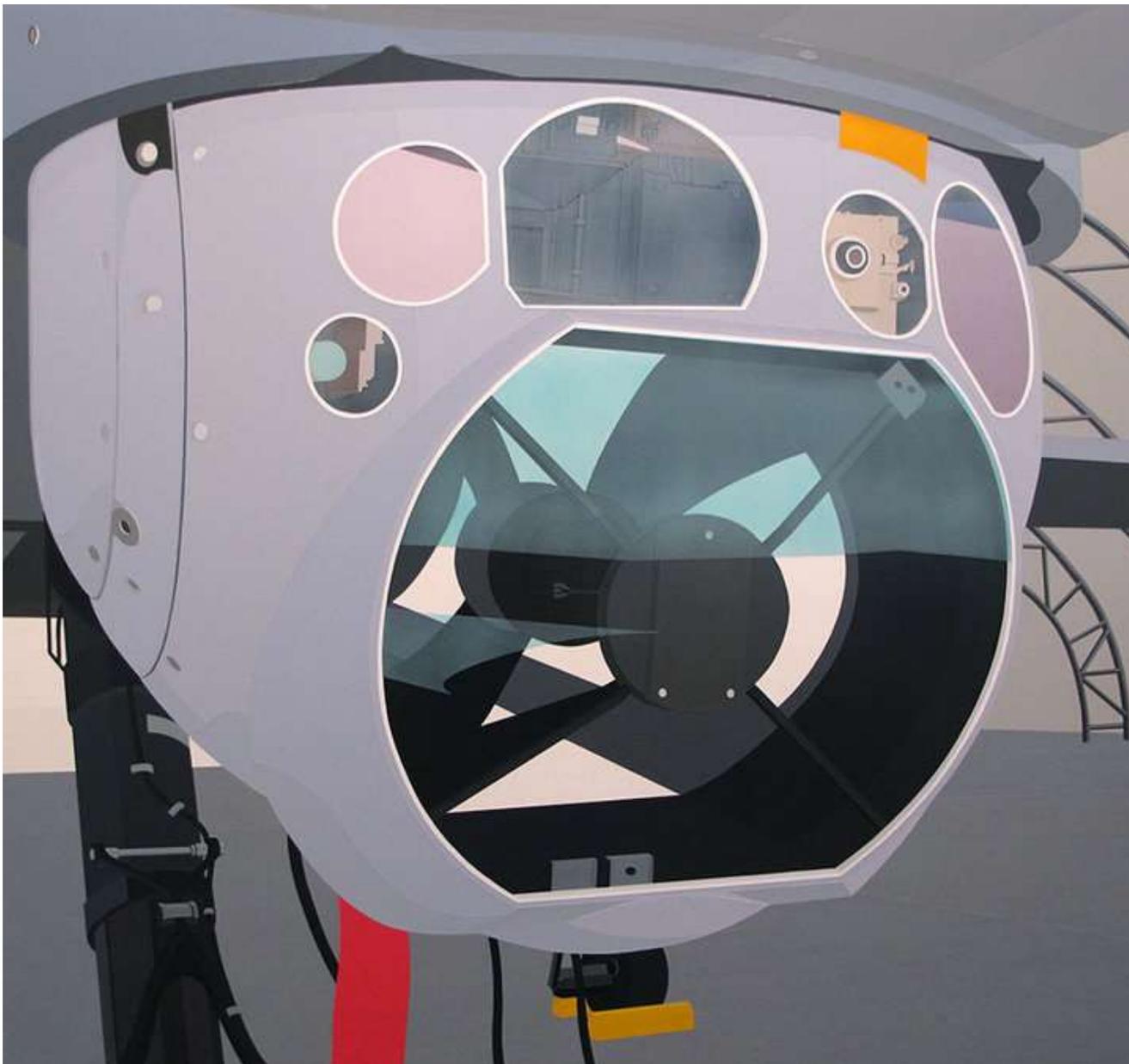




ARCHITECTURE
'Windows & Mirrors'
By Daniel Rich

June 2nd, 2016

We will soon be releasing "Windows and Mirrors," a book surveying the work of New York-based painter Daniel Rich, curated and art directed by Keir Kramlich and Allday's Jake Sumner. For more than a decade, Daniel has been interested in capturing the political power of various buildings from megalopolises across the globe. Working primarily from found imagery, he usually spends several months on a single panel. His paintings are colorful and disciplined, mineral and joyful, realistic and fantasized. For Allday, Daniel and filmmaker Benjamin Tiven discuss topics he's been exploring fully, such as mood and architecture, design and desire, and the message behind Apple designs. Daniel Rich: Ben, you visited my studio back in 2011 and I remember we had a really interesting conversation about the role of design in military technology and the Internet, and the ways that design can cloak and shield agendas. At the time, I had recently finished a painting of a Predator Drone and amongst many other things, we talked about a style of design that has been developed by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency.



