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Emma McMillan, *Room 3*, 2019, oil on linen, 71 5/8 × 47 1/2".

Emma McMillan

ÉDOUARD MONTASSUT

Emma McMillan's first show in Paris comprised six moody nocturnes completed during the Bronx, New York–based painter's recent three-month residency in the City of Light. Rendered almost entirely in shades of blue, the artist's murky imagery slowly revealed itself to include interiors, cityscapes, and a portrait. Semiabstract compositions ultimately turned out to depict windowed rooms, a staircase, a skyscraper, a bridge, and a face.

The title of the show, "*Bleu de Prusse*" (Prussian Blue), singled out just one of the many azure hues in McMillan's palette. Fittingly, this vibrant synthetic pigment, developed in the early eighteenth century as an alternative to ultraexpensive lapis lazuli powder, is sometimes referred to as "Paris blue." The fact that it is the traditional color of blueprints is also significant, given McMillan's background in technical drawing. And although her

paintings are hardly precise in rendering their subjects, they do reveal concealed structural designs. But if blueprints show infrastructures through neat dissections along an imaginary plane, McMillan's paintings carve up spaces (and a face) in messy and destabilizing ways.

In *Room 4* (all works 2019), a large, bright-blue rectangular outline hovered near the center of the composition in front of a dark interior with vaulted ceilings and large windows. This mysterious floating rectangle has the odd effect of both expanding and compressing the painting's depth of field. If the viewer understands it as a window or door, the rectangle implies a barrier—albeit an invisible one—between the viewer and the room. Thus it creates a sense of depth and division within the painting. Alternately, if one imagines it as a frame within a frame, the outline rests on the painting's surface and locks the viewer out of the picture plane. Dabs of white and beige paint in the composition's lower half further confuse these conflicting impressions of space. Suggesting reflections on glass, these bright spots hint at another transparent barrier between the viewer and the scene—a windowpane occupying the same vertical plane as the surface of the painting, for example. Ultimately, however, the materiality of the paint—thick, glossy, white, and in stark contrast to the rest of the composition's washy blue tones—thwarts any illusionism and insists on the physical reality of the painting itself.

A similarly uncomfortable push and pull between depth and flatness was evident in *Room 3*. In this painting, inspired by Roman Polanski's Paris-based thriller *The Tenant* (1976), a spiral staircase climbs up toward a skylight. A translucent greenish rectangle covering most of the composition suggests a scrim dividing the space between the viewer and the stairs. However, watery drips of paint running down from the rectangle's lower-left corner keep the eye locked on the surface of the painting.

The misleadingly titled *Room 1* represented Paris's Pont Marie, while *Room 5*—which hung, along with *Room 6*, in the gallery office rather than in the main space—depicts a haunting human face. *Room 1* is McMillan's attempt to depict what the bridge would see if it had eyes underneath its five stone arches. Practically unintelligible, the resulting fractured curving forms represent the Pont Marie and the city lights reflected in the River Seine. *Room 5*, meanwhile, is a deathly blue face, blurred as if it were submerged beneath rippling water. Recalling the overlays in anatomical textbooks that neatly distinguish bone,

muscles, and organs, the facial structure is broken into discrete horizontal planes. Some features (left cheek, right eye) appear to float toward the surface, while others (lips, neck) fade into murky shadows. If McMillan's rooms evoke a spatial purgatory somewhere between two and three dimensions, this haunting face—which simultaneously recedes into the depths of the picture plane and rises to its surface—is a soul awaiting judgment.

—Mara Hoberman

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