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Art review: Dan Bayles at Francois Ghebaly Gallery

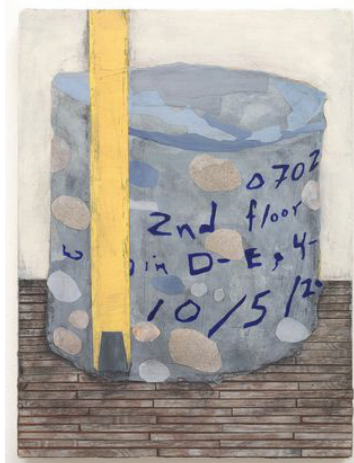
Sharon Mizota

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In 2006, the U.S. government abandoned construction of the Khan Bani Saad Correctional Facility, leaving a hulking, \$40-million monument to its failed reconstruction efforts in the Iraqi desert. The reasons for terminating the project included severe cost overruns, but site inspectors also found grave construction flaws that rendered much of what had been built unusable. The photographs documenting these mistakes are the basis for Dan Bayles' surprisingly serene paintings at François Ghebaly Gallery.

Like his earlier riffs on construction plans for the U.S. Embassy in Iraq, Bayles' paintings of the prison are only loosely based on the photographs the basis for nearly abstract compositions. Executed with a combination of loose brushwork and torn paper collage in muted colors, the paintings have a soft-edged, ephemeral quality that belies their bombastic subject matter. Concrete and steel are rendered frail and contingent in Bayles' hands.

This misty quality speaks to the provisional, invented nature of the imagery. In one painting, Bayles isolates a zig-zagging section of a concrete ceiling, buoying it with imagined scaffolding and streaks of greenery, as if the massive prison had become a floating ruin, slowly being reclaimed by nature. In another, he has wiped the slate clean for the government, returning three large rectangular buildings to empty, dusty plains. In some ways, Bayles turns the structure back into a two-dimensional plan, continually reworking it.



Not surprisingly, these painted interventions partake of the same modernist aesthetics that underpin such massive construction projects, especially carceral ones. The ethos of form follows function and streamlined economies of scale derive from the same ideologies that spawned modern abstract painting. Bayles acknowledges and refutes this relationship in a pair of images that riff on the meeting point of several concrete beams. Consisting mostly of hard-edged angles and planes, they divide the picture into a complex skin of flat and receding surfaces.

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However, at the crucial center point, where the major diagonals come together, Bayles introduces uncertainty: a scumble of semi-transparent white paint that leaves the point where the planes meet in question. This gesture seems to allude to the building's faulty construction, but is also a pointed refusal of the clarity of geometric abstraction. Somewhere between a faithful depiction and an idealized idyll, Bayles introduces fuzziness.

Yet the most compelling images in the show are a pair of small paintings of concrete cylinders, one intact, the other crumbling. Studded with collaged "pebbles," and decorated with cryptic writing, they are lumpy and pathetic and oddly corporeal, almost like portraits. Humble fragments, they make the grand modernist plan look as if it were built on sand.

Photos: Dan Bayles, "(Site Photo 7) Khan Bani Saad Correctional Facility," 2009; (top), "(Site Photo 3) Khan Bani Saad Correctional Facility," 2009. Credit: Courtesy of the Artist and François Ghebaly Gallery.