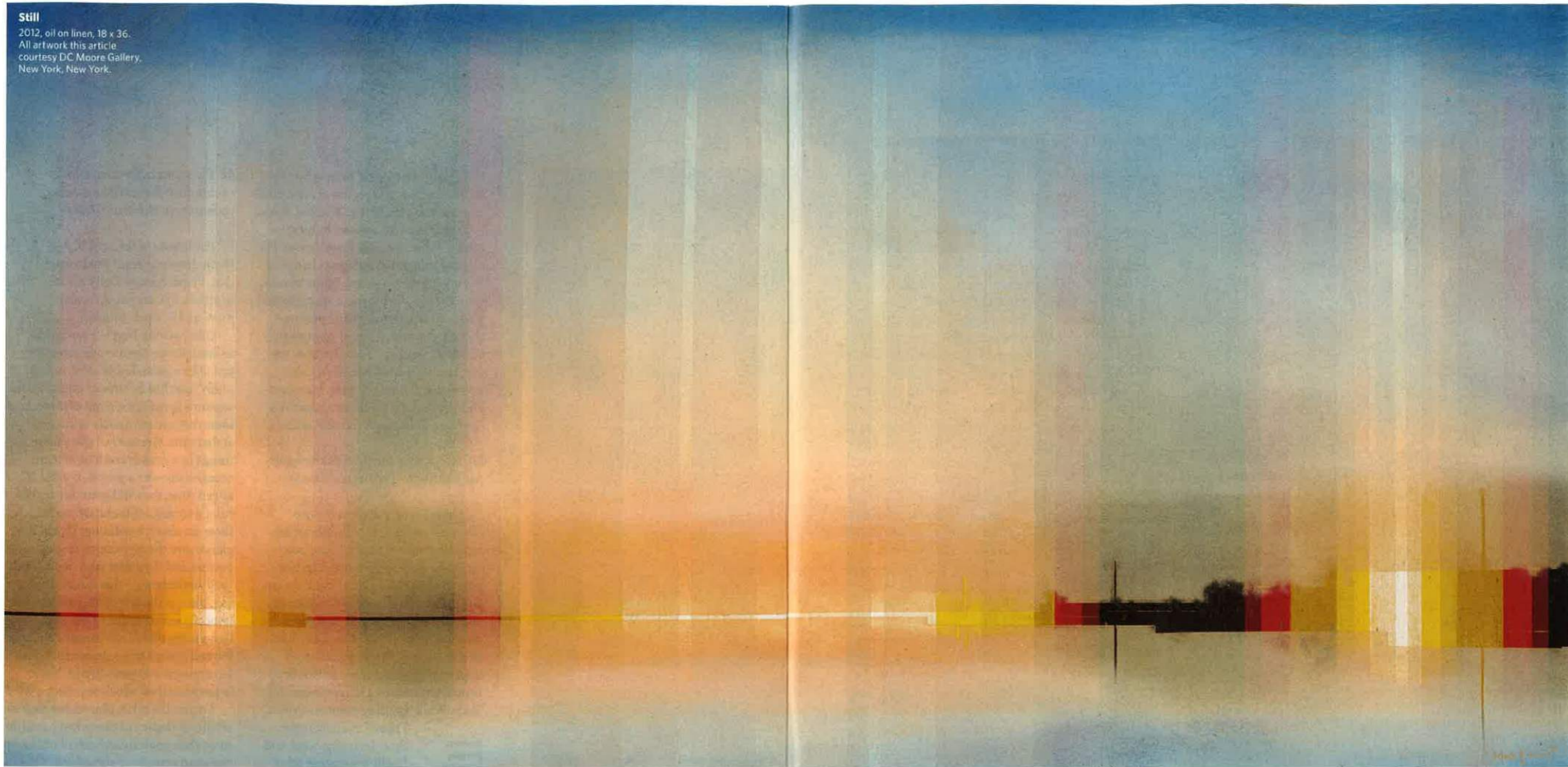


Still

2012, oil on linen, 18 x 36.
All artwork this article
courtesy DC Moore Gallery,
New York, New York.



