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## Parsing the Non-finito: Systems, Thresholds and Imaginative Space in Representation

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Parsing the Non-finito: Systems, Thresholds and Imaginative Space

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
In partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Fine Arts  
Drawing and Painting

by

Daniel Kelly, IV

BAD North Carolina State University 2003

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## Abstract

Between the actualized built spaces that the artist moves around and through on a daily basis and the more abstract systems we invent to represent these structures sits the illusion of space and structure found in his drawings and paintings. Constant turnover within the built environment offers not only content, but rich analogy for his artistic practice. The artist's endeavors in the studio in many ways echo the genesis, evolution and possibility he observes in the transitioning city around him. In the actual making of the work, he gleans from traditional methods of drawing and painting, from the architectural lexicon, from experiments with new materials, from the effects of time and decay and from building processes themselves.

Key Words: Architectural Representation; Transitional; Imaginative Space; Threshold; Uncanny; Non-finito.

## Potential

From early in my practice, one painting that has defined how I perceive my efforts as an image-maker is Leonardo da Vinci's *Adoration of the Magi*. The work, depicting the event of the wise men visiting the Christ child, is essentially composed of foundational sketches with initial layers of color blocked over the top. While Leonardo left the painting unfinished for various financial reasons, it functions for viewers today as a peeling back of the veil of the illusionistic artistic process. Despite its unintentional incompleteness, this painting is venerated alongside any other masterpiece of the day. And yet it makes a rare break with the conventions of its time.

In this particular state, it functions in two ways. First, it reveals the methods of the artist, giving insight into the way he conceived of the image and made decisions. It acts as a window into his foundational sketches, illustrating his application of under-painting with initial transparent washes over the cartoon. Second, the viewer is invited to complete the unfinished composition. The viewer is activated in his looking at the painting in a way that triangulates the artist, the subject and the viewer. The viewers are allowed to insert their own finish onto the painting (with any number of imaginative possibilities,) which connects them to the artist who conceived the initial image. Through this process the subject of the painting is affected in the estimation of the viewers and a dialogue between the artist, the subject and the viewers persists ad infinitum.



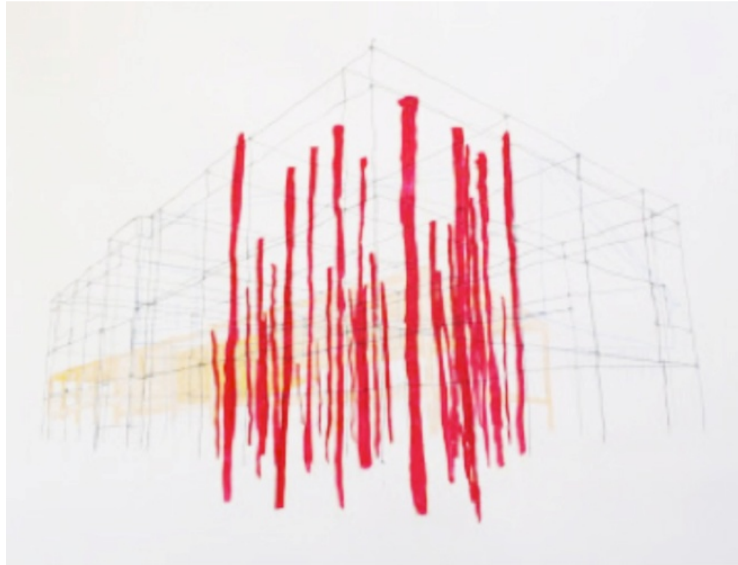
*Adoration of the Magi*, Leonardo da Vinci, 1481

While this painting was simply abandoned, later artists began to intentionally leave their paintings unfinished in order to create an effect. Jacques-Louis David is credited with one of the first examples of a true “*non finito*”. In his well-known *Death of Marat* from 1793, he made the decision to leave the background incomplete, just the underpainting shows. James Elkins, in an analysis of unfinished paintings, points out that among many interpretations, this uncompleted portion of the painting may be an expression of the subject’s life, tragically cut short. He also suggests the lack of finish might reflect the haste of the intense environment of the French Revolution within which it was made.<sup>1</sup> Later artists like Cezanne and de Kooning employed this technique, with differing reasons and results, yet the unfinished character asserts itself as one of the most noticeable qualities of the work.

