



ART PAPERS

DEAN KESSMANN
WASHINGTON, DC

In the rare event that you've never lain on your back and traced imaginary constellations in the nubbins of a stucco ceiling, you might not understand Dean Kessmann's photographs. But no matter. It is the romance of finding illusionistic space within larger structures that motivates his photography—which has rarely been so straightforward or evocative as in his latest series. For *Architectural Intersections*, Kessmann focuses on a singular, simple subject, as he has in the past [Conner Contemporary Art; April 4—May 23, 2009]. In earlier series, he photographed wafers submerged in sacramental wine and plastic bags salvaged from the recycling bin, drawing an abstract, biomorphic quality from both the sublime and the mundane. Now, he strips away the transportive nature of his subjects—be it a narrative of transubstantiation or the sheer liquid movement of thin, formless plastic—pinning down his subjects as if on a slide, reducing them to specimens.

Not so for his photographs of ceilings, however. These images work like landscapes, playing on shadow and composition to arrive at pictures much larger than the ceilings themselves. Yet, they're depictions of nothing more than point, line, and plane. While color is merely a matter of a light-and-shadow trick on cream-colored wall here, Kessmann captures a modern palette of roses and chocolates. The coffee and cinnamon hues in *Untitled (Wisconsin House #3)*, 2009, are understated and painterly, though they still register the semigloss of off-white domestic house paint. In this, the series resounds as an essentially modernistic project: transforming common, commercial pigment into a tool for high, romantic abstraction.

Kessmann's depiction of light brings to mind the textures and colors of Charles Sheeler's delicate, romantic industrial landscapes. But color isn't the only Sheeler reference here: *Untitled (Wisconsin House #5)*, 2009, and *Untitled (Wisconsin House #6)*, 2009, both employ powerful diagonals to contrast values in the way that Sheeler does in works like *Church Street El*, 1920—

finding a transcendent quality in the built environment through perspective.

Untitled (Wisconsin House #9), 2009, perhaps best captures the spirit of the project with a direct quotation from Hiroshi Sugimoto's *Seascapes* series, 1980-ongoing. For his photographs of oceans and seas, Sugimoto trains his lens on oceanic horizons, capturing sea and sky in incredibly long exposures. Kessmann's photograph features a similar scene, down to the proportions of sky and ocean. In this case, though, our perspective is screwed up: the picture finds wall where it intersects with ceiling. The light source further enhances spatial illusion. The lower area of the image is a slick, oily surface, consistent with the paint that is actually being depicted but tweaked by long exposure to appear mysterious. Much as Kessmann's ocean contains depths, his sky betrays a bleakness reminiscent of the featureless sky in Caspar David Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea*, 1808-1810.

Those qualities are all contained in ceilings and walls—that is, the very elements that transform house into home by way of our lived-in experiences. Kessmann draws this transformation out in close confines, using perspective, composition, detail, and acute attention to light. In *Untitled (Wisconsin House #8)*, 2009, he finds abstraction in light that scatters from an unseen skylight onto the wall. With light, texture, and color—and the play between fine pictures and crude materials—Kessmann arrives at abstraction as a template for possibility beyond the romance that his work cites.

—Kriston Capps

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Dean Kessmann, *Untitled (Wisconsin House #4)*, 2009, from *Architectural Intersections* series, archival pigment print, 18.5 x 22.5 inches, ed. of 3; *Untitled (Wisconsin House #9)*, 2009, from *Architectural Intersections* series, archival pigment print, 28.5 x 35.5 inches, ed. of 2 | © Dean Kessmann; courtesy of Conner Contemporary Art, Washington, D.C.