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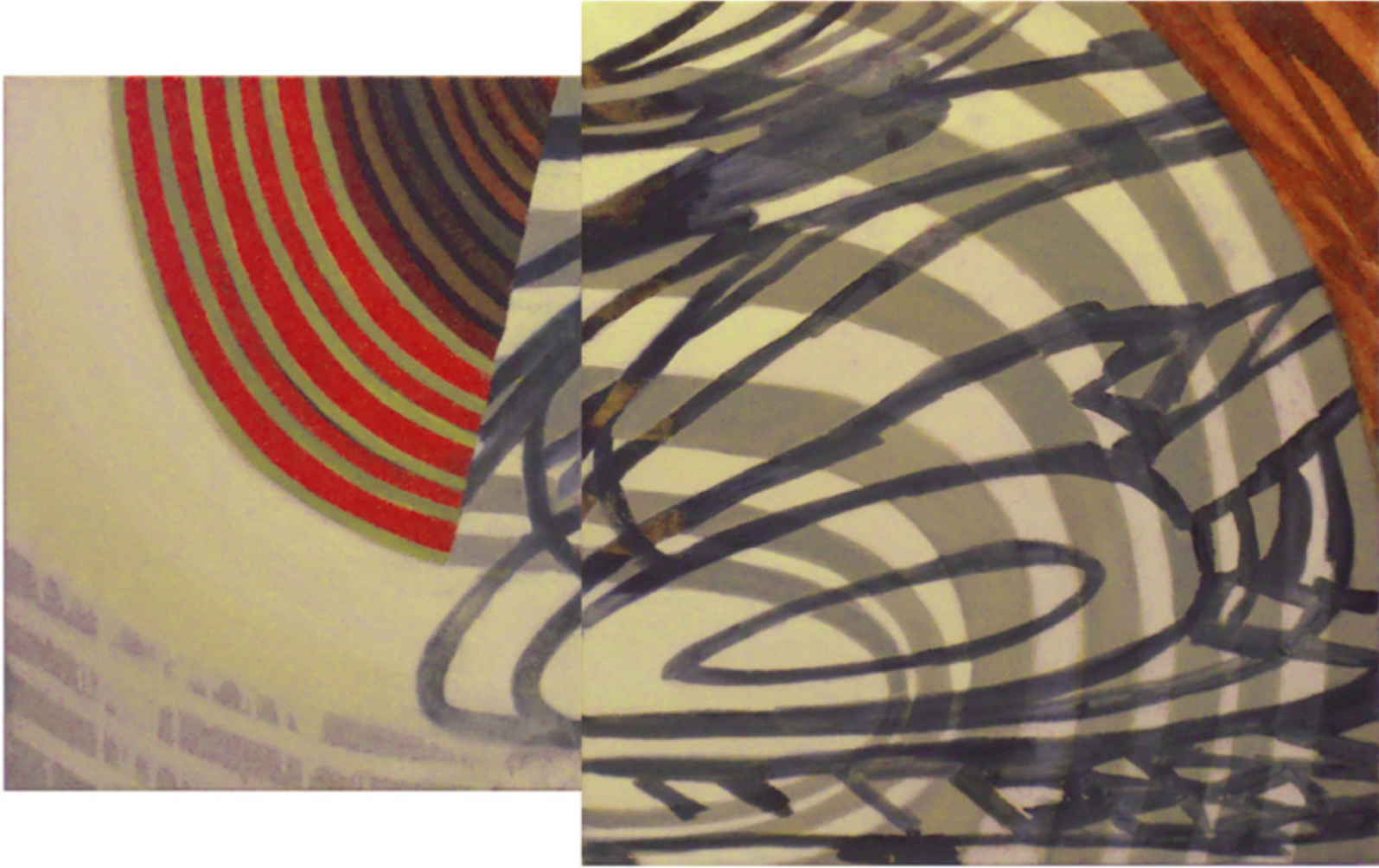
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Barbara Grad, *Circumstantial Evidence*, 2010, oil on canvas, 24 x 34", Courtesy of the artist.