"Drone," 2011. Acrylic and Enamel on Dibond, 47 x 50"

Benjamin Tiven: I remember that painting, and I remember even more specifically that first moment of seeing it. I think this was a bit before drones had such a high profile and public iconology, and your source image was pretty amazingly close-up. And this was right at the height of the US drone campaign in Pakistan.

Daniel: Yes, that was when drones became common in the news, and the rage in Afghanistan and Pakistan against the U.S. reached new levels. At the time, I had an idea of what a drone looked like, but it was still in the realm of science-fiction images, like the movie "The Terminator" would always come into my mind. I was thinking about the Predator's sleek color coordination, and the potential symbolism of its appearance. I saw in it an architecture of desire that mirrors its makers: a highly designed assassin and symbol of the times we live in, whether we pay attention to those times or

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not. So I approached it as a portrait painting: by painting the optic sensor ball that is this assassins face. Its features are pleasing: they reflect the calmness of superiority.

“WHEN SEEN FROM THE AIR IT’S SUDDENLY SO OBVIOUS AND SIMPLE: IT’S A CLOCK, THE FACE OF A WATCH.”—BENJAMIN

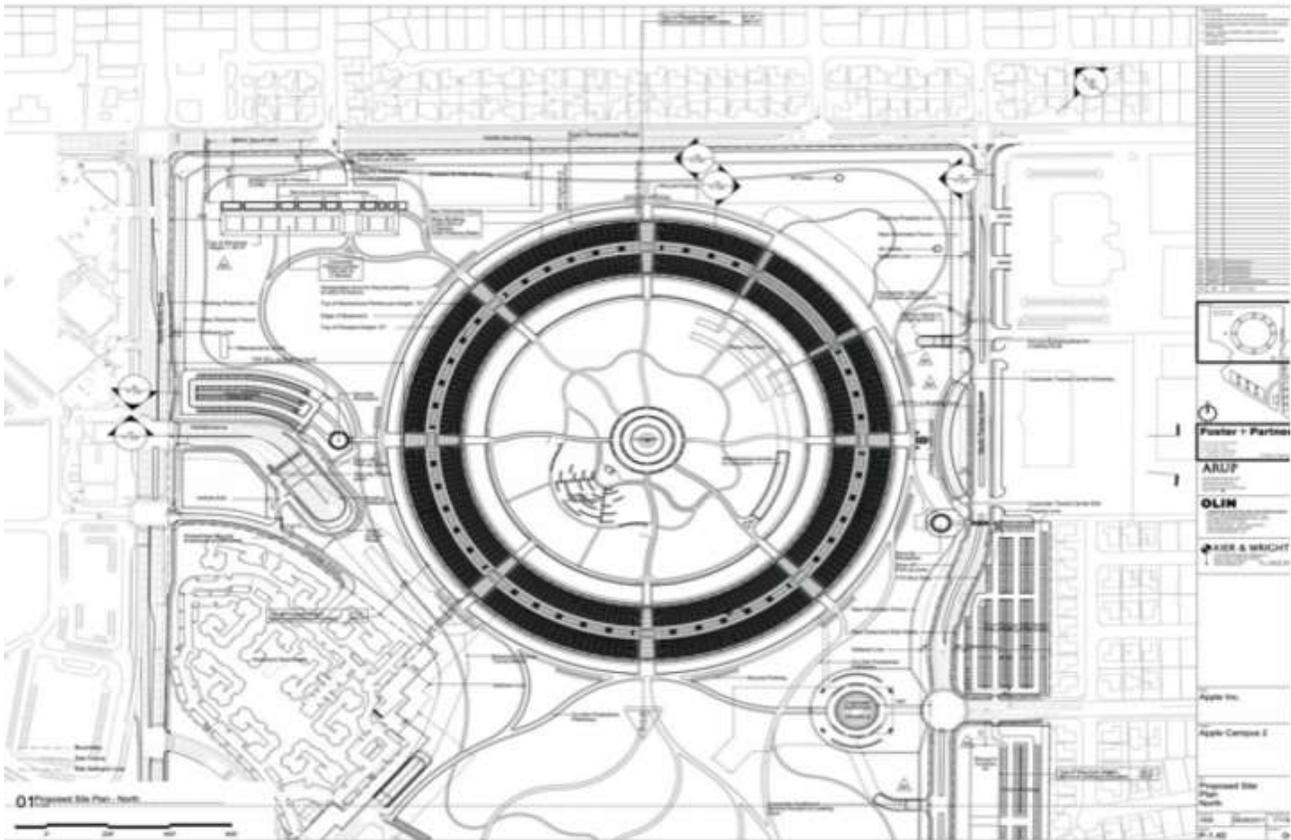
Benjamin: Right. But precisely what desire do you think it mirrors? “Design” is the solving of a particularly constrained problem... In this case, the problem of a weaponized, pilotless airplane, constrained by things like stealth, flying time, degree of autonomy, its very high-resolution optics, etc. and the Predator is the outcome of navigating those circumstances. So, the “makers” who are mirrored are... General Atomics, who manufactures it? Or, us, the public? After all, it’s “we” who want to technically automate warfare... But let’s go back to the dominant theme in your paintings: architecture. We were talking before about Apple’s new headquarters in Cupertino, and I think that’s a good example of this same mirroring, on a larger scale. A complicated building mirrors the society that lets the builder get away with it. The entire building is a circle, skinned with curved glass. The architect is Norman Foster, but Steve Jobs obviously had a lot of input.



