

THROUGH A PRISM OF REALITY

Text by Travis Diehl (2009)

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The only thing in Nicolas Grenier's painting *Inclusive Gated Community* (2009) rendered in familiar hues, wispy and pastel in the sky above a row of toxic green shacks, is a rainbow. It hardly seems sincere. Like the emerald green lawn on a billboard advertising desert tract homes, it appears to cinch the cynicism of some radioactive modernist dystopia. If the glowing color seduces, if the motion-blurred and molten-flecked trees look inviting, well—let the rainbow return you to irony.



Vertically Integrated Socialism (2010) Oil on canvas, 88" x 122"

The visible spectrum grounds the otherwise skewed world of Grenier's images. In the horizonless dawn of the large canvas *Vertically Integrated Socialism* (2010) is another reassuring gradient—in the form of an apartment building. From a white penthouse shrouded in a pale halo, the units neatly subdivide at each successive tier; their colors mix, trickle down, darken—four bold red, blue, and yellow-green luxury units, then sixteen two-bedroom units in teals, fuchsias, and oranges—until the gleaming penthouse is literally supported by sixty-four dim, subterranean “inclusivity apartments.” The pigments seem somehow ominous, those tiny basement units almost inhumane. Yet the composition of this color theory society is pleasantly resolved.

Grenier renders the architecture we deserve. We want unity, but not at the expense of diversity or freedom. The *Vertically Integrated Socialism* building accommodates just that: all classes under one roof, their relative positions essentially unchanged within a capitalist pyramid scheme. Or take the frank and efficient approach of *Gentrification-Ready Single Family Grass Roof Housing* (2011), a development of small bungalows ready to be stacked into three-

bedroom homes once property values rise. The old cellars of the poor will be flooded to make the swimming pools of the bourgeoisie. Admittedly, in their blunt elegance, these buildings reflect the priorities of our current social architecture.

Is this, then, some cold yet bright, painterly utopia? Or are these crisp exteriors a cover for totalitarianism? We expect one extreme or the other: the benevolent designs of Buckminster Fuller, the sun's energy spread evenly across the whole social spectrum; or Aldous Huxley's nightmare of UV hatcheries and synthetic solar doses. It's even tempting to abandon ourselves to the acidic wonderland of Grenier's paintings, to accept the utopia presented here in its paradoxical sense of "no-place," the impossible made possible at last by art. But none of this quite fits. Grenier's images comprise a flat, diagrammatic world—a world of painterly correspondence, not transcendence. In it, we see our own tangled cities, our own lost communes, our own regimented wilds. The spectrum itself becomes a diagram of the full range of our society, distributed across modern urbanism. The bland rainbow suddenly seems to confirm the banality of even electric suburbs.

Like Disney's Tomorrowland and its arterial freeways, like the United States under Reaganomics, Grenier's United Communities possess the veracity of social models in the abstract. This is society viewed, as Ronald Reagan once put it, "through a prism of reality." A strange idea: an optical instrument that does exactly nothing—or, put another way, that constitutes reality by insisting on vision as truth. This self-evident visuality precludes all other perspectives and recognizes only its own result. Through such a prism, for example, is produced the everyday hallucination of Southern California. Greek Order facades sparkle in Technicolor; palm trees bristle like pubic hair at the bases of high-rise office buildings. The synthesis of Mediterranean and Modernist fantasy forms a quotidian mirage.

Of course, some might dispute this reality, if they were part of it—that is, if they were visible. Here, Grenier's diagrammatic architecture gains its polemic. By rendering contradiction, by composing inequality, the artist contests a paradoxical and disingenuous urbanism on its own terms of self-evident visuality, shining it through its own favorite prism. Unlike photography, which is bound to less metaphysical optics, painting is visual in an expanded sense, and therefore is well suited to challenge a regime of pleasant visions. The buildings depicted in this exhibition are not meant to be built. As visual solutions to visual problems, they are already fully realized. This may seem dangerously close to the painterly utopianism of Mondrian or Rothko. Yet in a colorful, geometric painting of the footprint of a planned community is, more than abstract escapism, an echo of Peter Halley, who "walled up" Rothko in the 1980s with schematic, DayGlo abstractions of prisons, streets, and circuit boards. Here, as they occupy the picture plane, Grenier's United Communities insist on a candid, socially conscious visuality through the very social hallucinations that would conceal contradiction altogether.

Creating worlds without referents is still what painting does best. Grenier reclaims precisely this from the medium's disparaged history, countering fantasy with fantasy. Perhaps, too, painting itself is evidence of a certain idealism. Surrounded by cloying psychedelia, burdened with strange social correspondences, that wan little rainbow, fragile relic of reality, could almost be sincere.