

## Janaki Lennie

Janaki Lennie's work is inspired by nature and by the Western landscape painting tradition. Her most recent oil paintings are derived from the distinguishing features of the Houston cityscape: its tropically luscious, radiantly green trees, and the architectural motifs of the energy industry that drives its economy. Collectively titled *Breathing Space*, each painting is numbered progressively and is a subtle variation in color and composition on those completed before it.

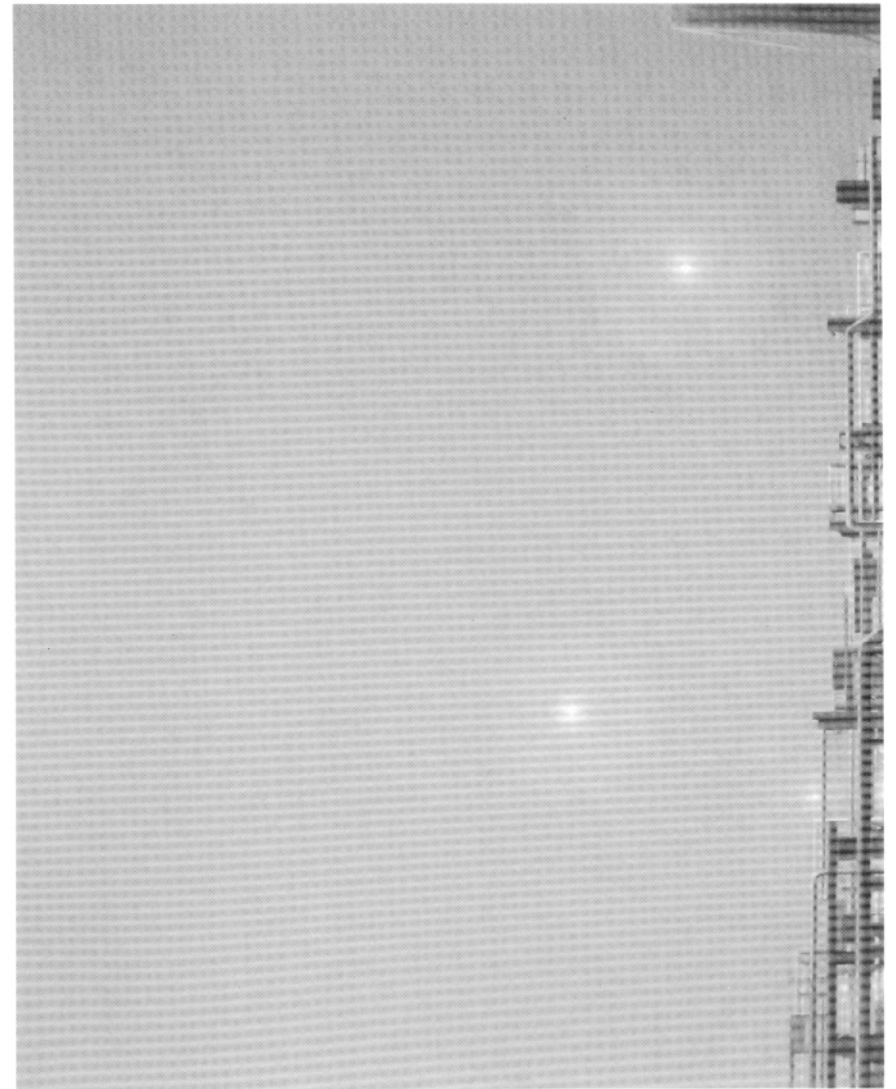
In the Western tradition, landscape paintings are typically oriented horizontally to suggest limitless distance. Although Lennie also focuses far and high, at the midpoint between the horizon line and the zenith, she contains this open sky within the vertical edges of the canvas, whose periphery she crowds with indeterminate landmarks such as factories and fragments of vegetation.

Lennie's painting process begins analytically, with the elements of landscape rather than with an existing image of nature. She works in layers, first rendering the sky as a solid monochromatic plane, and then developing more earthbound details in slightly thicker brushstrokes. As she moves from painting to painting, she stretches her palette of brown and gray tones to its subtlest reaches, creating skies that are deep, dense yet opaque, and inhospitable: the only hint of a human presence is the occasional hazy sparkle of an electric light. Because its emptiness so dominates the picture plane, Lennie's sky is neither an illusionistic nor a symbolic space, but an experiential one, much closer to us than we initially may think.

The other compositional components in Lennie's paintings—the stylized foliage and industrial architecture—read as signs, as fragments of an obsolete technology rather than as symbols of progress. By emphasizing the tonal relationships between colors, Lennie is able to use these elements to adjust the depth of the monochromatic center. As reflectors of the most unnatural shades of light, they bring to mind the still skies over the dehumanizing landscape in Michelangelo Antonioni's *Red Desert* (1965), a chilling meditation on the psychological effects of late capitalism.

In contrast to many contemporary artists, who look to nature largely as a source of ornamental solutions, Lennie considers nature a reality, as "the best reference." Her painting can be compared to that of the American artist Brice Marden, for whom "the edge [is] the balancing point." The sky at the center of Lennie's work is a precise point in space, where earthly humors—both natural and human-made—condense. In treating technology as nature and nature as experience, Lennie takes landscape back to a true sense of place.

<sup>1</sup> Brice Marden, "Statements, Notes, and Interviews (1963–81)," in *Brice Marden: Paintings, Drawings, and Prints, 1975–1980* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 1981), pp. 54–57, quoted in Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, eds., *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 139–40.



Janaki Lennie, *Breathing Space 114*, 2006. Oil on gessobord, 45 x 36 inches. Private Collection, Houston.