



# Union College exhibit examines Katrina's legacy

Paintings aim to give specificity to storm's devastation

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Laini Nemett "Africa, Delaware, & Roosevelt Island" 2013 (oil and gesso transfer on linen)

Laini Nemett's paintings at the Mandeville Gallery make you wonder how she might depict, and interpret, the untold ruins left in the wake of this year's hurricanes. Her oeuvre of the last few years revolves around disasters, man-made and natural, like Hurricane Katrina. She moves in, house by house, to rubble and to physical recovery.

In this show of large oil paintings on linen, smaller paintings on plastic, and some pencil drawings, Nemett deconstructs and constructs. The debris shown in the large works is buttressed by new construction, sometimes in a perplexing way, as if the two are simultaneous. These paintings are fairly detailed, and they have the feel of being based on several photographs that are collaged, at least conceptually, so that the natural perspective is thrown out of whack.

This perceptual complication enlivens. In "Africa, Delaware & Roosevelt Island" there is a foreground of broken masonry, some new wood framing behind and a city in the far distance. The perspective seems slightly askew, and the painting itself is a combination of two separate stretched linens butted together. The disorientation felt when looking at it is mild but essential.

Similar effects pervade all the big works. "Last Door on the Right" almost certifies her formula, with layers of decay and rebuilding moving from foreground to background.

Halfway through the show I discovered, behind the glass doors in the alcove, the three crude models she made of photographs and cardboard, including the one she used for "Last Door." Nemett, by constructing in three dimensions from various images at various angles, creates her final point of view artificially, physically. The models don't seem like finished works, but they are illuminating, almost essential to understanding the big paintings.

The smaller paintings, called "studies," have a fast intensity and are simpler, most of them showing what appear to be the remains of houses that have been bulldozed into piles, waiting for the dumpster. As paintings they are simple and not quite self-sufficient (outside of the show), but they bring up what Nemett intends as a socially concerned aspect to her output.

Nemett's subtitle to this show is "When We Lived Here," suggesting her works are about inhabitants, and about the loss of places for them to live. So even though the debris and new construction is geometric and spatial—and the paintings are completely empty of actual people—there is an implication of caring about the individual tragedies at hand.

This is amplified, at least on paper, by specific locations given for the smaller paintings. One is simply titled, "Neighbors: Between Flood & Egania." Another is an address, "720 Charbonnet," which I looked up on Google Maps. The New Orleans street view shows a cleaned up, empty lot where previously there was (as shown in 2007 in the Google history) a house. No doubt people once lived there. Another crude view

showed a pile of house parts not so different than some of her painted views. It felt good to connect the works to reality, a definable place and a moment.

I don't doubt the artist's good intentions, but I have to say these works put a huge burden on the viewer to empathize, through the art, with actual victims of Katrina. Nemett's works in the gallery are so much about a physical understanding of space and architecture, and her larger works about a painterly, flexible transformation of reality to a confounding, fictional montage, it seems almost facetious to stretch the meaning here into some kind of social awareness. The fact that the small works referring to Katrina were made in 2017, over a decade after the fact, is also perplexing.

Keeping to the fact that the paintings are, to me, cold, academic and analytical, there does remain something fascinating about Nemett's method, her taking apart and remaking these places with models and re-configurations. That the works all play a similar game might dilute this, but taken individually, the best large works are fascinating and commanding.

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