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<sup>1</sup> Elkins, p. 1

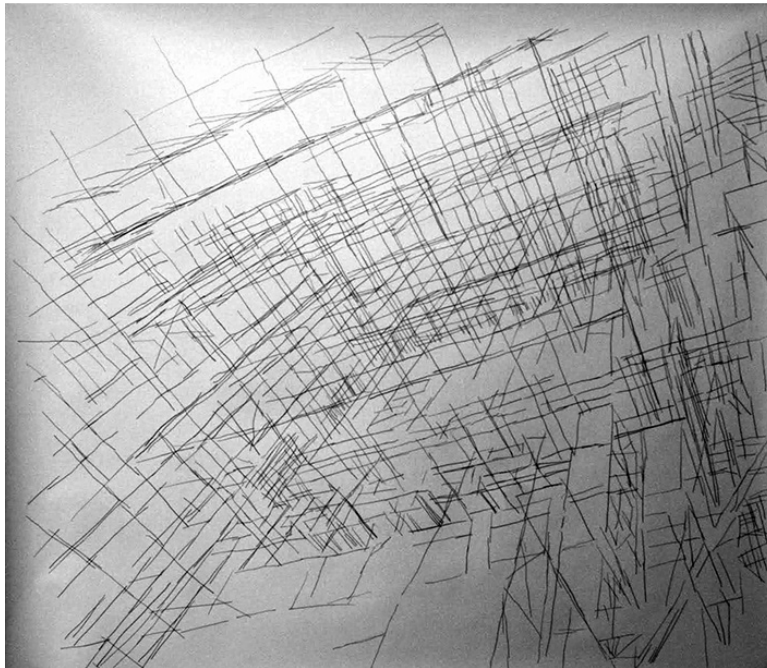
The incomplete and transitioning man-made environment, the source for the majority of my subject matter, is for me a contemporary embodiment of this quality of potential. The construction of new buildings and the dismantling of old ones provide a type of bookends to a constantly changing physical landscape. These structures in flux belie the permanence typically associated with architectural forms. As we experience our built world in this threshold state of becoming something that has been suggested but not fully articulated, we are invited into that imaginative space, as with Leonardo's unfinished work.



*Becoming #8*, Daniel Kelly, 2012

The drawing *Becoming #8* is a visual anthology of three such transitional states superimposed one over the other – the foundations of a future structure, a building being dismantled, and one being renovated. While they present three distinctly different stages in the life of a building, in this skeletal state of their evolution they find a resonance. This threshold moment, when something (be it a

building, a moment in history, a theory, etc.) is on the verge of transforming from one phase to its next incarnation, possesses a potency and a charge that I aim to replicate in my work. Whether or not these specific stages are discernable within the image, the endeavor is for a sense of transparency, incompleteness and a suggestion of possibility.



*Becoming #6*, Daniel Kelly, 2011

The act of presenting a framework, the beginnings of a system, without completing it (as in the traditional *non finito*), is a key element in my practice. *Becoming #6*, the above drawing, focuses specifically on generating this imaginative space. Through the use of linear perspective and repeated horizontal and vertical lines, I define the structure of an unresolved space. The rhythm of the simple, unadorned, hand drawn lines acts as a scaffolding of sorts, inviting the viewer to build connections or discover and generate new forms within the unfinished system.

Transition is thus a central theme in my work. It is important not only in the particular subject matter I choose, but it provides a lens through which I understand the act of painting and drawing.

