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"Art Review: Dan Bayles at François Ghebaly/Chung King Project"

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Image: "Interior #12." Image credit: Robert Wedemeyer.

For his second solo show at François Ghebaly/Chung King Project, Dan Bayles builds on the merger of landscape and abstraction that characterized his imaginative paintings of U.S. Embassy buildings in Baghdad. Those pictures were based on plans for the Green Zone leaked on the Internet. They balanced on an epic knife-edge between construction and dissolution – not unlike their subject. The new ones do too, but in a more intimate way.

In six large and medium-size canvases, Bayles paints picture windows whose view to the outside world is obscured, whether by Venetian blinds, apparently dirty glass, security bars or visual debris in the form of confetti-like chunks of drifting color-shapes. (Formally they're like a mash-up of Jasper Johns and Kevin Appel, who teaches at Bayles' alma mater, UC Irvine.) Often, the view seems apocalyptic – a smoldering vista of indiscriminate ruin, painted in dirty grays, taupe and pale putty, with smoky white wisps rising like smoke from an unseen fire.

Distinctions between outdoors and indoors are not clear, however, which gives the work quiet resonance. The sense of claustrophobic calamity is as much psychological as actual, internal as well as external, rendered on these somber paintings' heavily worked surfaces. The cautionary tone of Bayles' previous work has been likened to Thomas Cole's elaborate, 19th century lament for "The Course of Empire"; these new paintings bring that bleak yet fitting theme closer to home.