

PAINING IS DEAD



Untitled (vituperative), 2017

watercolor graphite on watercolor paper 22 x 30 in.

photograph courtesy of the artist

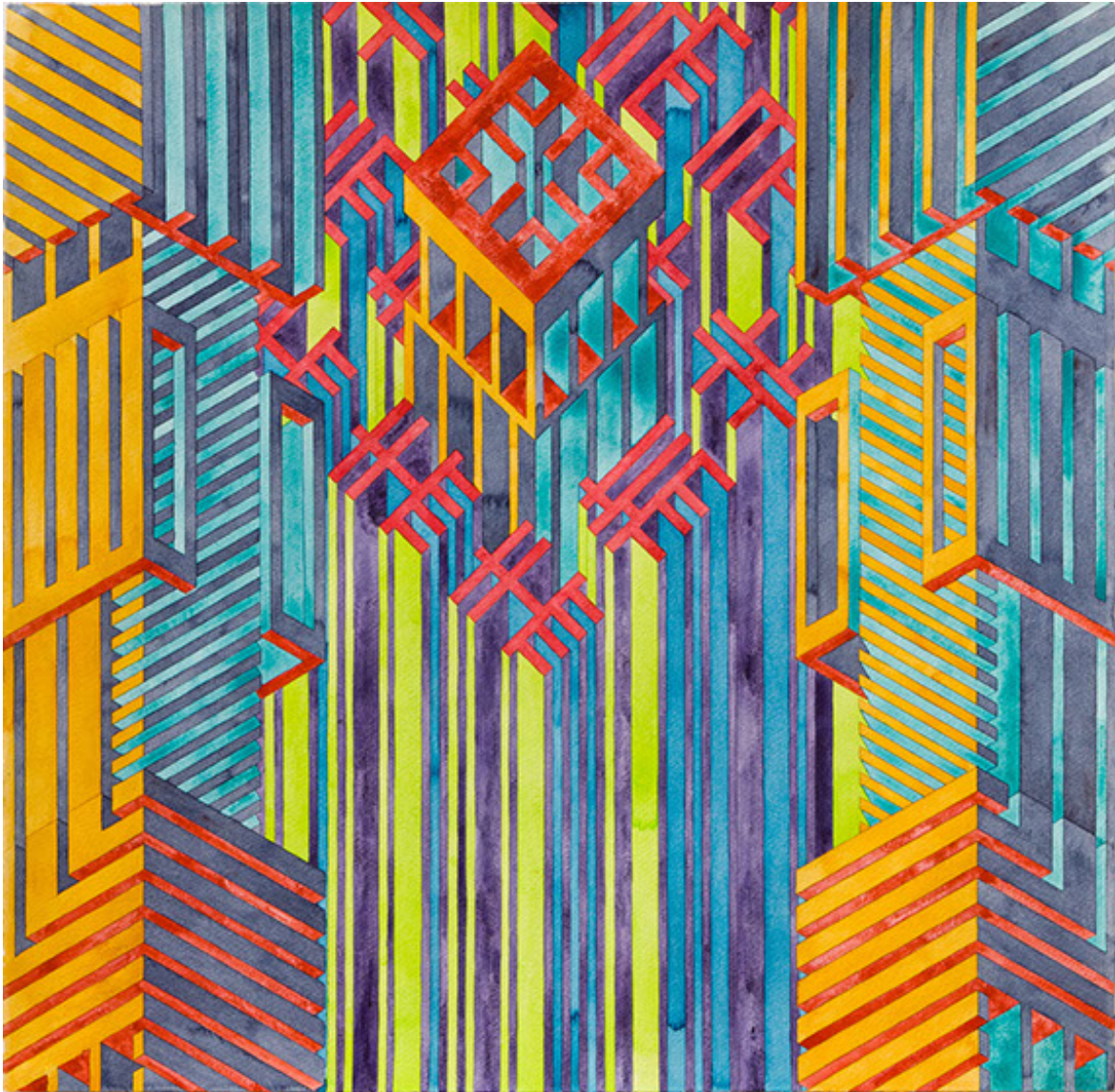
Nick Naber: Recent Paintings on Paper @ The Java Project

by Scott Robinson

April 28th, 2018



Nick Naber's paintings at the Java Project bring to mind city plans, brutalist architecture, transistors, and microscopic crystal structures. Lines and shapes are straight, angular, and tightly controlled. Contradicting isometric perspectives build a three dimensional space that leaves the engaged viewer disoriented. Forms intrude sharply from above, below, and at differing angles. They obstruct the ground and dictate movement. There's no secure footing and no place outside the structures to rest. The formal subject matter conveys a repressive atmosphere. But if an artist intends to simply relay such an oppressive or dystopian mood, it might be similarly accomplished with computer printouts or slick oil paintings—identical compositions to these in different media could provide the basic metaphor. But the surprising material choice of watercolor on paper allows rich and unexpected complexity.