### Behind the City

Almost as long as I have been painting and drawing, I have been enamored by the power and scope of meaning that representations and interpretations of the built environment can convey. Italian Quattrocento artists like Piero della Francesca and Pietro Perugino, for example, depicted the city in their figurative paintings in new and inventive ways (made possible by advances in linear perspective). However the city as subject matter – in and of itself – appeared in the Late Renaissance. At this point in art history, paintings of idealized cityscapes called *Prospettiva* emerged. These paintings are a curious mixture of architecture, perspectival study, engineering, mathematics and painting.



*Prospettiva*, unknown, c.1470

This clean and crisply rendered, completely imagined scene is balanced and unified by its creator's mastery of projected space. The vision of forward-looking, idealized architecture strangely lacks of any hint of human presence. This was completely unknown in prior or contemporary painting, which endows these

paintings their unusual, fanciful and mysterious sensibility. It is as if we are witnesses to a dream state. In a similar vein, Giovanni Batista Piranesi created entirely fictitious prison scenes, which are visually stunning inventions that, in their absence of figures and their sublime scope and grandiosity, engage the imagination of the viewer.

Modernist Italian painters Mario Sironi and Giorgio de Chirico took up this torch in their own work, but with varying purposes and effects. De Chirico's *'Metaphysical Town Square'* series had a significant influence on my conception of the possible interpretations of the cities we inhabit. His simplification of the city space, often only depicting a few carefully selected buildings and the occasional statue so common to Italian city squares, was coupled with harsh, raking, Mediterranean light with long shadows. The choice to limit the 'actors' in these urban views imbues those carefully chosen edifices with a meaning they would not otherwise have in a bustling cityscape. The effect is one of a strange, eerie and enigmatic quality.



*The Red Tower*, Giorgio de Chirico, 1913



In a similar way Edward Hopper depicted intensely lit urban scenes, sparsely peopled or at times completely vacant. Similar to de Chirico, these decisions shift the attention from ordinary experience of urban spaces to an awareness of the meaning, associations and qualities of the individual parts as defined by the collective and individual imagination.

### Lexicon Architecture

The presence of architectural language in my work is not a recent phenomenon, but stems from my experience working in that particular field before, during and after my undergraduate studies. For a year prior to college I worked in an architectural firm in Cambridge, England. In college I studied architectural history and continued to work in building and architectural firms. After graduating I worked for five years in a firm whose goal was to bridge the disciplines of art and architecture. So in some ways the language of architecture, with its focus on transparency, clarity and logic of design, is more primary to me than that of painting.

Whether dealing with existing or future buildings, the architectural discipline defines its subject using three primary views: the plan, elevation and section. With few exceptions, these are the architect's core visual means for understanding and articulating the man-made world. Similar disciplines (urban planning, landscape architecture, industrial design, etc.) whose goal is mapping, design and, ultimately, control of physical space utilize similar methods: plans, grids, simplified diagrams and perspectival renderings.



Gentilly #7, Daniel Kelly, 2011

In much of my work, and most specifically my large-scale drawings on paper (2010-2012), I have made clear references to the analytical methods of architectural drawing and even the materials of that process. Some of the work appears as theoretical renderings of buildings with no background, horizon or grounding (as in the aforementioned *Becoming #8*). Others present structures in a head-on format, or the architectural elevation, as in *Gentilly #7*.