Digital Rendering of the new Apple Headquarters, Cupertino, CA. Norman Foster Architects

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I once saw a talk (by the curator/critic Sarah Lookofsky) about the history of glass architecture, tracing its development from modernism's open, utopic spaces to its inversion in post-modern American skyscrapers, where glass is a mirrored barrier that keeps out sunlight and also other people's vision. She ended her talk with this Apple building, which hadn't yet broken ground. I was really struck: between the circular form and the glass material, it's so many things: barrier, shield, loop, perimeter boundary, delimiter of sacred ground, building with neither front nor back, particle accelerator, space ship, snake eating own tail, man with head up own ass, etc. But, when seen from the air it's suddenly so obvious and simple: it's a clock, the face of a watch. Which makes sense, of course: through its global network of timeservers, Apple keeps and controls the time. That's the message it sends.



Schematic of Apple Headquarters, Cupertino, CA. Norman Foster Architects

Daniel: I think this observation about Apple having control over time is really interesting on so many levels. Their products link desire to modernist aesthetics, often Modernist architecture, and they all subsume the function of a clock within them. Your phone tells you the time; your watch can make a phone call.

Benjamin: The Desire-Design-Chronology triangle is the core of their business. But their circular HQ isn't the extreme end of symbolic architecture; that might be something like the World Island archipelago complex in Dubai. A scene which you once painted, I remember! You're really adept at finding these global examples of enormous, capital-infused architectural epics, like the plastics exchange in Guangzhou, or the pyramid hotel in Pyongyang, or the visual pattern of megacity

apartment complexes. It seems you're making some form of history paintings, and the subject is globalism itself. Do you think about it that way?



"Tokyo," 2013. Acrylic on Dibond, 84 x 86"

Daniel: Good question. History painting's legacies are really interesting to me—for example Jacques Louis David's use of architecture as a symbolic backdrop for his heroic political scenes. And Piranesi too: he depicted the malevolent side of absolute power through gigantic architectural fantasies, typically with tiny human figures dwarfed by the built world. I suppose my work could be understood as a kind of history painting, without the genre's historical mandate for propaganda. I scan global iconology, and try to render images of how this system looks, or seems to look. I'm

mostly interested in how power is portrayed: what its stage props and backdrops look like, without the narrative reality implied by having people in the image.



