

FANTASTIC SPACES, GROUNDED IN REALITY

Alyssa Dennis uses architectural rendering as a starting point for depicting imaginary buildings and environments that bring our attention to the material realities of the world.

BY COURTNEY JORDAN

The drawings of Alyssa Dennis depict something close to clairvoyant spaces. They offer dwellings with transparent walls and views around every corner. Additionally, they give us a glimpse into the mind of this sustainability-minded draftsman-cum-builder who sees beauty in function and loves the art of visual bricolage.

Much of Dennis' work is inspired by philosophies of building design and architectural planning, especially those of organizations whose approaches are intuitive, informal, and inclusive. As an artist with actual experience building in such a way—Dennis has worked on several construction sites, for projects including a straw-bale school building—she seeks to create drawings that hold fast to an approach in which the organic and inorganic live in very close quarters and utilitarian materials and objects are not hidden away but function in plain sight. “I want so badly for people to know what the materials around them are, in the habitual spaces we use,” she says, “to know how raw materials make what is around us, and the ethics of materials and chemicals we use.”

Dennis' passion for exposing this often-ignored side of the modern world can be seen in the drawing *Levels*, which shows cross-sections of several environments, ranging from mining operations and construction sites to a natural area where animals graze. The inverted orientation of the drawing perhaps suggests that consumption has come to dominate our culture and that nature is often put on the bottom rung. But there is also a sense of cyclic movement in the work, with

drawing meant to represent the cycles of material. The horizontal bands that demarcate the different passages ripple and flow, emphasizing that, for better or worse, man and Earth are inextricably linked and need to work well together, for longevity's sake.

A sense of flux pervades Dennis' drawings—a sense of moving, breaking down, and building up—and this gives the viewer a heightened awareness of everything in the picture. Nothing is hidden; we never lose sight of what is going on. Looking at Dennis' visual schematics is like watching a modular building being constructed, where what can be seen and what can't be seen change with every step of the build. The artist and then the viewer become visual clairvoyants, seeing through walls and rooms, able to map an entire house while understanding that everything might reshape, change, and adjust at a moment's notice—at least if Dennis has her way. “At what scale does your perception change?” she asks. “When you are bigger? Smaller? More closed in? I try to open up perceptions in the work and deal with scale a lot—the macro, the miniature, the micro.”

In Dennis's drawings we are at once both large and small. Our perceptions can change so that in one area of a drawing we feel bigger; in another, smaller. In one we are hemmed in; in another, flung free. Looking at *True Fox*, we feel as if we are on a precipice with a kind of X-Ray vision that allows us to see through the straw bales that support the structure, through multiple walls, all the way through to the back of the house, and even through the ground that we know must be down there, somewhere. “Space can change and work different ways,” Dennis says. “In the drawing, I



OPPOSITE PAGE
Levels

2011, graphite, colored pencil, gouache, and pastel, 38 x 42.

All artwork this article collection the artist unless otherwise indicated.

like that all the layers, the erasing, and all that goes into it create an active part of the piece for the viewer. Sometimes you look and see something that you never have before, and other times you'll look for something that isn't there. It's like the work is almost a moving image."

In *Home School*, Dennis reacts to hours and days of driving the open road and seeing only grass and billboards. "I don't love billboards," she says, "but drawing them, I've devised