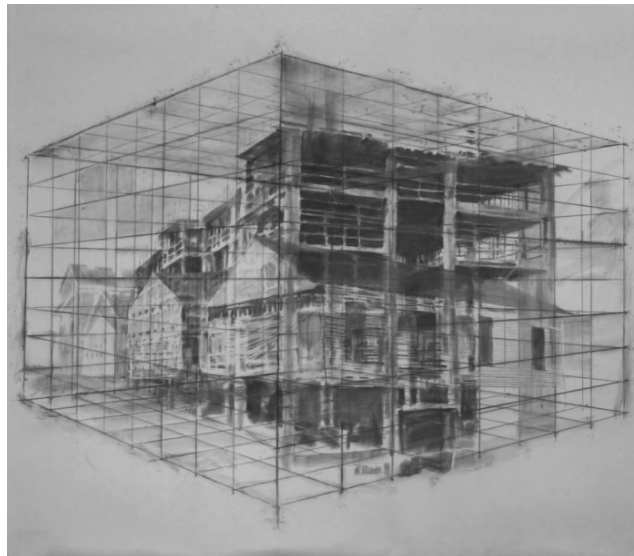
In this painting I depict a house flattened with little reference to perspective, save the few hints of depth from the shadows. The structure, removed from its immediate setting in New Orleans' Gentilly neighborhood, is re-set in an indefinite space. It floats, disconnected from its provisional atmosphere by any grounding shadow.

Architects and other descriptive drawing disciplines also utilize two-point and isometric perspectives in their work (also employed the "architect's rendering"). These views present rotated projections of spaces and objects, which

offer a more comprehensive description of the given structure (as in *Becoming #8*). Moreover these views can be used to place the viewer inside the space (see *Becoming #6*), which creates an altogether different feel – one of a virtual experience of space rather than analysis or investigation as with the flattened elevations (see *Gentilly#7*).

### Theoretical Space

Many of the objects I depict using these mechanical methods of drawing exist in a theoretical space. Structures float in the ether, defined only by the paper or the tone of the canvas. It functions as an idealized world, an intangible “no-place” as Julie Mehretu described her own drawings in an interview with Laurie Firstenberg.<sup>2</sup> And, like Mehretu, I am captivated by the notion of being able to invent parallel spaces and worlds through the manipulation of imagery in this vacuum; self-defined analogues extracted from the world in which I live and move.



*Thresholding*, Daniel Kelly, 2011

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<sup>2</sup> Firstenberg, p. 70

In *Thresholding*, a gridded cube, drawn in two-point perspective, encapsulates multiple buildings that float within its geometric space. In this provisional space the cube appears as a device that contains these washy buildings, simultaneously functioning as a generating form whose grids provide a structure for the buildings to take form. Removed from specific place or time, the object depicted is able to function in ways that it could not were it bound by a conventional environment (grass, streets, trees and adjacent buildings).

This theoretical space enables me to isolate and analyze objects away from their original environments. I can choose an object and set it apart for examination or even dissection – as if it were under a slide. The tightly rendered work of Michael Borremans is a case in point. In his paintings he presents idiosyncratic, and strangely charged figures (often alone) in shallow yet indeterminate plain space. Some of these bodies are even sinisterly partial, like patients etherized upon a table. Yet, there is a weird and wonderful life to them – they are dismembered and yet somehow supernaturally alive.

This treatment of these beings presents the viewer with a moment of tunnel vision or a heightened focus on a moment – like a film still, partial yet pregnant with possible interpretations. There is a peculiar, yet sensible logic that Borremans achieves through this presentation of the subject matter. It shouldn't make sense, but it eerily does. This is in contrast to a painting like Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa*, which sets its desperate figures in a particular maritime scene and immediately involves us in a specific narrative. Creating a parallel world, in which we as viewers

are left to sort through a peculiar logic - such as in Borremans' work-, is a strong motivator for me.



*'Raft of the Medusa', Theodore Gericault, 1818-19*

The series of paintings, of which *Gentilly #7* (p. 7) is a part, acts as a sort of comparative study of houses in New Orleans' Gentilly neighborhood. In this way they are similar to the taxonomic collections of photographs of Bernd and Hilla Becher, which strive to comprehensively document disappearing relics of a dying industrial era. While their photos are certainly influential in my own work, one obvious way these paintings differ from their photographs is in my decision to depict these houses removed from their original settings. In this way they become less about the ways these buildings are tied to specific places and stories, but rather about the way they are presented – isolated and floating. These paintings and drawings in which objects sit on blank space, often blank paper, can suggest registers of meaning that a house on an inhabited street (as in a plein-air painting) could not. Each decision that I choose to make within this blank space (whether to

add color, whether to use mechanical lines or hand-drawn, how solid the objects appear and so forth) begins to generate a dialogue. In this way the medium and its manipulation takes on an added relevance.

