

## **Essay for the next Women and Their Work catalogue. Charles Dee Mitchell**

You know what it is like to wake up in a strange room. Disorientation gives way if not to familiarity then at least to acceptance of what you find. Soon it's all right that a doorway leads to a closet and not the bathroom, and that the window opens onto a city street and not your own backyard. It is a fleeting experience, quickly forgotten as you get up and begin your day.

Mona Marshall's Point of Entry drawings heighten and sustain that experience. These are spacious works, usually 72 x 60 inches with one two-panel work twice that in width, and white or lightly tinted encaustic against a black ground gives the drawings a strong physical presence. Marshall has a theatrical vision and the rooms she depicts are like grand stage settings with an unsettling mix of the familiar and the strange, or of the familiar behaving strangely. The architecture is grand and sometimes oppressive. Wide stairways lead nowhere, and vertiginous spiraling staircases serve no apparent purpose. An incongruous baroque dome, complete with foreshortened *putti*, occupies the upper right of a drawing that elsewhere contains the dreariest office imaginable. The boundaries between interior and exterior are fluid, as though many of these occupied structures might still be under construction. The light is abundant, but its frequently multiple sources within a single drawing further disorients the viewer. When it floods through the waiting room windows of a beautiful old train station, you get the sense that the people waiting there may be there for eternity. Waiting is a major activity in Marshall's drawings. Waiting and what sometimes appears to be conspiring. The two activities are carried on by two distinct types of people. The waiters are just everyday folks, waiting for a train, idling in a hallway, or pausing in their work. Marshall identified one vaguely familiar figure as the usher from an Edward Hopper painting, but she seldom quotes so specifically from art historical sources. Her subtle use of period distances the images and encourages a kind of voyeurism. Marshall knows that people like to look, and she gives us not only the figures but also many nooks and crannies to explore.

The dark suited men Marshall depicts may not be conspiring, but they are often deep in discussion. They are seated comfortably in their own quarters, away from the waiters. In one case they are separated from the rest of the space by a pretentious tasseled rope. That drawing is titled "The Directors' Room", further emphasizing that these men are somehow in charge. An isolated man sits away from the scene that involves the train station. It's tempting to project onto this figure the role of the architect or the dreamer who has created what we see elsewhere in the drawing.

I said earlier that Marshall had a theatrical imagination. When I saw these "Point of Entry" drawings I felt like the curtain had just gone up on performance that would be held forever in suspense. Reflecting on her title for this series, you realize that the drawings all depict the sorts of spaces we normally pass through rather than inhabit: waiting rooms, hallways, and staircases. In the station drawing a train is leaving a tunnel. In another drawing you can see an underground garage at the end of a hallway. These are places we tend to endure rather than seek out. That is why these static performances can be so unsettling.

Recently, Marshall has removed the protagonists from her work and focused on specific types of architecture. In these 54 x 52 inch drawings, the considerable skill she has

mastered in using encaustic is put to its best use. Encaustic can often produce an impressive but inert surface. Marshall applies it thinly and fluidly, using it at times almost like a wash. She draws back into it, scratching it away to reveal the dark ground of the painted paper. Her line can define the rise of an arch or the stones of a pillar, but by scratching and smearing the wax she can also produce a shimmering light. It's the light that breathes life into these three architectural studies, most triumphantly in one that depicts a view up into a primitive wooden tower. Light pours into the tower, producing a radiance that is paradoxically the waxiest, most solid element of the drawing. If the architecture in "Point of Entry" series becomes oppressive, here architecture combines with light to create a transcendent vision. This is perhaps what the characters in "Point of Entry" have been waiting for.