Paradise Lost

Mark Innerst creates sublime paintings of urban landscapes and coastal regions that juxtapose realist and abstract elements.

by MICHAEL GORMLEY

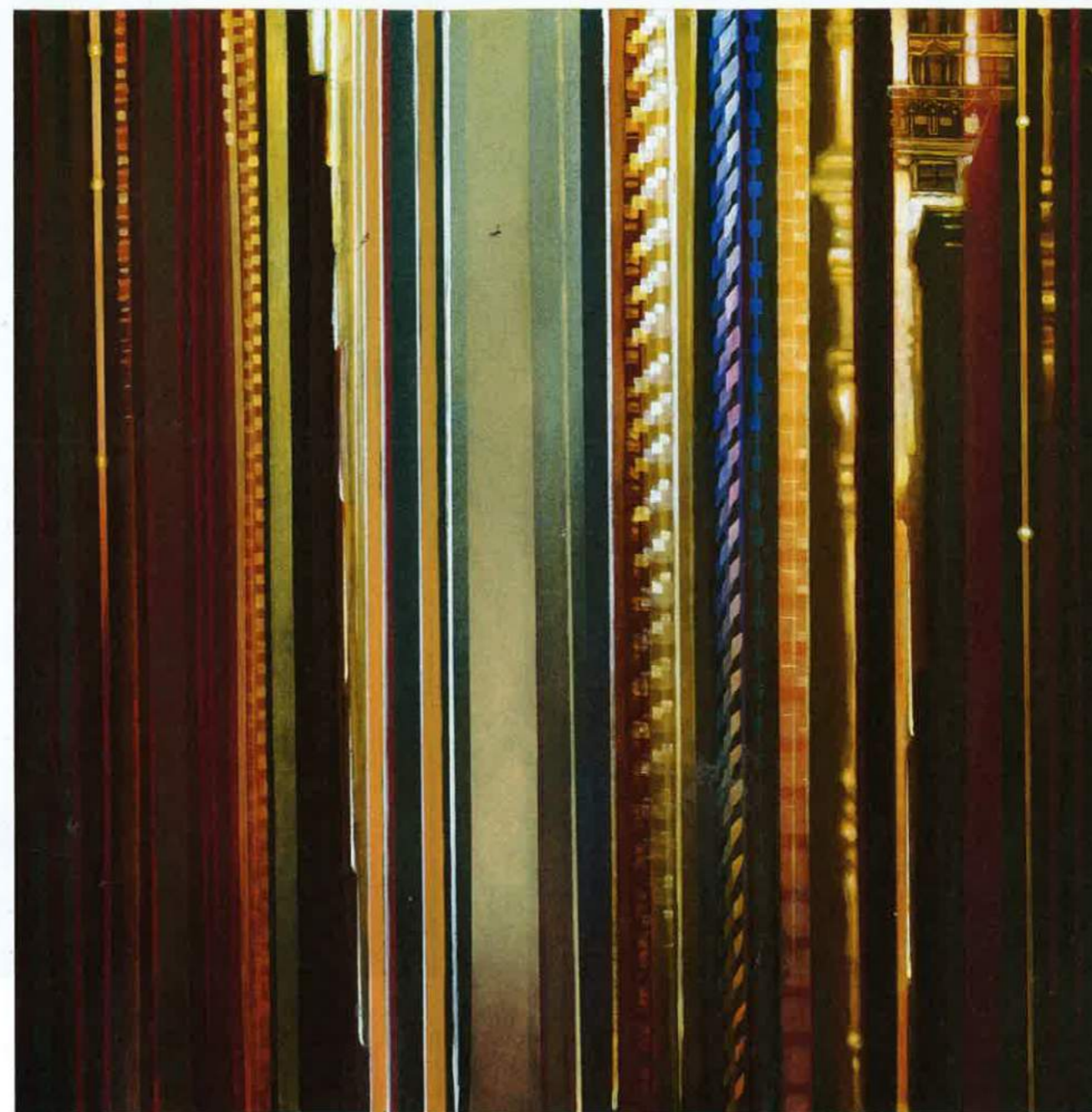
In his treatise "What is Painting?" Kenyon Cox postulates that the practice of painting has vacillated throughout history between expressions of "relation" and expressions of "imitation."

The art of relation takes as its subject matter the abstract and plastic qualities unique to visual art—such as color and the composition of line and shape on a two-dimensional surface. High Modernism's formalist abstractions are pure expressions of this impulse. The art of imitation, meanwhile, seeks to suppress or veil the materials and techniques that inform art production in order to advance an illusion of the real world. Nineteenth-century academicism's polished surfaces, anatomically correct figures, and deep recessional spaces evince this motive, as do various strains of contemporary realism practiced today.

In actual practice, the art of relation and the art of imitation are not as clearly distinct as outlined above. Rather, the two forms should be viewed as theoretical constructs representing opposite ends of the fine-art spectrum. Both forms, in varying degrees, display the characteristics of their opposite. For example, even the most hard-line formalists are often inspired by direct observation of nature. Likewise, academic realist works are highly composed inventions that exploit sophisticated design principles.

In the same vein, the objectives of artwork produced at these poles initially appear to be entirely distinct from each other. At its most extreme, abstract art makes no other claim than to delight or challenge the viewer on an aesthetic level by offering a rarified, optically centered experience that stands apart from real life. The underlying premise here rings true; our eyes delight and respond to the pure elements of painting—the shapes, the coursing lines, the harmonious (or dissident) colors.