### De-constructed Views

Architectural and industrial drawing techniques not only provide me the practical tools whereby I can logistically ‘construct’ these images on the page, they locate the drawings and paintings within a larger dialogue. By situating the work within a lexicon such as architectural drawing, with its accrued meanings and associations, my manipulations and additions can generate meaning beyond the limited scope of a series of personal sketches, for example.

That being said, the relationship between my own personal experience of these places and the ‘control-driven’ nature of the architectural language is one of the most potentially challenging and engaging aspects of the work. I utilize this structural means of analyzing the world around me to make sense of it to myself or even to make sense of myself to it. I am engaged in a mode of processing my environment in a way that tries to make it my own.



*Untitled, (Derham Jr. High), Daniel Kelly, 2011*

At the time I was making the above drawing, *Untitled (Derham Jr. High)*, the actual building was being dismantled piece by piece. The decision to choose erasure as the method by which I generated the image grew out of the time spent drawing and photographing the disappearing structure and even speaking with the residents who had lived around it for many years. The viewpoint of the building in this drawing (street level from two-point perspective) is akin to an “architect’s rendering”. Within the architectural discipline, this particular drawing is meant to bring the flat mechanical drawings to life in order to give the client a sense of the finished building. In the case of this drawing, however, there is something of an inverse of that happening; the drawing is instead a document of a disappearing edifice via a subtractive process of image making.

Edward Hopper was an early influence on my interest in these matters. He utilized genre painting, with its focus on commonplace scenes of daily life within the urban context, yet he subverted the genre through his manipulations of its forms and techniques. In his paintings he isolated the human figure, depicting them alone

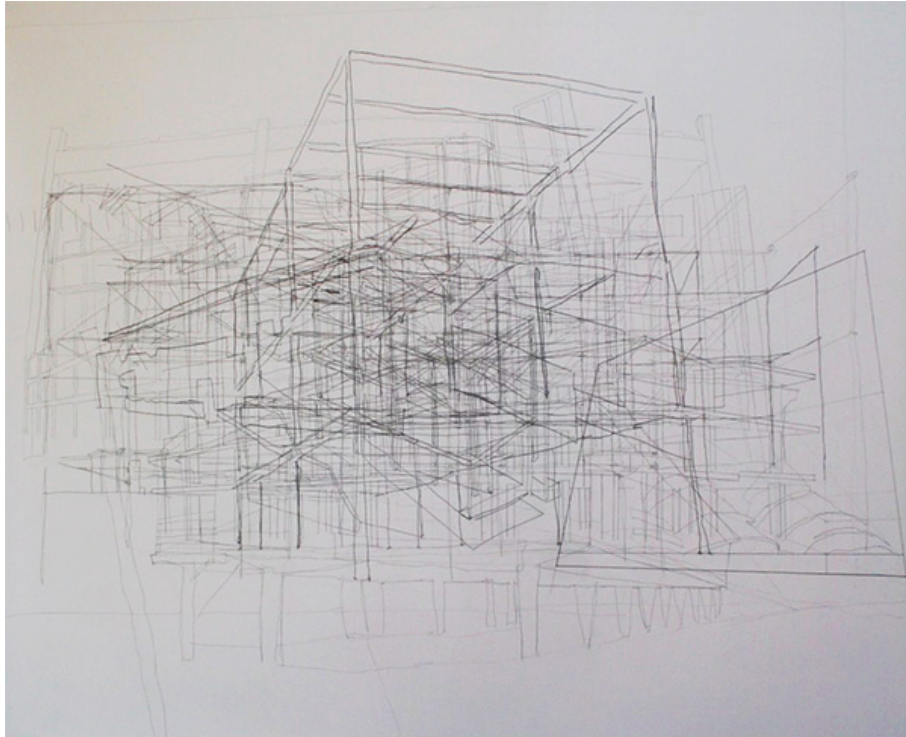
in private spaces, or surrounded yet isolated in public spaces. Moreover, he heightened this sensibility through his use of light. His characters are often placed in a flood of harsh sunlight or hypnotized in the neon glows of the busy city. So where earlier genre painters may have aimed for some sense of sentimentality in their depictions of everyday life in the city, Hopper's work dug beneath the surface to highlight qualities of loneliness, silence and even mystery.<sup>3</sup> It was in my early interactions with his paintings that I began to notice the possible implications of taking a familiar genre and manipulating it.

