

UTOPIA

NOW ENOC
PEREZ



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Enoc Perez pursues his subjects with the single-minded focus of a stalker. The objects of his attention are the architectural icons of the recent past: modernist buildings from the early and mid-20th century that embody the era's sleekly packaged belief in the promise of technology and the future. For his exhibition at the Corcoran, Perez sets his sights on Chicago's Marina Towers (completed in 1962) and Washington, D.C.'s Watergate complex (completed in 1971), locations that allow him to probe the intersections between utopian ideals, haunted pasts, and individual experience. Yet as much as Perez's works investigate place, they invite us to consider the faltering condition and enduring seductions of painting in contemporary life.

¹ *Marina Towers, Chicago, November 2011, 2011*, oil on canvas, 110 x 90 in.

Perez describes his paintings as “accumulations of time.” Throughout his career, he has restored the element of time—personal memory, political history, and physical decay—to modernist buildings, structures that have come to symbolize the desire to transcend such concerns. Perez has sought out landmarks of the modernist style, tracing a map of the recent urban landscape that is as much mental and social as it is physical. His painted city includes the Seagram Building, United Nations Building, and Lever House in New York City (fig.11), the Eero Saarinen TWA Terminal at JFK Airport, the Dorado Hilton in his native Puerto Rico, and the Nakagin Capsule Tower in Tokyo (fig.14).

Such buildings have been embalmed in cultural memory as the visual language of the future—dated symbols of an old-fashioned vision of the world to come. But while their claims to social transformation and technological promise have been eroded by time and the experience of history, the structures themselves have maintained their streamlined serenity. Undertaken in the most traditional of mediums, Perez's own painterly project parallels the ambitions of his modern subjects to arrest time. Yet it also recognizes the failure inherent in both, and the romantic notions of already outdated enterprises.

Perez's paintings are depictions of specific buildings, but they are also representations of personal encounters. In his eight large-scale, close-up depictions of the Marina Towers, Perez meticulously and repeatedly fashions portraits of the twin skyscrapers (fig.1, 6–9). Using his own snapshots as a starting point, he bathes the towers in blazing orange and lipstick red, viridian green, and inky purple. The images are doubled and off-register to varying degrees, forming a recurring echo that heightens the sense of an all-consuming if dizzying focus and making reference to his own painting process. The works are labored attempts to sear the structures into memory.

The intensity of Perez's vision rubs off, and the series encourages attention to every change in hue and focus. The buildings in *Marina Towers, November 2011*, for example, have the rounded fullness of the structures as seen in three dimensions (fig.1), whereas those in *Marina Towers, May 2012* appear like stark slabs schematically blocked onto the canvas (fig.9). The columns betray minute shifts in time of day, season, and mood.

But such intensity also directs attention to the artist's obsessive vision itself, and how quickly an architectural love affair can sour. Just as Perez's repeated return to the site suggests a quest for a never-quite-realized perfect image of the towers,

the viewer also becomes aware of their flaws and excesses. The eight paintings together take on a cast that none have individually—over time, they begin to look raw and abraded, the central forms appearing like scars that mar the canvas. The repetition makes clear the personal investment in this seemingly most impersonal of subjects.

Drawing on the tradition of the *memento mori*, Perez creates works that are as aware of decay as of surface beauty, and as full of longing for an imagined future as they are cognizant of its futility. His buildings become corporeal as he imparts to their sleek surfaces a heavy, pitted texture, replacing shiny skins of glass with thick clots of paint. *Pavilion of the Soviet Union, Expo 67, 2009*, Perez's depiction of the USSR's structure for the Montreal World's Fair, appears lit from within by searing yellow, radiating a heat that throbs against the teal dusk outside (fig.13). *Lever House, New York, June 2010*, bleached by the sun or the passage of time, melts into the creamy paste of its environment (fig.11). In *Dorado Hilton Hotel, Puerto Rico, September 2010*, gummy clumps of purple paint are placed atop an acid-pink wash, obscuring the surface in an ungainly balance of figure and ground (fig.12). In the "Marina Towers" series, the steel and glass skyscrapers are multiplied into a thicket of columns, simultaneously solid and slurry.