Untitled (calamity), 2018

watercolor graphite on watercolor paper, 22 x 22 in.

photograph courtesy of the artist

The medium in this case provides not only opposition to the repressive metaphor, but layering of it. For one, it serves as a visual analog to the stained facades of unprotected cement found

on aging brutalist architecture. The battle between controlled order and entropic chaos takes place materially—first, because watercolor and paper are not known for their durability, and also because watercolor is a notoriously difficult medium to control. Most artists who choose watercolor do so either for the efficiency of quickly sketching in color in preparation for a painting or because the unpredictable effects it produces are desired. Regardless, an element of the unpredictable is built into the medium. Nick Naber takes this opportunity to stage a fight. Despite his painfully steady hand, you can see where colors in one shape cross a boundary and intrude on another. Halation-like effects occur at boundaries in pieces like *Untitled (quiescent)*, 2017 and *Untitled (disconsolate)*, 2017. Watercolors don't dry evenly, providing unplannable lines and slight color modulations within shapes. But when a mark is too out-of-line, corrective measures are taken. For example, the top layer of paper might be torn off in a small section as in *Untitled (bellicose)*, 2017. (It takes a careful eye to find.) Every such "mistake", however small, is exacerbated because of the material delicacy and austerity of execution. These anomalies stand paradoxically against the subject matter's atmosphere of control. A contrapuntal theme is repeated throughout this way: The artist's struggle for control is visibly present in the process, the struggle is again depicted in the formal subject matter against the nature of the medium, and the compositions themselves are metaphors for repressive orders demonstrated in societies today and in the history of the world.





Untitled (quiescent), 2017

watercolor graphite on watercolor paper 15 x 11 in.