In a similar way I utilize traditional systems of drawing that have specific origins, uses and purposes. In my manipulation of the architectural lexicon I am exploiting it in a way that aims to play with the embedded meanings and associations. These methods of drawing suggest fresh beginnings, logic of thought, certainty and control. But my own interactions and experiences with the built environment disclose a much more complex and nuanced picture.

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<sup>3</sup> J.Ward, p. 15





*Becoming #4*, Daniel Kelly, 2011

The drawing *Becoming #4* is made up of structural line drawings of several buildings layered one on top of the other in a tangle. Which edifice was drawn first onto the blank page is unintelligible from that which was drawn last. This 'pile of designs' takes the clear linear language of the blueprint and multiplies it to the point of becoming unreadable. It is as if every building that will ever be built on one single parcel of land has manifested on the same page.

### The Uncanny

So why are the structures depicted in these paintings and drawings alone? Why is there no grounding? I feel as though these choices begin to 'problematize' objects very common to our everyday experience – objects which have immediate personal and cultural associations. By pulling them out of their environments,

questions may be posed not only about the specific places these habitations could have been drawn from, but also where they *should* be: they ask the viewer to consider what it is that makes these pictures incomplete – what it is that gives a thing its wholeness or meaning in an ontological sense.

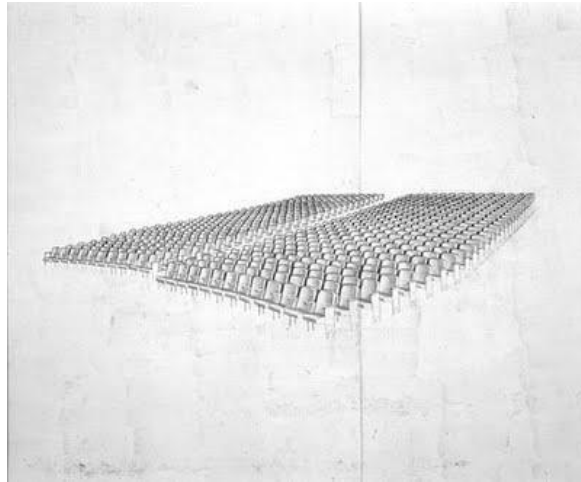
In my own painting *Plauche Circle*, the house depicted has been raised up on supports but there's no way of getting up to the front door. This is at once a home, yet not a home; one may recognize it as a house yet it lacks one or more of the essential characteristics that make it complete. This in-between state is echoed in the manner the image is constructed. Walls and structural surfaces are washy and in some places completely transparent and construction lines reveal the vanishing point and leave opportunity for filling in the blank space.



*Plauche Circle*, Daniel Kelly, 2012

Michael Borremans work achieves something of this quality with his forensic paintings, as does that of Toba Khedoori. Her massive yet simple drawings of

manmade objects – doors, furniture, room interiors, etc., presents us with the familiar and homey, yet without any sign of life. The emptiness of the objects in images like *Untitled (seats)*, is enhanced by incidental marks and physical traces of the actions of the artist (hair, scuff marks and dust), that have become embedded in a wax coat applied to the surface.



