

« OCT 2020 Issue

Lauretta Vinciarelli: *Intimate Distances*

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By William Corwin



Lauretta Vinciarelli, *The Subway Series (2 of 3)*, 1988. Watercolor on paper, 30 x 22 1/2 inches. Courtesy TOTAH, New York.

On View

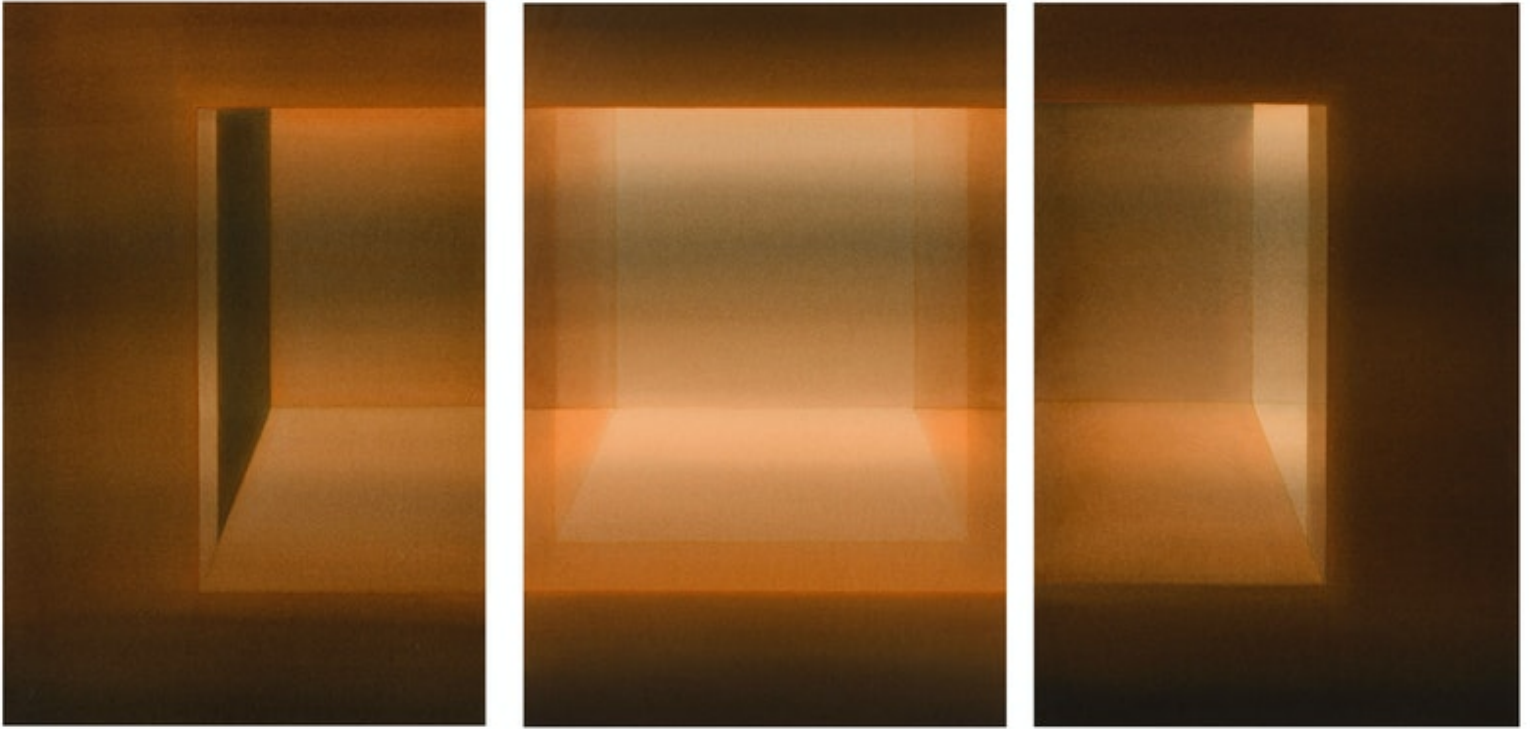
TOTAH

September 10 – October 25, 2020

New York

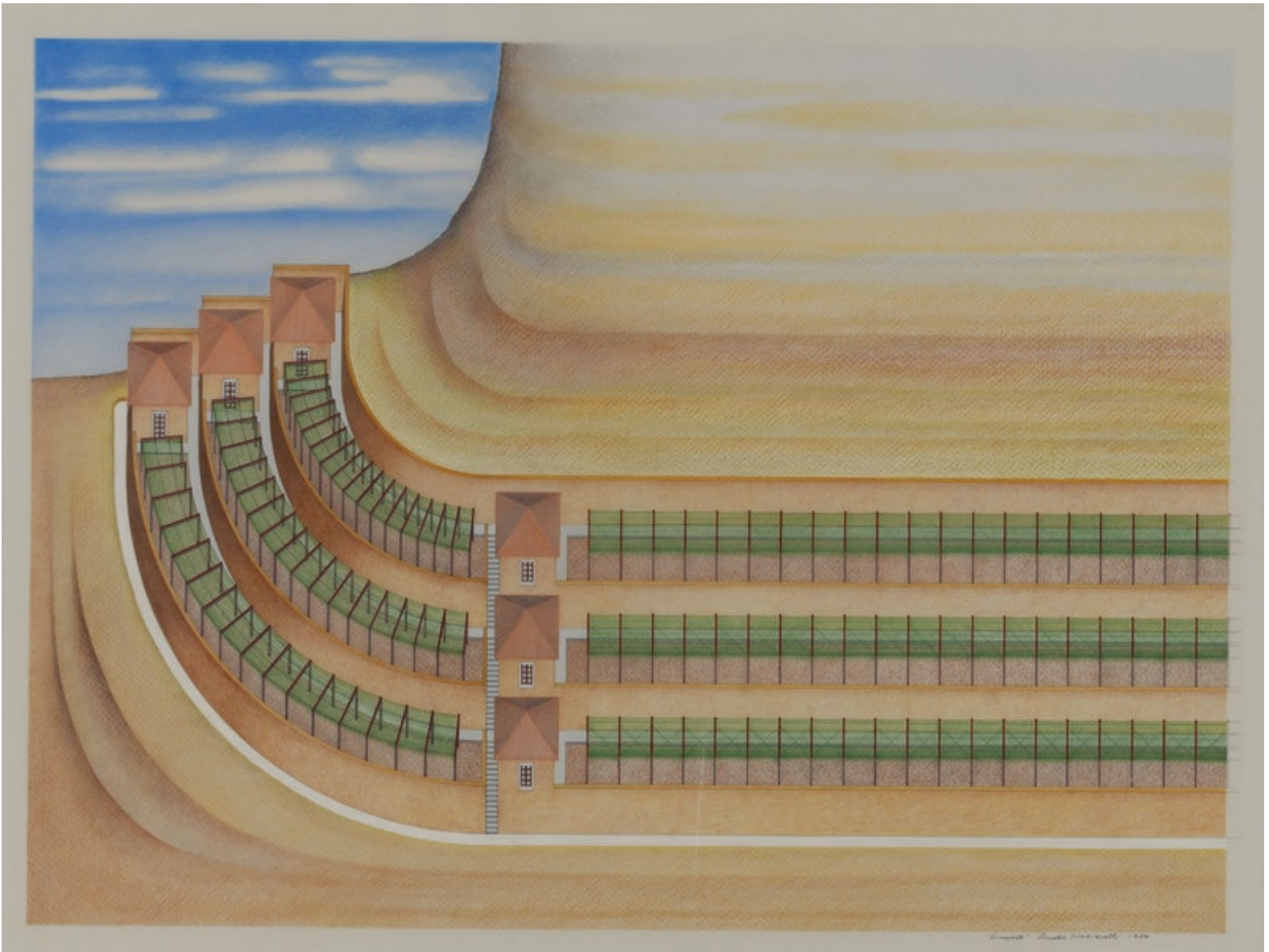
The irony of a lot of architecture is that it's meant to be looked at but not physically interacted with. We, the viewers, are expected to take in the symmetries, shadows, and rhythms of the structure from a privileged viewpoint. Lauretta Vinciarelli's watercolors depict spaces created from this curated perspective. Her work is a conversation with, but ultimately a concession to, the frozen requirements of the architect's eye—yet this is not necessarily a pejorative trait. Within the nuance of the viewer's fixed position, her works are packed with a host of philosophical ideals, including the "tragic city" and the "comic city," Renaissance principles of architecture that experienced a renaissance themselves in the 1980s (when many of these drawings were made). Vinciarelli was a practicing architect, part of the Postmodern movement that included John Hedjuk, Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi, Diana Agrest and Mario