photograph courtesy of the artist

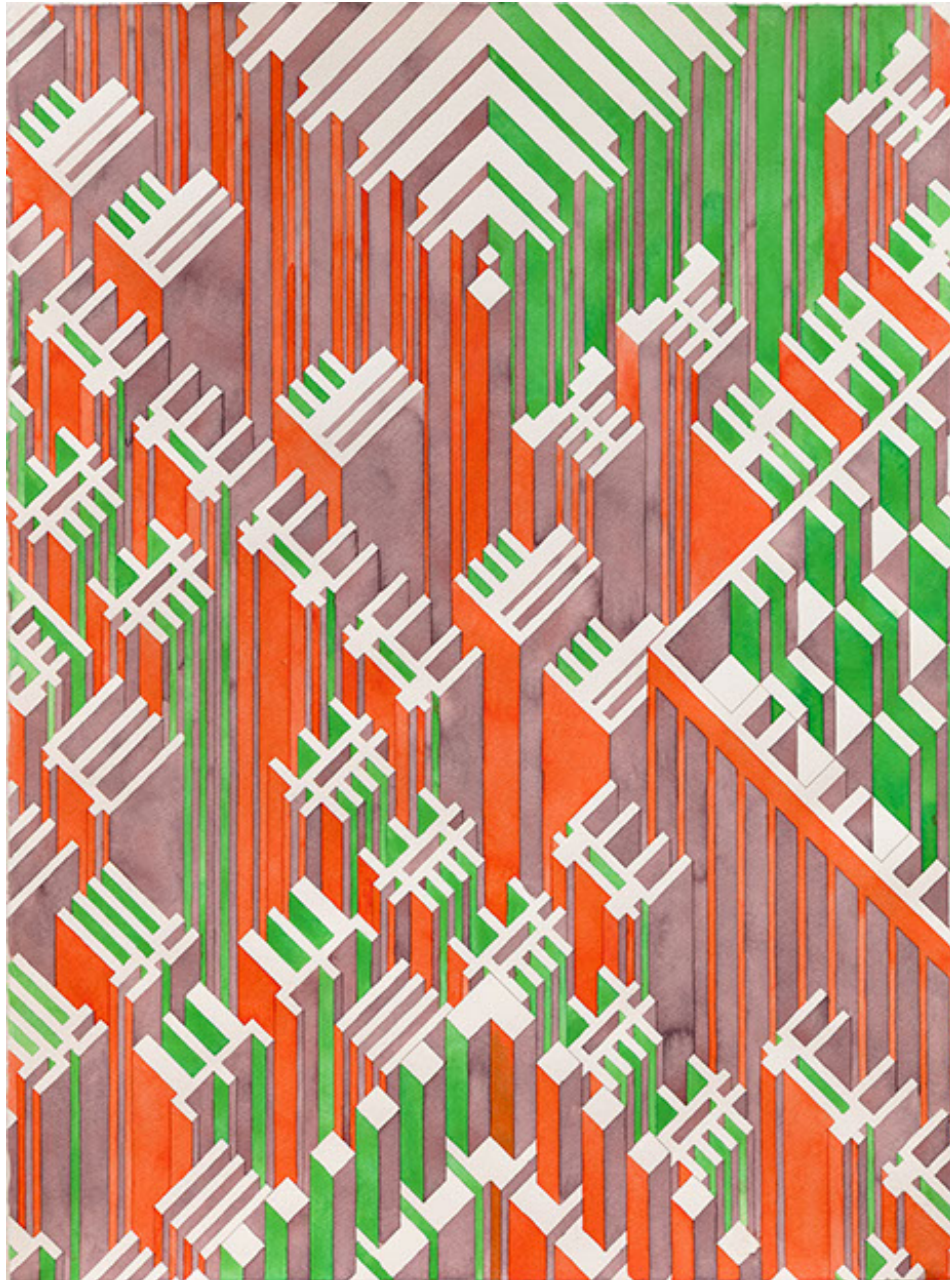
Untitled (disconsolate), 2017

watercolor graphite on watercolor paper 15 x 11 in.

photograph courtesy of the artist

One such historical example happened to be fresh in my mind at the time of the opening. I had recently read a story about Nicolae Ceasescu's policy of Systematization in Communist Romania in Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estes' introduction to the 2004 edition of Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. She writes briefly about the forcible displacement of rural populations from their ancestral farm villages and subsequent relocation in large, multi-story, cement apartment complexes. These were often without amenities like running water. In fact, these high rise apartment buildings (which happen to resemble elements in Naber's paintings) had no restrooms¹. The tenants of multiple buildings would have to share a single outdoor latrine¹. The cultural vitality of each population was largely lost as land was confiscated and villages were systematically destroyed. Despite the hardship, the oppressed found ways to preserve what parts of their culture they could. Dr. Estes tells about a group of women who would gather in a story circle in the home of an elderly village member, and while making clothes together, would pass on their oral tradition to younger generations². So when Naber

says in a recent interview with Java Projects that his choice of watercolor was “a way to insert the human element”, I think he’s at least intuitively aware that he’s completing an apt poetic metaphor³. That’s why the abstraction of repression and struggle depicted in his work feels so relevant beyond its formal manifestation.



Untitled (bellicose), 2017

watercolor graphite on watercolor paper, 30 x 22 in.

photograph courtesy of the artist

I think an important part of the reason for the success of the artists’ paintings at Java Project is that he allows unconscious, intuitive forces to have their say, but remains cognizant enough to choose from what, in a sense, has worked through him. Philip Guston recognized the need to cultivate unconscious creative elements. In a conversation with Harold Rosenberg, he expressed his desire “to be a victim of mysterious forces” saying “In fact, it’s very difficult to

become one. You really have to prepare for that state.”⁴ Or from a different angle, one of my favorite Gerhard Richter notes regarding his “principled avoidance of the subject” in his landscape paintings made from photographic references is: “I see countless landscapes, photograph barely 1 in 100,000, and paint barely 1 in 100 of those that I photograph. I am therefore seeking something quite specific; from this I conclude that I know what I want.”⁵ In both cases, there is an acknowledgment of unconscious forces at work and, to whatever extent, a productive negotiation. In this way, artists like Nick Naber apply their intuition to find a greater richness of expression.