*Untitled (seats)*, Toba Khedoori, 1996

The single-family home is an icon of security, ownership and the American Dream itself. Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century and Mid Century architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright and his mentor Louis Sullivan helped to identify and play on this sense of ownership of property so intertwined with the American national identity. Wright's 'Prairie Style' designs (a small farm in and of itself), is described by historian Carter Wiseman as "... a unique expression of manifest destiny in the American psyche – a conflict between wanting to expand to new horizons while simultaneously establishing their sense of permanence in time and place."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Wiseman, pp. 104-105



*Splitting*, Gordon Matta Clark, 1974

By taking an actual suburban home and physically breaking it open (in a demonstration of his own ‘discipline’ of “Anarchitecture”), Gordon Matta Clark’s *Splitting* from 1974, from one perspective, begins to call this sense of security into question. Clark, an artist who has greatly affected my perception of the relationship between artist, space and the discipline of architecture, physically enacted this ‘transition’ onto actual spaces. Through his cutting, splitting and chopping up of buildings he endowed them with metaphysical meaning. His emphasis was on his bodily action upon these structures and how that interaction impacted perceptions of those concrete, yet symbolic objects.



*Gentilly #3*, Daniel Kelly, 2011

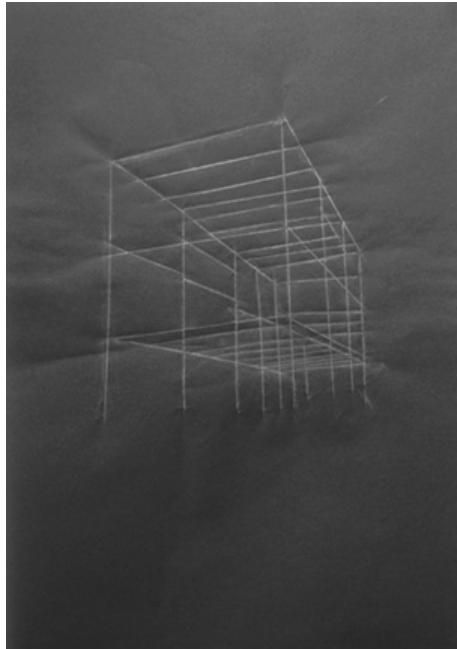
This sense of the uncanny first began to work its way into my plein air paintings of houses in New Orleans which I was finding in various ‘states of being’ – under construction, in dereliction, or in limbo after construction or renovation had ground to a halt. These houses lacked essentials that preclude them from being ontologically complete. The most obvious absence was that of human life, but this “absence” extended to physical deficits in the buildings themselves. Some lacked entry stairs – taken off for repairs but never replaced (as in *Plauche Circle*). Others had been raised up on piers to such absurd levels that a stiff breeze would threaten to send them tumbling.

In the process of painting these “non-homes” I began to mirror these lacks in the manner that I presented them. In the above painting *Gentilly #3*, the house ostensibly sits on a grassy lawn under a blue sky. Upon closer investigation however, this illusion begins to fall apart. The severe light, which creates such

strong shadows on the house, doesn't cast shadows on the ground. The house appears to float supernaturally above this scene – disconnected and out of place. The serene depiction recalls traditional genre paintings, but the illusionistic painting techniques of creating believable space are manipulated in a way that subverts the conventional style in order to create a subtle “tear in the fabric.”