Representational art, with its imitative qualities, takes the opposite approach and



OPPOSITE PAGE
Gone or Imagined
2012, oil, 30 x 30.

ABOVE
Array
2012, oil, 30 x 30.



Intracoastal
2012, oil, 15 x 30.

aims to steer the viewer back to life by heightening or focusing on specific, naturally occurring phenomena that the viewer has missed or grown indifferent to. As with abstract elements, the eye delights in these imitative qualities—and often the viewer's pleasure is in direct proportion to the degree in which the work recalls and mimics life. Additionally, representational

art is historically linked to narrative intent by creating imagery that seeks to address issues or advance ideas that are not necessarily about art itself. In its most extreme manifestation, the representational impulse aims for exacting realness—a skillful perceptual re-creation that aims foremost to paint “what’s there,” with little to no artistic alteration.

Cox argues that the best art offers both relational and imitative qualities, and Mark Innerst’s visionary inventions, recently exhibited at DC Moore Gallery, in New York City, evince this abstract/realist trope to great effect. Comprising urban streetscapes, tropical isles, and formalist abstractions that reference landscape motifs,

the show offered an ever-shifting dynamic tension between abstraction and representation—both in the works themselves and across the various series.

Innerst’s early childhood exposure to fine art, his extensive education, and his subsequent interactions with a wide range of artists help explain the compelling direction of his work. “I grew up in

York, Pennsylvania, and from my earliest memories wanted to be an artist,” he recalls. “In our house were two very old but comprehensive volumes of antiquities. I think these books were a great influence on me. Also, on yearly visits to relatives near Washington, DC, our parents made sure to visit the National Gallery, Natural History Museum, etc. When I was in 7th grade or so, my



Tracery
2011, acrylic on panel, 12 x 12.

parents made arrangements for me to attend the drawing classes of a local artist in her home. I enjoyed enthusiastic art teachers in high school and went on to get a B.F.A. at Kutztown State College. In my final year at Kutztown, I arranged for an internship in New York, dividing my time between two nonprofits, The Kitchen and Artists Space. I was exposed to an indescribable assortment of artists."

Tracery and *Gone or Imagined* are exemplary of the City Beautiful views that have become Innerst's signature expressions. Picturing deep recessionary space, glittering reflected light, and the vertical thrust of soaring high-rises, they also come closest to illustrating a balance between Cox's concepts of imitation and relation. Part imaginative, part perceptual, these works offer an idealized—if not wide-eyed utopian—view of the modern city. Innerst deploys a pop-minimalist paint handling and a compositional strategy utilizing a repeat pattern of vertical shapes juxtaposed with subtle Beaux-Arts architectural flourishes.

In *Array*, Innerst further abstracts the simplified verticals that symbolize skyscrapers in his other paintings. These formalist verticals recall Barnett Newman's zips and Brigit Riley's Op Art effects. "Those abstract elements suggest different things in different paintings," Innerst notes. "They are achieved through underpainting and originate in my background in drawing and printmaking."

Innerst works out his compositions using acrylic paint on paper; these are often completed on-site and reflect his experience as a city dweller. "When I first began to exhibit, I was seen as a landscape painter," he says. "The city might appear in the distance of

paintings, and gradually, as I lived in the city and experienced the building boom of the 1980s, the city imagery moved to the foreground. I feel I am a painter of my experiences and of my environment. The balance between the natural elements and the man-made comes and goes."

Given this experience of watching the city "fill in," one can surmise that Innerst's deployment of abstraction betrays a narrative intent. *Array* best symbolizes this disappearance of urban space, the vertical elements becoming more pronounced and advancing toward the picture plane to effect a closed and increasingly dense screen.

Intracoastal further exemplifies this screen motif, represented by both landscape designing and abstract vertical bars that suggest cubist plane changes. Like New York's voracious building boom and its blind impact on the environment and the economy, this work references Florida's boom-and-bust real-estate cycle. Similarly, paintings such as *Still* transform Innerst's realist views—into these instances tropical waterways—into abstract grids. They recall the color-coded urban planning documents that municipalities use to measure population and building density. Unlike the City Beautiful abstractions, the tropic transformations have a somewhat sinister undertone—they throw a toxic glow and hint at a modernist severity that is out of synch with the lush tropical settings they reference. In these pieces Innerst has mastered both the art of relation and the art of imitation, and he uses the tensions between these impulses to prompt reflection on a very real struggle. **A**

Michael Gormley is the editorial director of American Artist.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Mark Innerst lives and works in Philadelphia and in Cape May, New Jersey. He has exhibited widely, holding solo shows at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, in Kansas City, Missouri, and the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, among other locations. For more information, visit www.dcmooregallery.com.