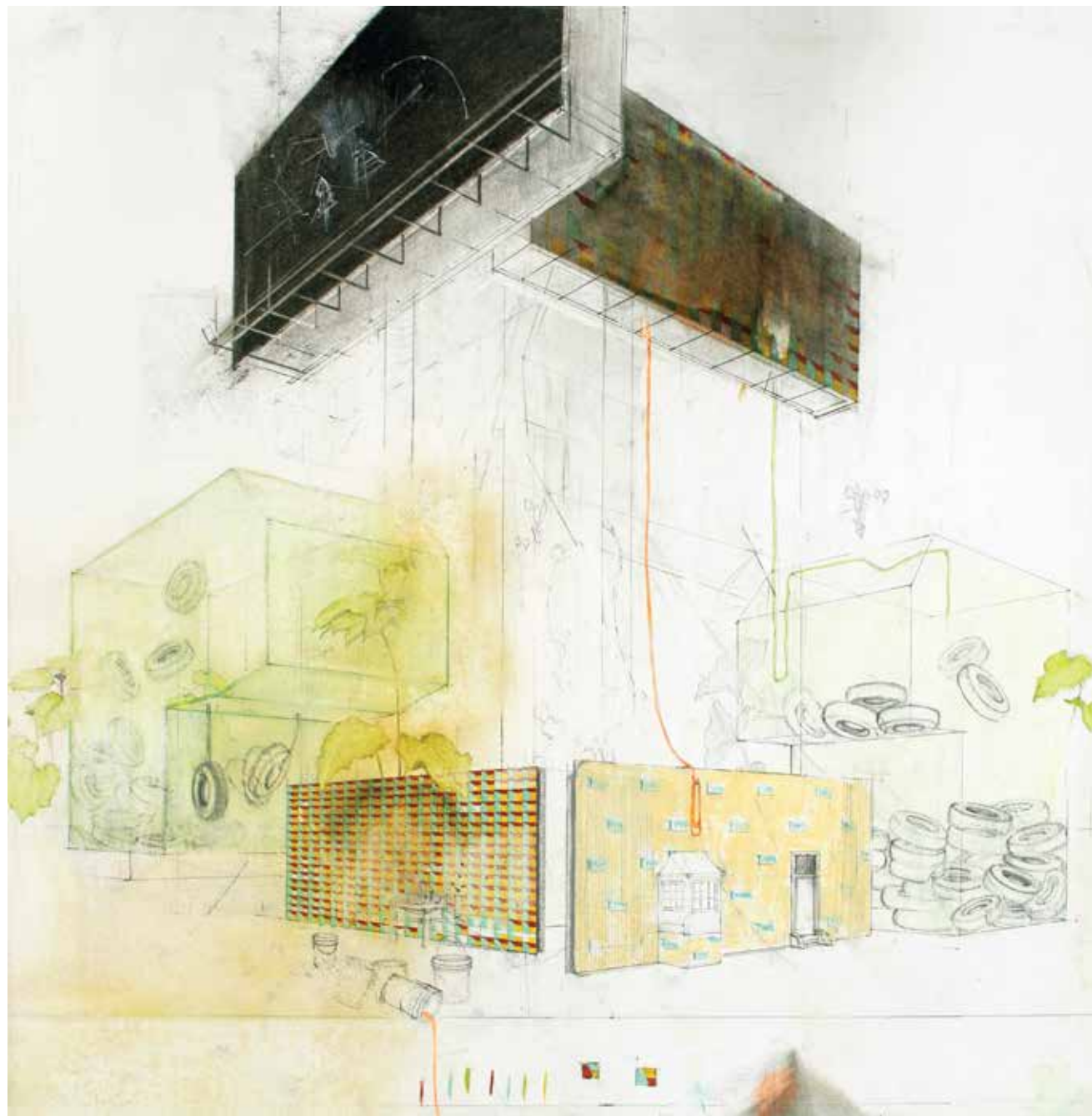
a way to subvert them—I make them playful." This speaks to another tenet of Dennis': bricolage, the art of using whatever is at hand, repurposing and reclaiming materials and transforming any negativity that they might imbue into something positive. "Take something really crappy and make it awesome," she says. So the orange netting so ubiquitous on construction sites is represented in *True Fox*, as are piles of tires, power lines, and rubble in other images.

In *Striped*, the artist displays Tyvek housewrap—usually hidden from sight by siding—as if it were wallpaper, putting it on the same beauty spectrum as the actual wallpaper in the foreground. The title of the piece attests to the artist's visual quip on the constructed "skins" of buildings. The presence of a zebra, its stripes half hidden, underlines the absurdity of taking such pains to mask how our buildings are built. "The parts and materials of the construction



ABOVE
Circus Tent
2012, graphite, ground pigment, and colored pencil, 22 x 20.

OPPOSITE PAGE
True Fox
2012, graphite, pastel, colored pencil, and gouache, 42 x 52.