Piranesi, "The Gothic Arch" from the series "Imaginary Prisons," 1750

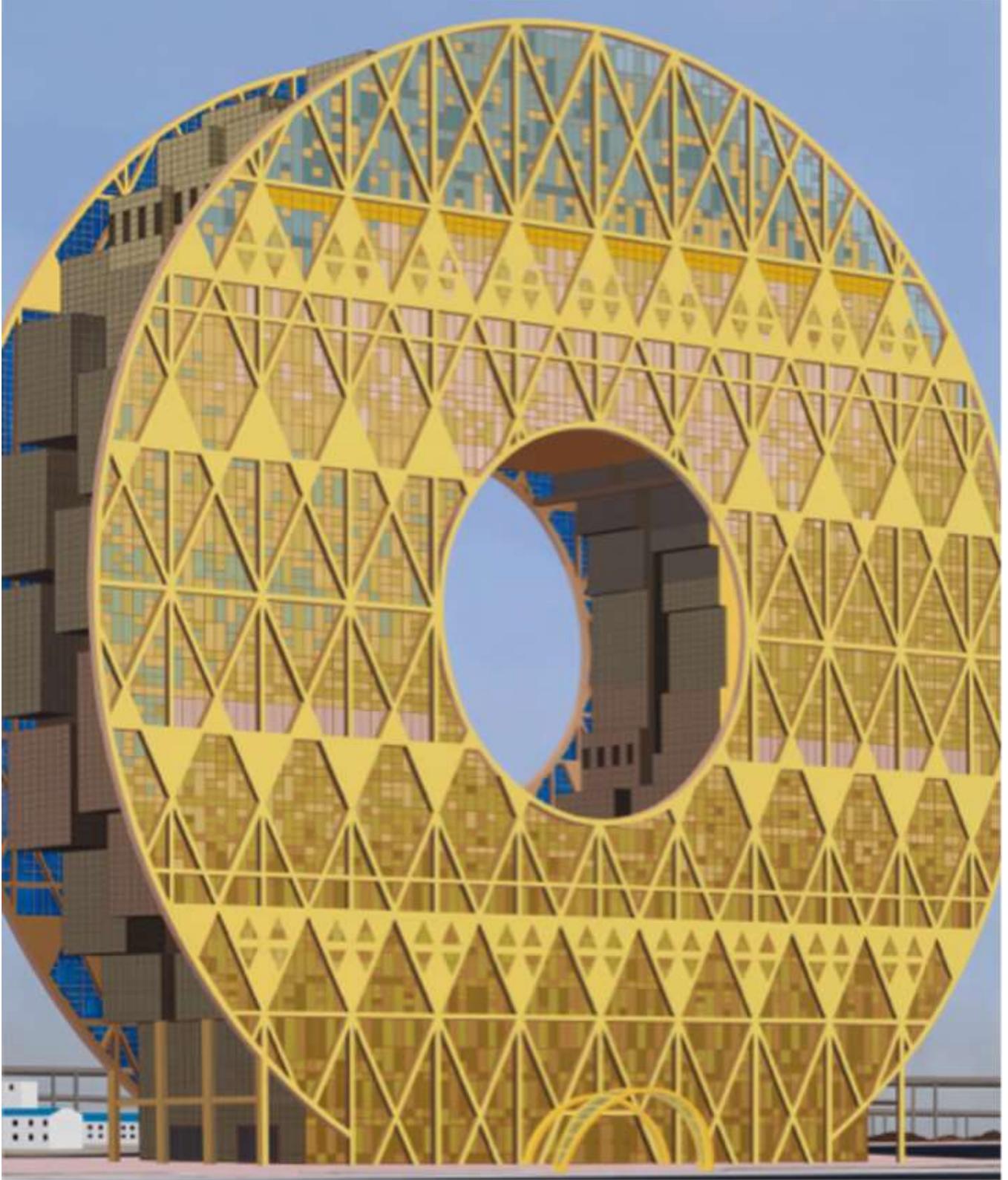
"WHAT IS INTRIGUING TO ME IS THAT THE DESIRES EXPRESSED IN THESE BUILDINGS ARE IN NEITHER CASE THOSE OF 'THE PEOPLE' BUT ARE INSTEAD CLOSELY LINKED TO THE DESIRES OF INDIVIDUALS."—DANIEL

Benjamin: I notice the anxious strangeness of having no people. You have these giant city scenes, with captions indicating the most crowded parts of the globe, and yet there's basically nobody in your paintings. Still, the paintings feel close to contemporary reality. I think this happens at the level of process, too: your pixelated grids are themselves a kind of trace realism. You sort of paint in a way that's similar to how a CCD chip takes a photograph.

Daniel: I don't describe my paintings as realism—but they always depict real places. My aesthetic is that of the image having been subjected to "filters"—another link that could be made to the digital globalism era and to the image/ information saturation that is the Internet.



Source Image for "Guangzhou Circle, China" from Wikipedia



"Guangzhou Circle, China", 2015, Acrylic on Dibond, 72 x 59"

Benjamin: What do you think happens to the source images when you slow them down by painting them? When you transpose a found image into paint, what are you doing to it?

