also create drawings that are in some ways symmetrical with an open pit tower at the center and other towers placed throughout. I think of the towers in the drawings as a place of observation and, ultimately the source of power. My aim is not to illustrate the idea of a panopticon but to flirt with the ideas that surround that theory.

Does this series aim to represent of our urban landscape as a symbol and reflection of the powers that be, or imagine a new version? If so, how would you describe this urban ideal?

It's an amalgamation. It represents us today, us in the past, and for me a dystopic future. I began this series 3 years ago, way before the mess that is Trump and the rise of nativism, and isolationism. These currents were happening here before his election. It's something that can be seen once you leave the bubble of New York or Los Angeles. The drawings have become more political as these ideals and people are rising to power. Originally, I thought of the work as commenting on the failures of the Modernist Utopian City, and their notions of a common fix for the ills of society. As time has gone on, there seems to be a move toward this idea of a fix all solution. The drawings are born from some of these ideas.

To focus a bit more on your artistic process…

When I think of watercolors, I usually think of landscapes or abstract imagery—fluid, bleeding lines and shapes. The decision to use this medium in such precise, linear work is compelling—what can you say about your choice to create this juxtaposition between

line/image and medium? Was it a difficult process to get the paint to work into the confines you created?

Watercolor is an odd medium. I had made a bunch of previous work in watercolor and swore I wouldn't use it again because it's frustrating when making linear work. Eventually, I began using it again. Part of my reasoning behind using watercolor in this way is that it is absurd, why would anyone use this medium for a precise drawing? The medium lends a bit of lightness, an accident that I wasn't achieving using marker, colored pencil, or ebony pencil. It is a contrast that can be stark on the page especially against the rigid drafted line of the underdrawing.

The process to get the watercolor to work with the linear drawing was difficult. I have a system now that helps with the application, however, I can only work for about 8 hours before my hand gets sore from painting. I do not mask any areas of the work, it's all done with a steady hand, which sometimes leads to mistakes. I'm alright with those mistakes because it humanizes an otherwise austere work.

Understanding perspective is a foundational component of any art form – painting, drawing, etc. It requires precision and meticulous attention, and at times can become confusing. What was it like to create work that manipulates perspective and the viewers' sense of depth?

The parallel perspective is confusing. It's a drawing technique that I learned when I was in

architecture school in undergrad before switching to art. It's a baffling thing to understand at first, especially when you're used to natural perspective or the one-point, two-point, three-point that you're taught in school. I use the perspective I do in my work for a few reasons. One, to many at first glance it makes sense, but looking at it over time it begins to unravel and look peculiar. Two, I want to harken to the techniques of architectural drawing. In many ways I am taking things that exist in the world, rearranging them and creating a new plan or scheme. Three, because it's not the way we see the world it becomes automatically abstract, with elements from reality or what you could imagine as existing. There is no real depth in many of the drawings, you never see the ground plane, there is no horizon line, the space is frontal and all over, there is no escaping this place when the viewer is looking at the work.

What is your process for creating each piece? Do you begin at the linear level, joining lines into angles, angles into shape, shape into figure, figure into layers? Or do you work in a different direction? Do you begin with pencil, move to ink, and then watercolor?

I typically begin a work by writing about the last work I finished in my sketchbook. I spend up to two hours writing and looking at the last work that I finished. Writing down observations about composition, color, concepts that I want to get across, and a lot of other ideas and ramblings. Then I will make a few thumbnail sketches that lay out where things should happen on the page. Next, I work on the large sheet on my drafting table, using the mayline, a scale, two triangles, and a drafting mechanical pencil. Nothing is planned at this point, I draw whatever seems natural and begin to work top to bottom. Once the underdrawing is complete I start working on the watercolor. I begin with one color and paint that one color in certain areas over the entire page, then mix other colors and lay them next to the first on a scrap sheet of paper to see what the relation is. Then continue to paint.

How does this series fit into your larger collection/catalogue of works? What subjects are you typically drawn towards and why?

This work is an outgrowth of the work that I have been doing since 2009. I have been enamored with the rich metaphors that architecture inherently has. The work has taken many forms since 2009 and I'd say if you're interested in what happened previously check out my website.

What kind of experience do you look to create for the viewer and why? What message or feeling do you hope to impart/conjure?

I want the viewer to have their own experience. I work hard to impart my reading, my ideas, the things I see into the work. After the work is complete it's not up to me anymore. I hope that some of the things we have discussed in this series of questions come across in the work. I want the viewer to come to these ideas through the visual that I have provided. If they do, then I feel the work has been a success.