2-5 *Watergate, Washington, D.C., June 2012, related drawings, 2012*



- 6 *Marina Towers, Chicago, July 2011, 2011, oil on canvas, 110 x 90 in.*
- 7 *Marina Towers, Chicago, January 2012, 2012, oil on canvas, 110 x 90 in.*
- 8 *Marina Towers, Chicago, February 2012, 2012, oil on canvas, 110 x 90 in.*
- 9 *Marina Towers, Chicago, May 2012, 2012, oil on canvas, 110 x 90 in.*

The lush but leaden quality of these works is derived largely from Perez's method of paint application. Although his work is steeped in history, there is little that is traditional about his technique, which is based on photographs and found imagery from postcards and magazines, and combines elements of brushwork with a kind of primitive printmaking. To create his works, Perez first makes a series of preparatory drawings on paper, coating their backs with each color that will be in the final painting. He then places the drawing on the canvas and traces the image, pressing on paint layer by layer. This transfer method mimics the four-color separation and processes of mechanical reproduction while simultaneously drawing on conventional painting techniques. The paintings can comprise up to thirty transfers of color, each one painstakingly applied on top of the others.

Perez's process has the effect of slowing down the production of each work, of consciously turning a snapshot into a painting and capturing its gradual maturation through time. The resulting works are simultaneously intense and faded, with the quality of a memory.

In his monumental diptych of the Watergate commissioned for the Corcoran's rotunda, Perez makes his process, and its connections with time and history, more visible. In a variation of

his usual technique, Perez paints directly on top of a printed photograph, foregrounding the intertwining of the painted and the technological. Whereas earlier works subsume a mechanical printing technique into the painting process itself, the imagery in *Watergate* instead emphasizes the distinctions between the mediums. The photograph evokes a moment frozen in history, both immediate and remote; the paint on its surface makes it tactile and physical, creating erasures that demand to be navigated in real time.

Although Perez's architectural portraits are always depicted up-close, *Watergate* is an immersive, consuming work, consisting of two paintings 13½ feet high and 52 feet across. Stretching across the gallery's rounded walls, the painting is a cloud of swooping curves and jaunty angles, made stark with a palette of blacks, whites, and greys. The paint, pressed and dripped onto the printed photograph, has the effect of literally obscuring the building's facade, famous from countless photographs and newsreels documenting the political scandal that took its name. White and grey blocks of paint hover on top of the building's image, echoing the structure's windows but not conforming to them, miming the print medium through hand-applied brushwork. Black brushstrokes gather to form masses of foliage and then break free, dripping to the



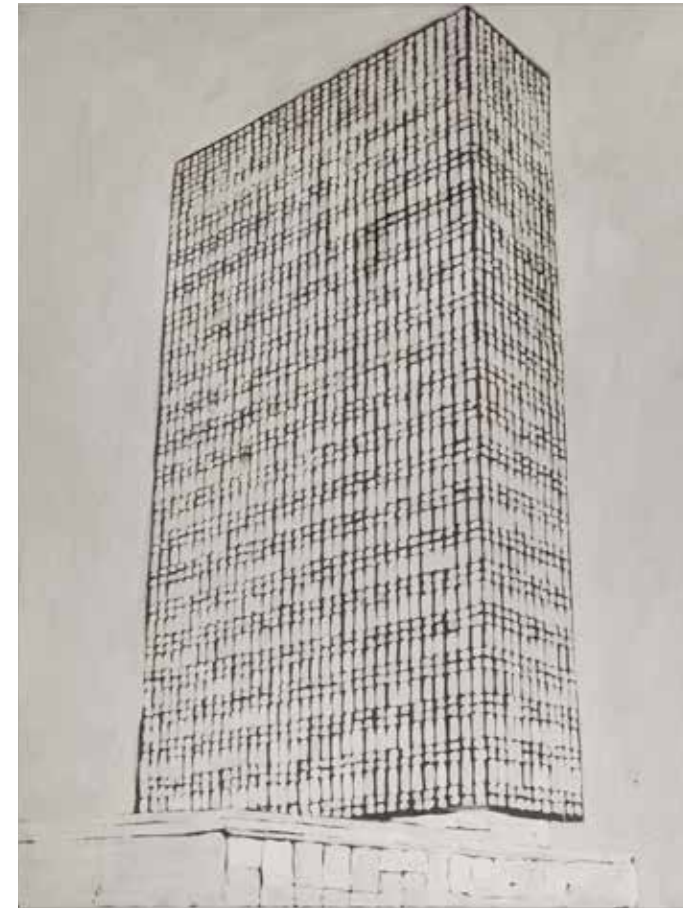
10 *Watergate, Washington, D.C., June 2012, 2012 (detail)*. Oil and acrylic on synthetic canvas, two paintings, each 163 x 624 in.

