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Art review: Eamon O'Kane at See Line Gallery

March 19, 2010 | 7:00 am

In an eclectic installation at [See Line Gallery](#), Eamon O'Kane takes on the controversial story of Le Corbusier's admiration and eventual vandalism of fellow architect Eileen Gray's villa, E-1027, in the south of France.

As a woman and a successful designer of modern furniture, Gray was a rarity in the 1920s, and E-1027, completed in 1929, marked her transition from furniture – a more suitably "feminine" profession – to the male-dominated field of architecture. By redrawing and intermingling images of her work and Le Corbusier's, O'Kane not only evokes their strange, intertwined history but momentarily levels the difference in their reputations. Le Corbusier is nearly a household name; Gray is far less well-known, but their furniture designs in particular are remarkably similar.

By all accounts, Le Corbusier, who was about 10 years Gray's junior, thought very highly of her designs, especially the integrated layout and furnishings of E-1027. He visited on numerous occasions and eventually bought an adjacent piece of land on which he built an uncharacteristically rustic cabin. But after Gray moved away in the 1930s, Le Corbusier moved in against her wishes and painted a series of eight murals on the home's interior walls, an act Gray's biographer has described as a "rape."

Yet for all the story's scandal, O'Kane's response is markedly understated. He has lined the gallery walls with small drawings and paintings of both buildings and their furnishings, as if quietly cataloging evidence. Drawn from photographs found in books or on the Internet, a few images depict the offending murals, but most are isolated objects on small white or coffee-stained pieces of paper stuck casually to the wall.



This nonchalant presentation is reminiscent of sketches in an artist's or architect's studio – in some cases, O'Kane has reinterpreted actual plans – but most of the images are clearly intended as re-creations of photographs, not works in progress. Yet with their hand-drawn quality and coffee stains, they look not authoritative but vulnerable. They might be the products of an especially driven hobbyist who collects and redraws such images in order to make them his own.

This amateur tone extends to the wood-and-paper partitions the artist has erected around the gallery. Based on designs by both Le Corbusier and Gray, the panels are also reminiscent of Mondrian's grids. Painted black, the wooden armatures are filled in with squares and rectangles of white and colored paper. Unlike the sketches, they re-create modern designs in three dimensions, but they are also slightly pathetic: some of the crossbars sag, and the colored paper looks flimsy.



To the artist's credit, one needn't know about the Corbusier-Gray intrigue to understand how this handmade, human aspect belies the typical presentation of modernist design as cool, rational and machine-made. And as if to reinforce the point, the gallery, located in the Pacific Design Center, is surrounded by exactly such displays of actual furnishings.

In O'Kane's hands modernism becomes inflected with messy and inchoate desires that are only amplified by familiarity with his source material. His loose, casual re-creations disturb the fantasy of mastery associated with modern design, much in the way Eileen Gray's success

as a woman architect must have done for Le Corbusier.

— Sharon Mizota

See Line Gallery, 8687 Melrose Ave., Suite B274, West Hollywood, (917) 604-3114, through April 8. Closed Saturdays and Sundays. www.seelinegallery.com

Images: Le Cabanon, 2010 and E-1027, 2010. Courtesy of See Line Gallery.

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