



Shotgun Review

Erik Parra: History by Choice at Eleanor Harwood Gallery

By Charmaine Koh May 8, 2018

Shotgun Reviews are an open forum where we invite the international art community to contribute timely, short-format responses to an exhibition or event. If you are interested in submitting a Shotgun Review, please click this link for more information. In this Shotgun Review, Charmaine Koh reviews Erik Parra: History by Choice at Eleanor Harwood Gallery in San Francisco.

Nothing is as it seems in Erik Parra's *History by Choice* at Eleanor Harwood Gallery. At first glance, the paintings of domestic interiors appeared so banal that I almost passed them by, but a faint, disquieting strangeness about the depicted spaces gave me pause. Chairs float, legless. Views of the outdoors beckon, but turn out to be mere reflections in mirrors. Shadows—which typically impart dimensionality—are so stark that they flatten entire scenes into blocks of color. Parra's refusal of depth even extends to a would-be sculpture in the gallery's center: a painting of a sculpture, comically installed on a pedestal like a three-dimensional object, and aptly titled *Function Follows Form* (2017).

The dangers of form taking precedence over other considerations loom in the alternately darkened and bleached-out spaces of Parra's paintings. Although one would expect a home's interior to look intimate and alive, here it appears cold and alien, almost otherworldly. Not a soul can be seen. With their impeccable modernist furnishings, the spaces present a utopia of design. Yet, they are also dystopian in their untouched and untouchable sterility, portents of what happens when design is not grounded in the body and is instead consumed by aesthetics and concepts. Lived realities cede to notional ideals; representation becomes abstraction. Design is often regarded as a panacea, promising better living and even better thinking, but Parra's paintings expose this as a dream. For all their painstaking accuracy of proportion and perspective, the worlds these paintings construct feel distant, unreal, and un-lived.

The exhibition statement quotes Gaston Bachelard, a French philosopher who wrote about the phenomenology of the house, on the preferability of never arriving at one's ultimate dream house. If the unhomey scenes in Parra's paintings exemplify the dream house that the imperatives of design would lead us to, then one has to hope that, as Bachelard would have it, we never succeed in getting there.

Erik Parra: History by Choice was on view at Eleanor Harwood Gallery in San Francisco through April 28, 2018.

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