



TODAY'S
MASTERS

ALINA GRASMANN SOMEPLACE IN BETWEEN

Viewers in search of experiential art need look no further than Alina Grasmann's paintings from *Sculpting in Time*, the solo show that New York City's Fridman Gallery devoted to her recently. Born in 1989, Grasmann grew up on the outskirts of Munich, the German city where she now lives and works. Earlier in life, Grasmann studied at Munich's Academy of Fine Arts, including a stint at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna, yet somehow her work is distinctly American. Thus it's only fitting that New York was where Grasmann chose to present *Sculpting in Time*, which actually contained two new series of large paintings — a curated blend of places both real and imaginary, emblematic of the artist's fascination with American mythology.

The first series — titled *The Montauk Project*, after a conspiracy theory of the same name — explores this exclusive beach community at the eastern tip of Long Island. Though the area is beautiful and quaint, Grasmann chose to focus on the secret government work that allegedly took place there — experiments with psychological warfare techniques and the possibilities of teleportation, mind control, and staged landings on the moon. The Swiss writer Max Frisch (1911–1991) set his novel *Montauk* here, and Grasmann, an avid reader, has long admired his knack for blending fact and fiction.

So began her own exposé, in which she depicts abandoned eateries, hotels, and other immaculate sites devoid of life. In each painting, the lights are blazing and it seems as though the residents were just there, but now, for reasons unknown, they have disappeared. The eeriness of this moment in time — in this unique place, quite literally captured — plays a critical role in what makes Grasmann's canvases so compelling.

In the Fridman exhibition's second series, also titled *Sculpting in Time*, Grasmann showcased spaces inside a sandstone-hued building in the desert town of Arcosanti, Arizona — a hamlet established in 1970 almost 70 miles north of Phoenix by Italian architect Paolo Soleri (1919–2013), who studied



The Montauk Project (how do you know), 2019, oil on canvas, 55 x 39 in., Fridman Gallery, New York City



The Montauk Project (you are a monster), 2019, oil on canvas, 39 x 55 in., Fridman Gallery, New York City

under Frank Lloyd Wright and carried out his mentor's vision of living largely in nature. Though Soleri built only 1 percent of his designs, Grasmann brings the entire place to life — yet its spaces are devoid of human life. In each room, she guides us through an imaginarium of objects, subtle symbols inviting us to fill in the blanks with our own subjective meanings. We can appreciate the beauty of the building, of course, but also its decay. *Sculpting in Time 1*, for instance, depicts a balcony with chairs around a table adorned with fresh poppies. We wonder what happened to the residents, and then our sense of dread, of disruption, grows as we notice that flames are engulfing a house in the distance.

Eerie and ethereal, Grasmann's scenes are clearly inspired by architecture, the constant that pulls everything together. Indeed, it is architecture and film that have fueled her vision over the years. *Sculpting in Time* is the title of the manifesto penned by Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky (1932–1986): both he and Grasmann offer compositions that combine movement and stillness to hold viewers' attention. David Lynch's, Alfred Hitchcock's, and the Coen brothers' directorial takes on



Sculpting in Time 4, 2020, oil on canvas, 51 x 70 in., Fridman Gallery, New York City



Sculpting in Time 1, 2020, oil on canvas,
51 x 70 in., Fridman Gallery, New York City

the American landscape also speak to Grasmann, who admires Michelangelo Antonioni's films as well. After a hard day of painting, she often watches movies by these and other masters in their original language, with English subtitles if needed, allowing herself to escape into their worlds at night.

Architecture was the career path Grasmann's father once considered pursuing; as a girl, she would sit with him drawing houses, over and over again. Today her approach is rooted in the same sense of place. She likes to visit the areas she will paint only after researching them — via books and films — and getting a feel for what she might experience once there. When she is actually in towns like Montauk and Arcosanti, Grasmann takes photographs of captivating scenes that play with light and shadows. These photos are the raw materials she will later manipulate — consciously, thoughtfully — before starting work on her paintings.

Late in 2018, Grasmann began selecting the photos she would consult to make the paintings exhibited at Fridman this past winter. First she altered them with Adobe Photoshop, adjusting their textures, compositions, and lighting as needed. She began each painting with a gray primer (a blend of white primer and black gesso) to ensure that the underlying tone is more neutral than what conventional white primers offer. Next she used chalk to draw the composition, then painted those elements that appear farthest away before homing in on what is closer, and perhaps less comfortable.

As for choosing which spaces to depict, Grasmann says she is simply drawn to them — first through reading and watching films, then in person, and finally in her photographs. She notes that American architecture is distinctive: “a little bit artificial, sometimes very temporary.”

(This makes sense coming from a European who grew up among buildings that often date back many centuries.) Yet Grasmann does not merely record actual American spaces, but alters them into new ones, working in a sort of fever dream to arrive at images that suit her objectives. “On the one hand, the place exists,” she explains, “but on the other, it's like it doesn't exist. It's something in between.”

At the Fridman Gallery, Grasmann arranged for J.S. Bach's choral prelude *BWV 639 (Ich ruf' zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ)* to play at designated times, such as 11:11, 3:33, 4:44, and 5:55. Per her fascination with conspiracy theories, these times lent themselves to chilling speculations and wishful thoughts, and this specific song had already played a prominent role in Tarkovsky's 1972 film *Solaris*. Grasmann saw it as aligned with all of her show's paintings, as it contains three simultaneous melodies that together create a polyphonic harmony akin to her images.

Indeed, by understanding her paintings as harmonies, viewers can discern three of Grasmann's strands for themselves: her exploration of the history of place, the ideas conveyed by her favorite films, and her own memories and experiences. Together they comprise a form of subjective reinvention that resonates powerfully on canvas. ●

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