Daniel: I'm interested in the potential divergence and duality of images. I mean, when I make meticulous paintings of newswire photographs, I'm seeking to invest that picture with the capability to function as a more abstract signifier. I started making architectural paintings in 2002, during the aftermath of 9/11 and the lead up to the invasion of Iraq, and I began seeking out images of the architecture that was the backdrop of the unfolding events. Footage of nuclear inspectors at sites in Iraq, supposed sites for Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, speeches at the UN Building, the World Trade Center site, etc were abundant in the media.



“Saddam Grand Mosque, Baghdad,” 2008, Enamel on Wood, 62 x 96”

Benjamin: But for all the pictorial clarity of the reportage photography you use as sources, it's sometimes really hard to see or understand what these things are, where they're contextualized, what forces they encode. How you decide to work on one image vs. another...?

Daniel: Choosing images to make paintings of can be a very intuitive process. The source image is selected for its capability to function as a signifier, and whether it has the potential to be transcribed into a painting. My process involves tracing the photograph onto the panel, re-drawing it, and subsequently reconstructing the image through stenciling and masking. During this process, the photograph is broken down into individual, graphic shapes that are each designated with a color.

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The painted version of the original- having undergone its appropriation, takes on a new life on the wall or online. The availability of digital images from around the world is a fortunate circumstance for me, and my work would have probably developed differently if it weren't for the Internet.

Benjamin: You and I share an interest in hidden infrastructure. I've seen pieces of yours with images of the patterned racks of server centers, or the Foxconn staircase that was covered with mesh netting to keep workers from committing suicide, or the huge book warehouse of Amazon. In some ways, these hidden (or at least, non-public) spaces are also iconic now, having circulated through popular media. They demonstrate some of the ways architecture shapes desire: either circumscribing it forcefully (Foxconn) or obliquely (server racks, Amazon's physical plant, or even its predictive purchase algorithms).



"FoxConn, Shenzhen," 2012, Acrylic on Dibond, 21 x 19"

My own work has taken up some of these same questions. "Invisible Encampment" (2014) is a 3-D printed sculpture in the form of a large floor tile, 25cm square, with a pattern design that's a proposal schema for an informal settlement. The pattern of the buildings has been adjusted so

it tessellates: any side of the square could touch any edge of an adjacent (identical) square and they would make a continuous pattern. The streets would all connect, the buildings would all line up. So, it could spread out indefinitely in all directions and make a repeating, but asymmetric, set of identical patterns. From the air, this would be confusing: each section of the city grid would be the same as all the others. The idea was to propose an architecture that would resist being aerially surveilled.



Benjamin Tiven, "Invisible Encampment," Connex 3D print, 25 x 25 x 1.6 cm, 2014

Daniel: This reminds me of alternative internet platforms like the Tor Network that resist surveillance. The idea to apply that idea to future cities is profound. Under what political circumstances would this proposal be implemented? Is it a response to the legacy of our contemporary lives as seen from a future point of view?

Benjamin: It does exist in some future, but probably the conditions to really design such a scheme (and the reasons to do so) are already here. The idea came from a short video piece that's shown along with it, called "Two Devices" (2014). That work narrates the mechanization of natural forms in two episodes, one with an animated donkey who's about to commit an act of violence, and a more documentary half detailing a mechanical bird and its awkward human handlers. But the bird (its called the SmartBird, made by a German company called Festo) has often been assumed to be a kind of drone machine that's taken the form of an animal. It's actually not that at all. But it prompted me to think about what landscape would be hard for such an "animal" to see. But, this video itself came from a sort of obscure news clip about drones, a story from the summer of 2011—not long after our first studio visit—when a spy drone crashed in southern Pakistan, and the plane was bird-