Gandelsonas, Michael Graves, and Charles Moore, but it was her long professional partnership with Donald Judd that seems to have tempered and diminished her need to pin her ideas of light and space to a literal architectural structure. Many of the projects built by her colleagues fell into a historical trap at the intersection of a classical decorative vocabulary and minimalist/modernist simplicity: the buildings bring to mind the neoclassicism of early/mid 20th-century fascist regimes. Vinciarelli's sculptural meditations, however, slowly morph into completely ethereal studies, subsequently skirting any negative political associations.



Laretta Vinciarelli, *Orange Silence*, 2000. Watercolor on paper, 22 x 15 inches each. Courtesy TOTAH, New York.

Vinciarelli moves from the specific to the general throughout the selection of works exhibited in *Intimate Distances*. Initially her drawings describe semi-recognizable spaces that could or do exist, but she comes to ground with works that are concerned solely with light and volume as exploration of perception becomes the paramount motivation in her rendering of space. Among the earlier works, *Subway Series* and *Texas Remembered* (both 1988) are two sets of three watercolors and are stoic meditations on symmetry, rendered with a touch of dry humor. The buildings depicted in *Texas Remembered* have arches, columns, and windows, some obscured with bars in a sinister touch. These details summon references to the light, airy, and ominous modernism of Terragni and particularly his unbuilt memorial to Dante, the Danteum (ca. 1938), one of the great poetic and creepy architectural proposals of the 20th century—and seemingly a stylistic influence on Vinciarelli's watercolors. Her *Subway Series* again constructs a convincing location, one with platforms that resemble a waiting area in which we have all stood at one time or another. The wit of the works resides in the fact that she insists on instigating an artificially precise symmetry through a strangely reflective mirroring device on the floor. If this subway has a delightful watery reflective pool, where are the train tracks? And where is this train going, as the perspective ends in a small window? The mirroring of the top half of the image in the bottom half is more than a reflection in water, it's a forced and inevitable symmetry in the world, such as between heaven and earth, or even heaven and hell. The later works on view seem to have shed their false sense of practicality and need for human interaction (beyond looking). In the intense *Atrium II (4 of 4)* (1991), a nexus of three monumental doorways converge on a square rotunda which descends into a well of blinding luminescence. Piranesi-like, Vinciarelli playfully highlights the fact that this is an architect making architecture that doesn't work.



by retreating to pure volume as subject matter.

Contributor

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is a sculptor and journalist from New York. He has exhibited at The Clocktower, LaMama and Geary galleries in New York, as well as galleries in London, Hamburg, Beijing and Taipei. He has written regularly for *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Artpapers*, *Bomb*, *Artcritical*, *Raintaxi* and *Canvas* and formerly for *Frieze*. Most recently he curated and wrote the catalog for *Postwar Women* at The Art Students League in New York, an exhibition of the school's alumnae active between 1945-65, and *9th Street Club*, and exhibition of Perle Fine, Helen Frankenthaler, Mercedes Matter, Grace Hartigan, Lee Krasner and Elaine DeKooning at Gazelli Art House in Mayfair. He is the editor of *Formalism; Collected Essays of Saul Ostrow*, to be published in 2020, and he will participate in the exhibition *Anchor/Roots* at the Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art at Snug Harbor Cultural Center in 2021.