1 Gheorghe Boldur-Lățescu The Communist Genocide in Romania

Nova Science Publishers 2005 p.125

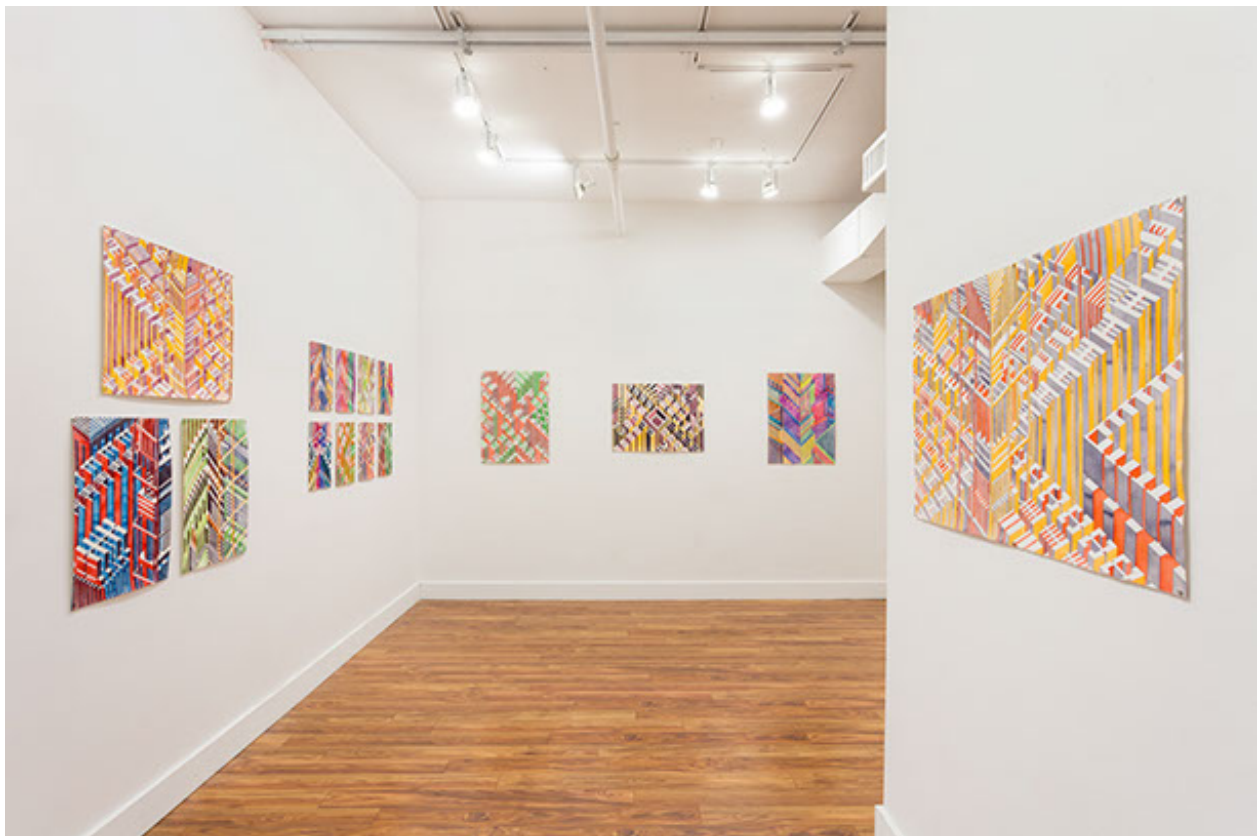
2 Joseph Campbell and Clarissa Pinkola Estes, Ph.D. Hero with a Thousand Faces
Commemorative Edition Princeton University Press 2004 pp.xxxiii-xxxv

3 Ori Geva, An Interview with Nick Naber, March 30, 2018 Java Studios Blog

<http://www.java-studios.com/blog/an-interview-with-nick-naber/>

4 Clark Coolidge, Philip Guton Collected Writings, Lectures, and Conversations University of California Press 2011 Conversation with Harold Rosenberg 1974 p.272

5 Dietmar Elger and Hans Ulrich Obrist Gerhard Richter Writings 1961-2007 D.A.P 2009 Notes 1986 p.162



Installation view at The Java Project

photograph courtesy of the artist

Nick Naber: Recent Paintings on Paper

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