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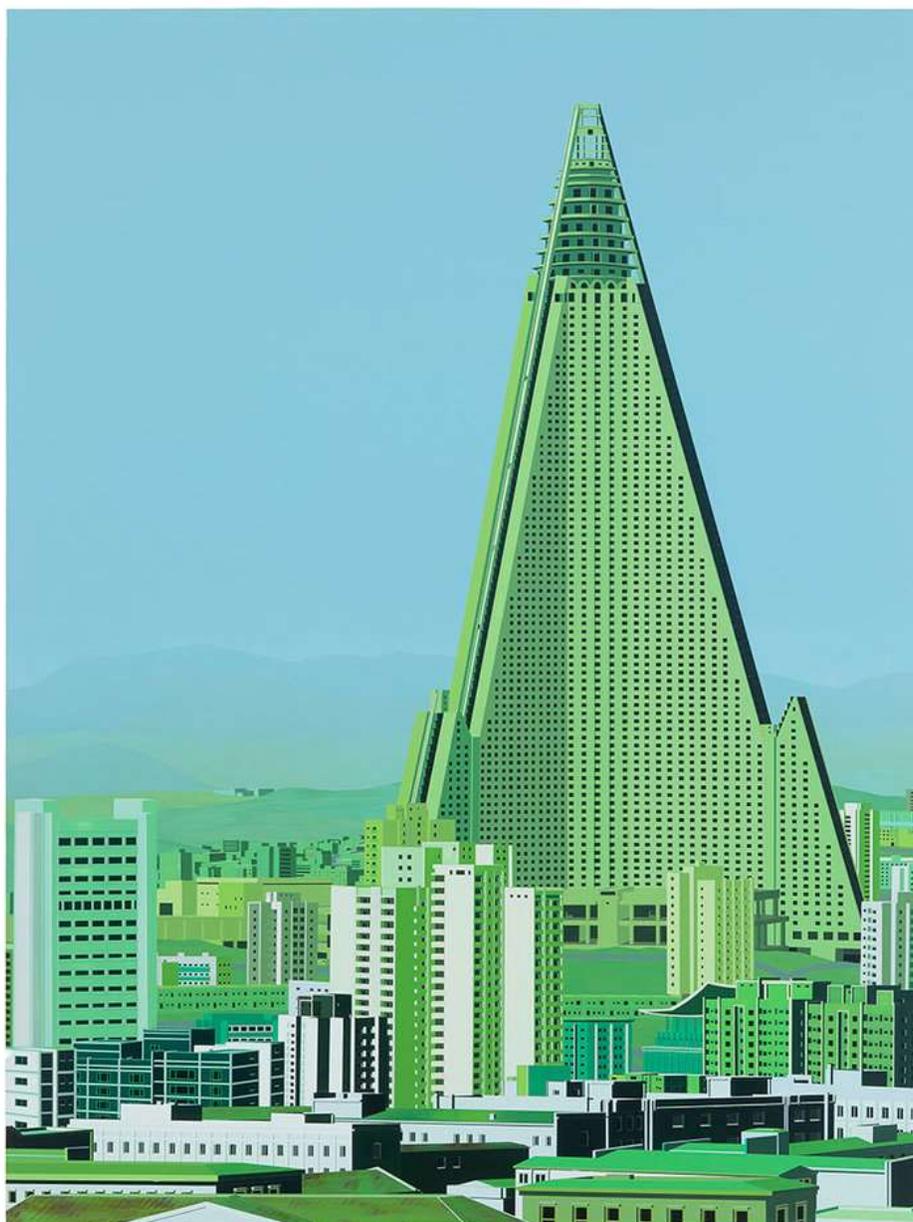
like in its wing shape, and the Karachi news media reported that it was some kind of spy-bird-robot, and they used the Festo Smartbird as the illustration. My video was basically the reimagining of the news story, and the re-use of its shot choreography.



Benjamin Tiven, stills from "Two Devices," HD, color, stereo, 10:00", 2014

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Daniel: This speaks to another common interest for us, which is the aerial viewpoint, both its political implications (control, dominance) and its optical properties: things wrap, compress, or spread out depending on the pitch of the view. This brings us back to the outset of our conversation: to aerial surveillance, the drone, and the view of the new Apple Headquarters currently under construction in California from above. It's strange, but a building I made a painting of—the “Ryugyong Hotel” in Pyongyang—draws interesting comparisons. This structure is an unfinished 105 storey obelisk built over the course of over 20 years. The Ryugyong Hotel was designed to be one of the most prominent features of the Pyongyang skyline, and when seen from above, could be interpreted as a sundial, keeping time by casting its gigantic shadow. Benjamin: You could see these architectures, and their two modes of public time-keeping, as loosely symbolizing two methods of exercising social power: one analog, one digital.





"Ryugyong Hotel, Pyongyang," 2012, Acrylic on Dibond, 75.5 x 57"

Daniel: We did not set out to make this connection at the outset of our conversation but we have arrived at this very interesting intersection between two structures that could not be more different from each other—the common denominator being the notion of “Architecture as Desire.” What is intriguing to me is that the desires expressed in these buildings are in neither case those of “the people” but are instead closely linked to the desires of individuals.