

JOHN MOORE

Paintings: 1967–2006

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Essay by Debra Bricker Balken

John Moore: A Brief Overview
Debra Bricker Balken

The wind came cutting off the river. He took out his hand organizer and poked a note to himself about the anachronistic quality of the word skyscraper. No recent structure ought to bear this word. It belonged to olden soul of awe, to the arrowed towers that were a narrative long before he was born.

Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*

While John Moore's paintings from the past thirty-five years or so have been pervaded by a distinct stasis and calm, these characteristics belie an undercurrent of anxiety, of a mutable built environment that has been ravaged and worn, subject either to neglect, demolition or change, the ongoing processes of either urban turnover or decline. However beguiling the warm and muted light that frequently bathes his images of office buildings, apartments, factories, row houses, skyscrapers, smoke stacks, viaducts and bridges, transforming them into serene compositions, there is a sense of unease in Moore's work, the feeling that this landscape too will soon change. While devoid of motion and activity, and seemingly stable and frozen in time, he reminds us through his melange of structures and architectural styles that these forms are impermanent, part of a volatile, ruptured history. But Moore is also a bit of voyeur of this ephemeral urban process, frequently positioning himself from within his studio to render his scenes, the window frame a potent intermediary between him and subjects. And, from this secluded distance, the monuments and landmarks of numerous cities are observed for all of their intricacy and detail while also ironically becoming, as it turns out, an extension of his imagination.

Before Moore left graduate school in the late 1960s, his paintings revealed an exacting facility, drawn with an expert precision that suggested the skills of a draftsman, a trade that he had actually pursued at McDonnell-Douglas in Saint Louis before entering the studio programs at Washington University and later at Yale. In *Oak Lane*, 1967-71, for example, a work that he embarked on while still at Yale, a sitter straddles a wooden table placed to the side of a central fireplace which has been framed by two

vertical windows, disclosing a row of townhouses beyond. Every element in this large scale canvas is painted with a degree of verisimilitude, an almost photographic likeness that connotes technical perfection. But wait, hold on, look again: this is a bizarre combination of furnishings and forms, an airless space, moreover, that teeters on the surreal, while altering our perception of the deftness of the composition. Rather than a carbon copy of a found interior, the painting has been highly staged, what with an empty, yellow, banal chair occupying our primary attention. A yellow chair?! The presence of the sitter, shunted to the side, has also become mysterious, yet part of a narrative whose drama is suspended and withheld. And, to compound the painting's eccentricity, the austerity of the room, with its few, minimal appointments, contrasts with the architectural profusion and density glimpsed through the windows, suggesting that this home is anything but ordered, off kilter and out of sync even, a place that the artist has manufactured and re-aligned.

Moore's painting, in fact, has had a hybrid component from the beginning of his career, a feature that skews the otherwise realism of his work. Like *Oak Lane*, all of his paintings from the late 1960s onwards, are composite scenes, an admixture of disparate fixtures, rooms, landscapes and architectonic forms that he has conjoined together, adding a layer of fiction to what otherwise poses as fact. These paintings are neither documents of known environments, nor faithful duplications of a specific city or street. While all of his work is derived from

either plein-air watercolor sketches, slides or photographs that he makes or shoots in his travels both abroad and in the United States, his images are always deployed out of context, recast in an inventive world that now skirts truth.

Many of Moore's paintings in the 1970s were given to still-life arrangements, but these subjects always existed in relationship to some dominant architectural motif or interior. In *Still Life with Commemorative Plate*, 1972, a table top with a quirky array of objects becomes subsumed within a placidly lit white room, the grey shadows thrown from a vase and table legs an integral part of the surroundings. Like the urns, glasses, dishes and bowls in *Wainwright*, 1981, which are juxtaposed against a heavily veined marble wall, Moore mined these implements not only for their beauty and enigma but as a means to enhance the overall design features of the room. Architecture would eventually become the primary content of his work in the early 1980s, rendered alternatively through a window as in *Night Studio*, 1989 or on its own as in *Near Lincoln Highway*, 1988-93. But as in all of his paintings, Moore's adroit realism would continue to be a foil, employed either to intensify the abstract properties of window casements, panes and radiator components as in *Night Studio*, or detract from the ersatz nature of the city that is projected in the rear. And, with light always an emotive, transforming feature in his work, his largely industrial and urban landscapes would become, especially towards the end of the decade, a type of reverie on modernism, its bygone structures and monu-

ments sometimes depicted, as in *Near Lincoln Highway*, at day's end.

While there are many historic exemplars that could be invoked as precedents for Moore's work, there are three figures, in particular, who stand out as noteworthy models: Charles Demuth, Charles Sheeler and Ralston Crawford, painters who were associated with either the rise or continuation of modernism in America, and who were specifically drawn to its new centers of manufacturing and commerce. But unlike these artists who rendered their factory complexes as icons of progress, as idealized symbols that embodied America's emerging economic prowess, Moore, who has revisited some of the same sites that they painted, has looked at the architecture of industry with a more distanced eye, noting its current desuetude and abandoned state. His painting of *Coatsville*, 1987, for example, a town in southeastern Pennsylvania where Demuth and Crawford had also worked, is now represented as an artifact or relic, its smokestacks inactive and no longer bellowing. However, re-composed and fitted with architectural elements and structures that are derived from differing sources, altering again its sense of certainty, the crystalline light in *Coatsville* magnifies every facade and rooftop, affirming that these buildings have been forsaken.

Sometimes Moore reworks his paintings over a long period of time, adjusting and re-arranging features so that the sense of dislocation becomes more uncanny and pronounced. *Station District*, 1992–2005, for instance, was painted over more

than a decade. While patterned on the area around South Station in Boston and its then massive excavation project known as the “Big Dig” – an underground highway system which is almost finished, having reconfigured the City into more seamless neighborhoods – the towering tenement building in the painting, like many of the apartment complexes beyond, are taken from Barcelona, a city whose outskirts has also been bisected and disrupted by roads, fracturing its former continuity and life. Moore began work on the painting after a trip to Spain in 1992 when he still lived in Boston, linking the desolation of the two urban sites. However, this pastiche of architecture has been revised by the artist yet again – much like the urban renewal that he depicts – with the recent introduction of a tree and wall in the foreground of the work, both of which are based on Moore's own courtyard off his house in Philadelphia, a city that he has resided in since 1999.

Although Moore has occasionally inserted some element of vegetation in his compositions, such as the near barren tree in *Birds, 3/4 the Moon*, 1993, which once stood outside his studio in Boston, but which is here transplanted to an avenue in Barcelona – still confounding our sense of reality and expectation – more recently, nature has played an equal, if not ascendent role in his work, dwarfing the man-made structures that have become a determinant of its annihilation and ruin. In *Smoke*, 2005, a painting completed last year, two tree trunks and the stalks of elegant,



Thursday, 1980
oil on canvas
92 x 141 inches
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

soaring flowers which are set on either side of a wall, overshadow the faint telephone lines and now minuscule manufacturing plant that exists in the distance. The wall is the same barrier that appears in *Station District*, becoming, like the device of the window that he has used in the past, a means to separate two opposing worlds, while also blurring the line between the real and the imagined. But, like the vacant lot in *Upper Bridge*, 2005, where the wall from his Philadelphia courtyard also figures, defining the edge of a garden with springtime flowers and grasses, and an old tree stump that is about to bear leaves, Moore suggests that maybe nature might be more constant than culture, at least more resistant and familiar, sprouting the same foliage each year.

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