picture's base and then running into a massive black square that abruptly and awkwardly interrupts the architecture's graceful arc.

With its black and white palette and recognizable imagery, *Watergate* courts associations with history and denies them, consciously suggesting newsprint and documentary film while obscuring its subject. The painted squares applied clumsily over the building's image contain obvious political metaphors, but such obfuscations are more evocative of the workings of the mind and of memory than of political history. Immersive in scale and cinematic in effect, the painting calls to mind a place and event known through stories and images, built up and concealed over time.

In *Watergate*, Perez has created a space that conjures both continuity and rupture, giving form to the fundamental irresolutions of time. Interweaving painting with photography and technology, Perez's work strives to make solid the processes of memory and the vagaries of experience. While acknowledging the probability of its failure, it vibrates with the intensity of the attempt.

Sarah Newman
Curator of Contemporary Art



11 *Lever House, New York*, June 2010. Oil on canvas, 80 x 60 in.



12 *Dorado Hilton Hotel, Puerto Rico, September 2010*. Oil on canvas, 60 x 80 in.



13 *Pavilion of the Soviet Union, Expo 67, 2009*. Oil on canvas, 60 x 80 in. Courtesy of Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.



14 *Nakagin Capsule Tower, Tokyo, 2009. Oil on canvas, 80 x 60 in. Courtesy of Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.*

ABOUT THE ARTIST: Enoc Perez was born in Puerto Rico in 1967 and moved to New York in 1986, where he continues to live and work. He received his BFA from Pratt Institute in 1990 and his MFA from Hunter College in 1992. He has had one-artist exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami (2007), and Lever House, New York (2007), and his work has been included in exhibitions across the United States and in Europe, including *Skyscraper: Art and Architecture Against Gravity* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (2012), *Painting the Glass House* at the Aldrich Museum, Ridgefield, CT (2008), and *The Undiscovered Country* at UCLA's Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2004). His paintings are in the permanent collections of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Puerto Rico; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; and the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami. This is his first exhibition in Washington, D.C.

ENOC PEREZ: UTOPIA

NOVEMBER 10, 2012–FEBRUARY 10, 2013
Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

All works, unless otherwise noted, courtesy of the artist and Acquavella Galleries, New York

Marina Towers, Chicago, July 2011, 2011
oil on canvas, 110 x 90 in.

Marina Towers, Chicago, September 2011, 2011
oil on canvas, 110 x 90 in.

Marina Towers, Chicago, October 2011, 2011
oil on canvas, 110 x 90 in.

Marina Towers, Chicago, November 2011, 2011
oil on canvas, 110 x 90 in.

Marina Towers, Chicago, January 2012, 2012
oil on canvas, 110 x 90 in.

Marina Towers, Chicago, February 2012, 2012
oil on canvas, 110 x 90 in.

Marina Towers, Chicago, May 2012, 2012
oil on canvas, 110 x 90 in.

Marina Towers, Chicago, August 2012, 2012
oil on canvas, 110 x 90 in.

Watergate, Washington, D.C., June 2012, 2012
oil and acrylic on synthetic canvas, two paintings, each 163 x 624 in.

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Cover image and 15 (right) *Watergate, Washington, D.C., June 2012, 2012 (detail)*. Oil and acrylic on synthetic canvas, two paintings, each 163 x 624 in.





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