

Paul Schulenburg and Roger Watt

Paul Schulenburg's new paintings, at George Billis Gallery in New York City, record and distill his observations of city life. While human figures appear, the stories this artist-flâneur tells us focus on the interplay between the solid geometry of architectural forms and the transient, evanescent effects of light. We may be intrigued by the woman in *Spring Street and Broadway* (all works 2015), walking in front of us in her light-colored raincoat. But her purpose and personality are hidden from us. The drama of the composition comes from the way she is silhouetted against the shimmering white light that cuts through the shadow canyon of SoHo's cast-iron palazzo buildings. Schulenburg obviously relishes the textural possibilities of laying swaths of glare-white paint

against the various greys of the potholed street, concrete sidewalk and gutter puddles.

In *Any Moment*, the lone figure lingering in the shadows of a gallery façade functions as an indicator of scale, like a supernumerary posed in front of an ancient monument in a nineteenth-century photograph. *Any Moment* celebrates a slice of the



Paul Schulenburg
Any Moment, 2015
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streetscape, viewed head-on and completely filling the picture plane. A complex grid of windows, doorways, pilasters, columns and fire-escapes comes alive in raking light. The crisp diagonals of the fire-escapes are dynamically repeated in their shadow versions, energizing the composition. The artist trains his eye on two façades, framing them asymmetrically. The dialogue between the components plays out as a strong geometric abstraction. Light and shadow give the image an appealing naturalism.

Contemporary urban painters frequently pay homage, in one way or another, to the great twentieth-century practitioner of the genre, Edward Hopper. Schulenburg explicitly evokes Hopper's *Early Sunday Morning* (1930) in *Barbershop*. Hopper includes a barber shop in his row of small businesses, and both Hopper and Schulenburg play variations on the rectangle in the apartment windows of the brick second story. Schulenburg's *City Sunlight* loosens up the formula. The greyish cobblestones and sidewalk are strafed with white-paint light. The branches of a tree, just off-stage to the right, seem to generate a diagonal flourish of brushwork. Viewers often intuit existential narratives in Hopper's lonely urban spaces. Schulenburg, however, cites with appreciation Hopper's argument for the primacy of a formal, visual language: "If you could say it in words there would be no reason to paint."

Schulenburg's city scenes appeal to the viewer on several levels. The neighborhoods he wanders in search of subjects are built on a human scale, with architecture that possesses a certain vernacular charm. The artist overlays the architectural bits and pieces with painterly shapes of his own. Paul Schulenburg's paintings were on view March 3–28, 2015.

Artists relish the physicality of their materials. Roger Watt, another artist featured at George Billis Gallery this spring, works in graphite. Watt's *Anytime* (2014) has a Pop Art vibe. The "No Parking Anytime" sign that dominates the image is covered in tape, stickers and graffiti, and the strong black lines of a metal railing give the composition a graphic punch. Yet the fog-shrouded bridge in the background has a delicacy reminiscent of Whistler's tonalism. In *7th Avenue* (2014), Watt plunges the viewer into the heart of midtown Manhattan, the tall narrow format emphasizing the soaring buildings on either side of the street. By keeping the buildings dark, Watt constricts the space and focuses the eye on the light-filled center, where the chaos of cars and jostling pedestrians is veiled by steam, clouds and rain-slicked streets. The image is both raucously urban and unexpectedly poetic. Roger Watt's drawings were on view March 31–April 25, 2015. George Billis Gallery, 525 West 26th Street, New York, NY 10001. Telephone (212) 645–2621. georgebillis.com

—Gail Leggio