### Materials

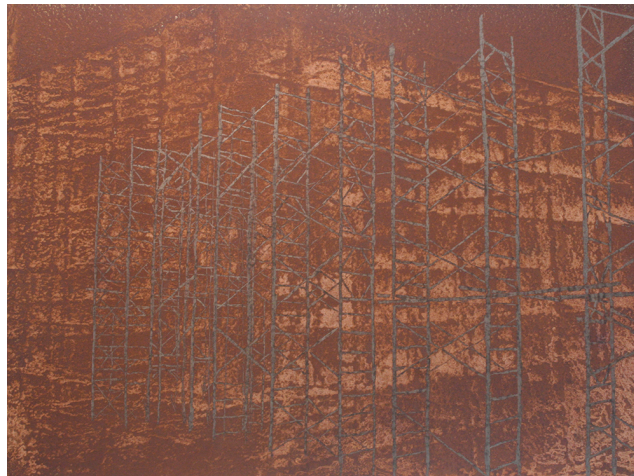
More recently my attentions have turned toward materials and processes. Two materials, vellum and mild steel, caught my attention almost by chance. I have worked with vellum for several years as a process tool, but only as that – a temporary material that would be tossed aside after each use. Likewise, metal is a material with which I have had a good deal of experience, but have never used as a substrate.



*Fold*, Daniel Kelly, 2012



In the course of working in the studio with these materials I began to pick up on connections between them and my subject matter. With vellum, I have been considering relationships between the provisional nature of the material and the impermanence of the subject matter. The vellum both in its feel and in its traditional usage is temporary; a tool used for overlaying more permanent drawings and testing out potential marks, designs and ideas. What I initially found striking about the images that I created with folded vellum was that the marks were immediately permanent (they couldn't be erased or burnished out), yet they could also be diaphanous and elusive, depending on the different ways I folded the material. So there is interplay between the temporary associations of this material, the permanence of the folded mark and the transitory nature of the structures depicted.



*Standards, Ledgers & Transoms, Daniel Kelly, 2012*

For the last six months a length of sheet metal measuring four by eight feet has hung on my studio wall in order to assist in a specific drawing task. As is the case with any unsealed steel in a sub-tropic climate, it began to rust. Similar to the

vellum, I began to notice connections between the rusting process and certain aspects of subject matter I have been engaging – specifically the decay and entropy that underlies the turnover of our manmade world. The imagery in the above work *Standards, Ledgers & Transoms* was created by ‘drawing’ lines using materials that would resist the rusting process, then after rusting had taken place I scratched other imagery back into the rust. A relationship thus began to emerge between the imagery of these various scaffolds and unfinished system of grids (similar to *Becoming #6*), the natural (time-based) rusting, and the act of scraping the rust away.

The scaffolding, in particular, has emerged for me as both a striking visual element as well as an apt metaphor for what I strive to achieve in my work: the presentation of an open, self-defined framework within which the viewer can engage, using familiar visual languages, but slightly tweaking and subverting those systems in order to open them up to analysis and questioning.

## Conclusion

The source for my imagery grows primarily out of my interactions with the built environment around me. My early experiences in the architectural field, with its particular language of articulating physical space, taught me something of how we see, how we communicate what we see and what that visual communication can convey (both person-to-person and culturally). However, the explorations of the metaphysical qualities of the city in the work of de Chirico & Hopper (among



others), made me more acutely aware of the vast array of interpretations and meaning possible.

This dual method of articulation, using architectural drawing and traditional painting genres, provides a filter for my experience of the world around me. Through these tools I reconcile the physical world, trying to make it less foreign to me. At the same time I am compelled by the fact that by utilizing and subverting these accepted systems and modes of visual description, I become a participant in a larger dialogue; in my own way co-opting and shaping that information. Rawness, genesis, transition, and potential: these themes continue to guide both the selection of subject matter and the way that I engage it through the use and manipulation of my materials.

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## Vita

Daniel Kelly grew up in the United States, Great Britain and Australia. In addition to studying painting and drawing at North Carolina State University, he worked for architectural, structural and building firms on two continents before, during and after his studies. He was awarded a scholarship to study art in Cortona, Italy in 2002. In 2009 he moved to New Orleans to attend an artist residency in the St Roch neighborhood. His work has been shown in Hawaii, Italy and throughout the Southeastern United States. He was awarded a fellowship and began his MFA at UNO in 2010.