

Land of the Giants

Local cityscapes in swirling Technicolor • BY FRANK GREEN

THREE MILE ISLAND IS a manifestation of an almost satanic beauty, a monstrous expression of pride and desire for power that is beautiful for its hatred of natural beauty, in its rejection of sweetness, in its insane scale. It is in its inhuman conception a completely human thing, an attempt to transform a whole region into an artifact. — Crispin Sartwell, "Technology and the Future of Beauty," *Harper's Magazine*, December 1999

Although he's describing a Pennsylvania power plant, Crispin Sartwell's conception of "satanic beauty" fits Cleveland's LTV steel plant as cozily as

ing her B.F.A. in 1995 from the Cleveland Institute of Art.

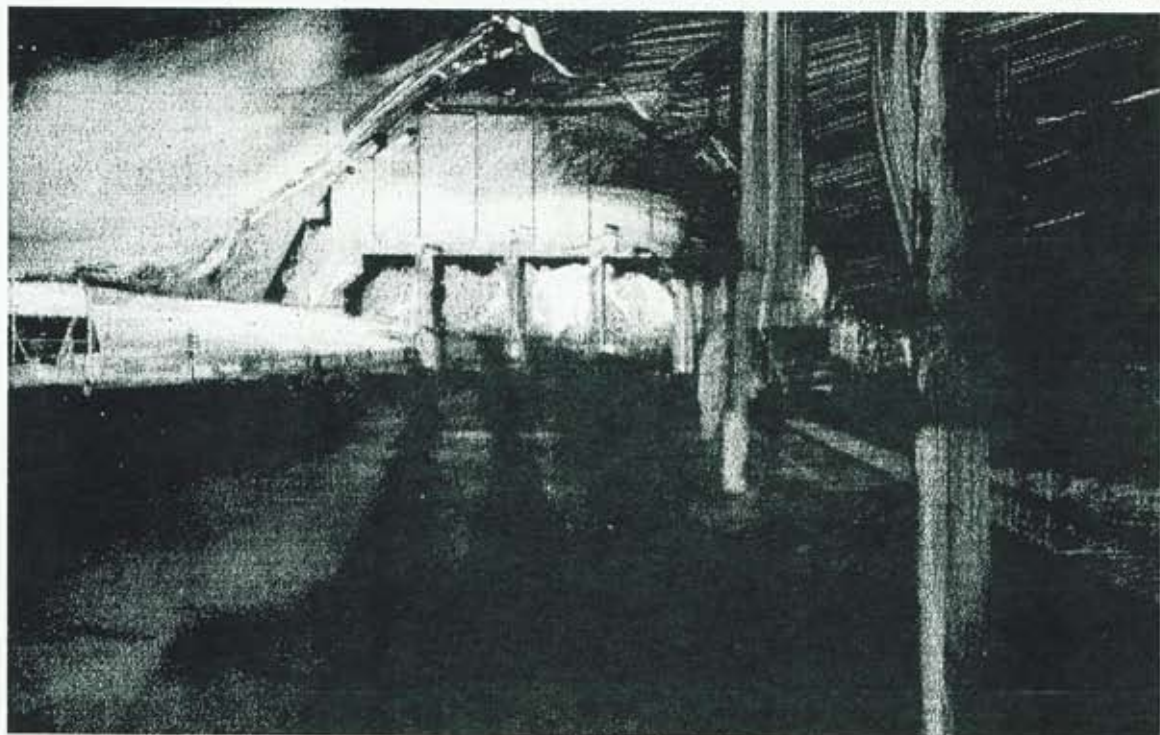
Bockrath takes pictures of industrial and urban landscapes, blows them up to large scale, then uses the photographs as a kind of armature on which to build up layers of oil paint. Her colors are bold, her brush strokes spontaneous and expressionistic. Rather than coloring neatly within the framework of images as in a paint-by-numbers approach, she allows herself free rein to spontaneously alter the emotional dynamics or the architecture of a scene.

The result is a hybrid of reality and illusion, a dialogue between objective report-

sense of movement lent by the paint picks up on the movement of cars and buses on the street, and the corner becomes a tornado of activity. People are absent, as they are in most of the artist's landscapes. In this abstracted and intensified motion, the city becomes not merely a locus for the actions of human beings, but rather — to borrow a word from Crispin Sartwell — an "artifact" of activity itself.

Bockrath's technique of obscuring images under layers of paint captures something of the decay of a dying industrial culture. You see this clearly in a painting like *Industry at Dusk*, which wraps the decrepit mills of the industrial valley in hazy clouds of blue, gray and brownish orange, as if the fog emitted from the smoke stacks were a kind of rust, corrosive and encrusted, no less beautiful than a bruise.

This haziness would suggest nostalgia were it not for the violence of the brush strokes. Bockrath may start with images of a decaying city, but she ends, not with a memory of past glory, but with an immer-



Anticipating Swift Passage, oil on photo, by Lissa Bockrath.

smoke curls through a stack. The terrible beauty of the vast expanse of rails and rust in the valley surrounding the steel plant, with its crown of raging fire, has long inspired Northeast Ohio's more "satanically inclined" artists, poets and punks. Sartwell describes how industrial landscape painters like Charles Sheeler abolished romantic distinctions between technology and nature, commerce and aesthetics. He proposes a new conception of beauty based in artifice and decay, "as when you look at the manufactured corpse in a funeral home and all you can say is, doesn't he look natural."

Lissa Bockrath has been working quietly and steadfastly toward such a new definition of beauty. A prolific painter, she operates an art gallery in Little Italy, where she features her own work once each year. Her current exhibition includes nearly three dozen recent landscapes and shows how far she has come since earn-

ing and subjective interpretation. If industrial environments represent a new form of found reality, Bockrath takes the marriage of nature and artifice inherent in industrial landscape painting one step further.

In the Shadow of Giants began with a photograph of three houses in Tremont, with downtown Cleveland in the background. Isolating the three tallest skyscrapers and swathing both them and the houses in a maelstrom of swirling purples and blues, the artist obscures everything else in the camera's viewfinder in layers of paint, so that the whole scene is reduced to six buildings. Because the horizon line has been obliterated, the distance between the bright, squat homes and the tall, gray towers is erased. Domesticity sits brazenly, if not cozily, in the lap of commerce — the very definition of a city.

In *Comfort Zone III*, a similar storm of blues washes over a shot of a street corner in University Circle. Here, the strong

vision in the storm of change. The photograph is the past, the paint is the present moment, and the future is up in the air.

On the level of skill and technique, there's still room for Lissa Bockrath to grow as a painter. But for an artist her age, she's precociously talented, intelligent, ambitious and independent. In Cleveland, she's affiliated with Art in the Powerhouse as well as her own gallery, and in the past year and a half, she's been picked up for representation by galleries in Toronto, Chicago, San Francisco, Atlanta, Philadelphia and Baltimore. Ten years from now, she's likely to have a firmly established national reputation. Smart collectors will get in on the ground floor.

Lissa Bockrath
Urban Landscapes

Bockrath Gallery
Through December 24