Home School
2011, graphite, ground
pigment, and colored
pencil, 20 x 19½.

process—I find them beautiful,” says Dennis. “I think that gaudy wallpaper is repulsive, but I made it work. It is about dealing with my surroundings whether I like it or not and making art from those kinds of materials.”

Dennis begins a drawing much as any architect or builder would (or used to) do, with perspective lines that look like walls and floors. Going forward, the artist plans to include more identifiable buildings as a vehicle for social commentary, but her current work is a self-proclaimed “mash up,” which speaks to Dennis’ process. The artist never backs herself into a corner, figuratively speaking; change and adjustments are always possible. “I work intuitively,” she says. “I have set ideas but I wait for those to come—I don’t start with a plan. I like the play in that. I love being able to make a decision and then completely change it—it’s very freeing.” That freedom means the more-than-likely possibility that the artist will erase, scratch into, layer upon, or completely cover what she is working on at a given moment. But that’s the point. “Nothing really starts until I erase or go over something—then it’s like, ‘Now something is happening!’ That’s where it starts to come alive and the layers come in.”

Those layers give Dennis’ work something of an inner glow. Her chosen media also greatly aid in this, as they are materials that can be made opaque or transparent in varying degrees. Gouache appeals to her because she can sand into it and because it has a distinct chalkiness that she enjoys. “I react to surface,” says Dennis. “I can be really aggressive with it, so there is always something left behind. Sometimes I will sand the paper and it still leaves the remnant of my mark.” These traces are important for the work, giving it a unique depth and field of vision, but Dennis doesn’t treat any mark as precious. “Some parts I get attached to and skirt around

because I love them, but that damages the process. My decision making will counteract that once I get invested and then just let go. Some artists can be free with mark-making and not interested in detail or representation. I make the drawing detailed and then erase, so it takes time.”

All of Dennis’ drawings appear meticulous and exactly rendered, but “finishing” a piece is not what drives her. Instead, the focus is on composition and allowing the eye to travel around the whole drawing. “It’s about the messages and images communicating within the work and

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how everything comes together—color, form, contrast, shapes connecting with each other and balancing visually,” she says. That enticing balance draws the viewer ever closer, much to the pleasure of the artist. “There’s a reason why I don’t frame anything behind glass. I want that closeness. Even with my sculptures, I use Plexiglas and recycled materials—things no one would ever want to use for any other purpose. So yes, you can touch it. I want to have people play and interact with it.”

Dennis’ artful preoccupations dwell mostly in the here and now, but she is also drawn to ancient architecture. “I think about the fingerprints in mortar thousands of years ago in Chaco Canyon, or about how in Mali an entire community comes together to replaster their temple,” she says. “I like to think of it as civilizations building these places. I want that to still happen.

I want communities to build—not one person. There is something important about the way we build. We need to give importance to construction and the building process.”

Going forward, Dennis plans to continue drawing, perhaps working directly with organizations or individuals involved with sustainable-building projects. Currently she is completing just such a collaboration, in which she drew a series of buildings for architects such as Dan Phillips, who designs and builds quirky, unusual homes out of recycled materials. Dennis hopes that her drawings of these houses can be used to raise funds for the builder. Other projects include a visual rehab-care manual for an Earthbag shelter in Haiti.

Does she want to ever see her own designs evolve into actuality in the form of her own building project? “I’m so in love with playing with space,” she says. “I think that is what I enjoy the most about the work—I can draw a see-through wall here and go around a corner there. Building blocks that you can rearrange. Recently the architect Yona Friedman’s work has been giving me some insight on that. We’ll see where it takes me. But I don’t know—it is so hard to do in real life.” ❖

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Alyssa Dennis received her B.F.A. at the Maryland Institute College of Art, in Baltimore, and her M.F.A. from Tulane University, in New Orleans. Dennis has exhibited her work nationwide, as well as in Japan and Germany. She was a Joan Mitchell Foundation grant nominee in 2011. She is represented by Kesting/Ray, in New York City, and Miller Yezerski Gallery, in Boston. She lives and works in Brooklyn. For more information, visit www.alyssadennis.com.

