HYPERALLERGIC
Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

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3D-Rendered Visions of Dystopia, Inspired by the Housing Market Crash

by Meredith Sellers

Tim Portlock, "Salon" (2011), archival pigment print, 54 x 72 inches (all images courtesy the artist and Locks Gallery)

PHILADELPHIA — Up the stairs on the second floor of Locks Gallery, you'll find an exhibition of landscapes. These aren't the boring, pastoral, plein air landscapes you'll find for sale in droves up the street in Old City. These landscapes are computer-generated, desolate, refuse-littered, apocalyptic, anti-pastoral. Tim Portlock's show Ash and Gold is his first with Locks, but the works build on a series of questions he's been asking about the housing market, sustainability, poverty, and gentrification since he moved to Philadelphia nine years ago.

My most intense experience with Portlock's work was at his last show at Vox Populi, 11th_St_City_Symphony.mp4, before leaving the Philadelphia artist collective in 2013. It featured a single computer-rendered 3D animation of the view from the gallery's windows, which were situated directly behind the viewer as you watched. In the animation, you see Philadelphia's swift gentrification unfold in a

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matter of minutes. Vox is one of a number of artist galleries in what's known as the "319 Building," for its address at 319 N. 11th Street. The neighborhood is known by several names: Callowhill, Chinatown North, the Eraserhood (after Eraserhead, as it was David Lynch's college stomping ground), and, more recently, it's been rebranded by developers as "the Loft District" for its large industrial buildings that are being converted into luxury lofts, thereby placing the future of the 319 Building, and all the galleries and artist studios in it, in a precarious position.

Installation view of Tim Portlock's 'Ash and Gold' at Locks Gallery

"11th_St_City_Symphony.mp4" is also on view at Locks, but in many ways the work feels specific to Vox Populi: it shows the collapse and consequent demolition of a building that used to stand across from the gallery. This scene is followed by a shower of building material raining from the sky, which lands perfectly in place to construct the 319 Building's newest neighbor, the anonymous-looking Goldtex Building (one of the aforementioned converted luxury lofts). Banners offering condolences for the city of Philadelphia — "In loving memory of the Workshop to the World," "Our deepest sorrows for your loss" — flutter in the breeze. This swirl of activity occurs around one of the neighborhood's most iconic structures, the Reading Viaduct, a raised railway long abandoned to the homeless and urban explorers. It is soon to become the "Rail Park," a copycat project of New York's High Line that will raise the desirability of the neighborhood and, in all likelihood, lead to the demise of the 319 Building as an Arts Space. Watching "11th_St_City_Symphony.mp4" for the first time ran a chill down my spine, and it's a vision of the future that plays out in front of my eyes every time I look out the Vox Populi gallery windows. The animation stuck with me, strongly.

But at Locks, "11th_St_City_Symphony.mp4" is on view in a rear conference room, and the poignancy of Portlock's gesture feels a little less urgent in the rarified space of a gallery that sits on idyllic Washington Square Park, in one of the wealthiest

neighborhoods in Philadelphia. Still, Potlock's other works on view have poignancy. Gritty, figureless street scenes of dystopic fantasy landscapes based on Philadelphia and San Bernardino populate the gallery as well, harking to a post-society future seemingly populated only by roving packs of wild dogs. The Philadelphia works are bathed in the orange light of dusk, seen through what looks like a nuclear smog.

Tim Portlock, "Yellow Dancer" (2015), archival pigment print, 54 x 72 inches

Empty shopping carts sit in the street, surrounded by chip bags, newspapers, milk crates, and other refuse that commonly litters the streets. Dogs sit next to a lake created by a flooded parking lot, and the city's iconic sculpture of William Penn which tops City Hall has been replaced by a sculpture of a naked man, arm outstretched in mimicry of Penn's pose, which gestures to the place where he signed the first peace treaty with the Lenape Indians.

The San Bernardino work was created when Portlock went to the West Coast to retrace the fallout of the 2008 housing market collapse. Interested in, as he put it, "how the market entraps people in poverty," he traveled first to Las Vegas, the foreclosure capital of the nation, and then to San Bernardino, which followed closely behind. Portlock cruised the streets, taking thousands of pictures of still-vacant properties, and modeling them in 3D-animation software. The scenes are skewed, with a strange perspective from above, giving the houses, shops, and freeways an eerie dollhouse effect. Some images play with a kind of magical realism — "Desert Rain" (2015) shows a vacant shopping plaza, raining down signs advertising sales, pawn shops, tax services, and cash for gold. The graphics are made from the same software as video games, and lend a feeling of lingering in a dangerous place, as one might in a first-person shooter game. The work was completed in the months prior to the mass shooting in San Bernardino, which killed 14 people, but the events cast a pall over the ominous feelings the pieces conjure.

Tim Portlock, "Desert Rain" (2015), archival pigment print, 54 x 72 inches

A video work, "The Best Times Win," shows banners suspended in the breeze, floating gently above vacant buildings and silent construction sites: "Building for Lease," "Manhattan West / $170,000,000 to date/ construction dormant since 2008," "Vantage Lofts $160,000,000..." In one sequence, a banner twists around itself above a parking lot with palm trees, dancing in rays of sunlight. In another, a flat, white shape drops from the sky, draping the skeleton of an incomplete building in sensuous folds. The next sequence opens with a writhing white square filling the screen, its ripples transforming into a sheet that becomes caught on a sign, reading in peeling letters, "THIS INVESTMENT MANAGED BY _____ INVESTMENTS CALL 702-737-1753 POTENTIAL HIGH-RISE SITE." These abstractions push the animations past a realm of reality, into a place of a dark futuristic fantasy, or an alternate version of the past.

Portlock's work inherently addresses the US, and continually refers back to paintings of the Hudson River School and their "positivist notions of American identity," as Portlock put it. The wide, dystopic vistas he portrays are the direct result — 200 years later — of these notions of positivism in collusion with late capitalist values. The work grapples with ideas of social responsibility, environmental destruction, and a precarious future where we will live in the ruins of a civilization we built, then decimated.

Tim Portlock, "Sundown" (2011), archival pigment print, 54 x 72 inches