



Laretta Vinciarelli, *Orange Silence*, 2000, three watercolor-on-paper works, each 22 × 15".

Laretta Vinciarelli

TOTAH

Solace. That’s the word that kept coming to mind as I looked at Laretta Vinciarelli’s exacting watercolor-and-ink studies of light, space, and reflection, after not having seen art in person for six months due to the Covid-19 closures. This exquisite exhibition focused on the artist and architect’s mature production between 1984 and 2002, before her untimely death in 2011 at age sixty-eight. It seemed to pick up right where the last Vinciarelli show—at New York’s Judd Foundation in 2019—left off. That presentation surveyed her output from the years 1976 to 1986, when she was romantically involved with the foundation’s namesake. Unfortunately, the offering, as Ida Panicelli wrote in these pages, left “unaddressed the circuitous path” that Vinciarelli “took to become an extraordinary artist.” Not so here.

Vinciarelli was raised in Rome, where her father was an organist at Saint Peter’s Basilica (she later likened the numbering of works in her various series to notes on a musical scale). She studied architecture at Sapienza Università di Roma before emigrating in 1969 to the United States, where she taught for many years at several institutions. In 1987, she commenced her transcendent spatial experiments in watercolor and ink, which were never meant to be plans for actual buildings. “The architectural space I have painted since 1987 does not portray solutions to specific demands of use,” she once noted. Her engagement with luminous watercolor on sturdy sheets of Fabriano paper, typically thirty by twenty-two inches, allowed her to exemplify what it means to “not portray,” to abandon utility in the service of unbridled imagination, as other well-known and mostly male avant-garde architects of the era—such as Walter Pichler and Lebbeus Woods—did. Now Vinciarelli is finally receiving her due, though at a time when Minimalism has become the dominant neoliberal lifestyle aesthetic. Those new to her might mistake her paintings’ rigorous elegance as “classy” and “sleek,” as if it’s something you can readily buy at Design Within Reach. Vinciarelli’s sublime pictures are indeed beautiful, but her brand of elegance is hard won, ruthless—her pristine tableaux are never sullied by the presence of humans, and recognizable architectural elements are frequently pared down to impossible-looking Apollonian forms.

Vinciarelli’s art began with identifiable figuration and slowly transformed into something much more expansive. The show at Totah opened with 1988’s “Subway Series,” paintings that resemble idealized and vacant places for transportation—think Giorgio de Chirico or the visionary drawings of Massimo Scolari—and the “Texas Remembered” series, also from 1988, which were executed in a similar style and influenced by her days in Marfa with Judd. Also included in the first room was *Vineyard*, 1984, a typological study of gardens, and *Night Five*, from a magnificent 1996 series, titled “Night,” of elegiac paintings that evoke memorials in reflecting pools.

Around a corner in the second room, the art shifted from representational to abstract, and the mood from somber to meditative with *Orange Silence* from 2000, the “Intimate Distances” series from 2002, and the “Suspended in Blue” series from 2007. All of these offer multiple vanishing points in an illusory, disorienting space and feature subtle variations in color that suggest the movement of light, which spreads across the surface of each composition before it is contained by networks of orthogonal lines, creating deep spatial recessions. Vinciarelli summons a remote sense of intimacy that describes our current situation perfectly: all together yet all alone. Given her interests in Zen and the elements of negation, I thought of these works as full of nothingness, per the Mahāyāna Buddhist concept of *Śūnyatā*. “Form is empty; emptiness is form,” to quote the *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya*, the Heart Sutra, which discusses human attachments to self and consequently to suffering. Vinciarelli’s acceptance of selflessness near the end of her life is admirable—an embrace of everything and nothing, all at once.

—Lauren O’Neill-Butler