

Concrete Abstractions: Notes on the Imaginative Geography of a City By Rich Blint

There is something unusually striking about Aaron Gilbert's *Song to the Siren* (2020). As a figurative work, the painting is rare for its at once abstract illusiveness and full-frontal address. The visual grammar deployed is typical of Gilbert's growing corpus: The subject(s) dominate the scene with plaintive and mildly accusatory eyes, and the drama is characteristically domestic. Figuring a landscape dystopic, otherworldly, and somehow mundane and every day, the topography trades a body of water for the urban geographies that are Gilbert's preferred imaginative terrain—although we do well not to miss the haunting brick structure that walls off and presses up against a fragmented and menacing sky beckoning to a desolate horizon. Perhaps this is the message lodged in the deep-set eyes of the encumbered brown man journeying across water with a sleeping child and more earthly possessions. For what does the viewer do with the insistent query that forms his mouth? What narratives might we activate and impose as acquitting response to the scene of dislocation to which we are witness? For all its mystical wonder, the painting achieves revelatory promise through wry realism, juxtaposing cross-generational capitalist consumption (represented through footwear, “wife beater,” and tattoo) with the life and death rupture that has set yet another family flowing, endlessly lighting out for more liberatory territory.

Martin Wong's *Sharpe & Dottie* (1984) confirms the wisdom behind this timely exhibition of autobiographical urbanity. The painting is shrewdly economical, depicting a diminutive couple locked in desperate intimacy before the impossible backdrop of an irregularly windowed tenement, seemingly oblivious to the sea of urban detritus that forms the ground beneath them. This figurative abstraction on a deceptively spare canvas is a constituent component of Wong's quiet brilliance. One marvels at the expressive effort made real, of the hushed presentation of love in what for the dominant culture registers as the most unlikely of places. Wong's 1980s New York is a city recovering from bankruptcy and willful blight, while simultaneously besieged by the devastation of crack-cocaine and the depopulating effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, urban renewal, and the incarceration of massive numbers of black and brown residents, which found legislative expression in the landmark Crime Bill of 1994. Wong's sealed-off windows and carefully rendered brick walls achieve the bleak atmospherics of a community shot through and disappeared. The artist's deeply sensitive and socially acute visuality confirms neither his prescience nor prophecy, but rather his keen understanding of the brutal habits of American power that renders entire populations disposable.

Nocturne at Ridge Street and Stanton (1987) is a powerful case in point. Here, Wong conjures the psychic life of Loisaida inhabitants wiped-out through the well-established routines of social engineering and racialized governmentality. Enshrined in the crushing finality of rows of cement-sealed apartments buildings intermittently brightened by the play of the moon or towering electric grids, Wong figures an alienated city that begs the lie of Reagan-era policies that would usher in decades of urban decline through the violent economic priorities of neoliberal privatization.

As an exhibition, *Martin Wong and Aaron Gilbert (1981-2021)* necessarily triggers a search for correspondences and departures between the late master and Gilbert. The result betrays a resonant kinship early and in process. Where Wong is judicious with color and the animated figure, Gilbert delivers a full, yet restrained and moody palette of near liquid lines and folds. Where the built environment of the prison and the evacuated block serve as Wong's chief points of departure, Gilbert remains compelled by the power of individuated subjects to generalize shared conditions—although the structures of state-sponsored coercion are never out of sight.

Powerfully cinematic and wrenching, *T-Mobile* (2021) figures the city as a menacing concrete jungle whose inhabitants are beaten down and tripped up on unforgiving ground. Viewed in the shadow of the indifferent and extractive ubiquity of cellular retailers, Gilbert's sensitively overdrawn

protagonist is formidable despite the quiet pleading legible in the soul-weary stare with which she assails the viewer. We should be careful not to assume any meaningful knowledge about her regardless of the urban markers spilling out all around. And one has to wonder what holds the gaze of the departed, long-necked form over her shoulder. Similar to the murals that dot the geography of urban centers with large immigrant populations, the central subject reveals her connection to a cosmology maligned, but nevertheless vibrant and sustaining. Her sage countenance registers as both watchfulness over the quotidian dehumanization of everyday life, and announces itself as promise that there exists something more potent and life-giving than the material devastation on which so much of our society depends.

If Wong is compelled by the existential ravages of the claustrophobic and homosocial cellblock, Gilbert insists that we confront the crushing vulnerability of women isolated in an exacting city. *Summons* (2020) skewers the genteel associations with American womanhood through the haunting car-bound figure consumed by circumstance as she pumps breastmilk and cradles the latest unwelcome sanction by the state beneath her chin. And what to make of *goddess walks among us now* (2020) except to be startled by the emotional density Gilbert is able to achieve. The title and botanica memorial suggest a kind of social death further confirmed by the haggard comportment of the divine making her way as she drags the requisite laundry cart of the city-dweller behind her with eyes blasted and hair bedraggled—to say nothing of the devastation contained in the lost Medicaid card she leaves in her wake.

But more than the glimpses of dimensionality and elaborated personhood to which we are treated in Wong's body of work, Gilbert gives us fully realized scenes of joy and compassion among the dispossessed. *Empire state of mind/Flaco 730 Broadway* (2020) stages an imagined moment of tenderness between those caught in the crossfire of benign neglect. And *Love Still Good* (2021) intrudes on this moment of familial play to suggest that love always finds a way even in the face of the most dispiriting circumstances.

Preoccupied by the condition of contingency and precarity that remains a defining feature of urban life, the artists' commitment to a liberatory aesthetic short circuits conventional visual procedures. Squarely within the blues tradition that encourages practitioners to break pitch or shout in their quest for emphasis and clarity, Wong and Gilbert “worry the line” in their subversion of received expectations concerning figuration and abstraction by centering the imaginative and metaphysical, which requires us to linger and trace the outlines of populations we try so desperately not to see given our accidental and momentary avoidance of a similar circumstance.