Barbara Grad, *Round Trip*, 2010, oil on canvas and linen, 24 x 38", Courtesy of the artist.

The Virtues of Working around the 'Limitations' of a Small Studio



**Kemper at the Crossroads**  
33 West 19th Street  
816-753-5784  
Kansas City  
*Video Villa: New Paintings by Barbara Grad*  
February 4-May 28, 2011

By **BLAIR SCHULMAN**

Abstract landscapes imbued with the presence of video gaming and cartography is seen throughout new and recent paintings from Barbara Grad. The layers and clues found in these works have a kinetic energy that strongly invokes a line from the "The Have Nots" by the great American punk band X: "This is the game that moves as you play."

One example of this well-conceived idea is prominently found in *Erosion* (2008, oil on canvas). Mostly blue in color, a small shock of bright pink asks us to pay attention to the connecting influences behind it. What could be a dam wall leads to swaths of washed out colors. Looking another way are whirlpools, lending a different sort of movement. Inspired by the world of video games from watching her son play, Grad began to see "the intricate worlds within worlds" of the gamer's almost never-ending participation. In the lower left of this painting are small neon green marks that could represent people, but in actuality, according to Grad, these markings are clues on how one might interpret the work. Within the world of gaming is a subculture that lends its knowledge by forums that tell players what to look for in order to stay alive. With many of Grad's paintings, careful observers will notice these clues that offer a road map on how one views the piece and sees it again. Unlike a video game, one can venture into a field of discovery without end.

Adding to this intricacy, Grad originally worked with a single canvas. However, working in a small studio as she does, by putting canvases onto the floor and kicking one next to the other, she liked the additional layers these dual canvases created. One occasionally feels the spirit of Hans Hoffmann's "push/pull" theory in Grad's color relationships and spatial structure.

The entire left side of *Pot Holes* (2010, oil on linen) are covered in earth tones, the topography seemingly dry and parched. However, when Grad joins these two canvases the interruption of harsh blocking at the top is brought into relief by cool blues that hint at running water. What might have been a landlocked cityscape is now a coastal paradise.

To spend hours or even days or weeks playing a video game can desensitize the mind, but Grad spares us the crippling effects by creating a snapshot of how an abstract landscape re-interprets the terrain in an exploration of "neo-geographication", to give this idea a new phrase.

*Real Time* (2010, oil on linen) shows us how the two



Barbara Grad, *Traffic*, 2008, oil on linen, 42 x 48", Courtesy of the artist.



Barbara Grad, Greenspace, 2008, oil on linen, 48 x 48, Courtesy of the artist.

paintings together are part of an illusion, but not a diptych. Deep, dark reds might be seen as a place to rest the eye, but the actual relief is seen on the second canvas, whose wider bands of color and looser texture are much more soothing. *Dark Slide* (2008, oil on linen) is another benefit of the dual canvases. Their blocking elements engender the way we actually live in cities as they grow and spread. One day the coffee shop in the middle of a block is replaced by an apartment house, now sheltering hundreds of people, clogging the space and shifting the environment. The tug of one section is replaced by the attraction to another. The occasional clues Grad inserts point us not in one direction, but give observers several ideas.

This density of space, as seen in *Restructure* (2008, oil on linen) is a lesson in compositional hierarchy. Thick quadrants of blues, reds and washed out pinks are emphasized by the surrounding areas of paler color. There is a dead center to the piece that an observers' eye is drawn back to again and again.

Some pieces could have benefited from a second canvas as in *Boundary Shift* (2008, oil on canvas). The movement is somewhat stifled by flowing into one direction. Without the surprise of mark-making clues, this particular work falls short.

The pieces which are most exciting are those that disturb the continuous flow of markings to cause viewers to shift their thinking on the directional pull. Both single and double canvas works pose similar questions by asking us to reconsider human interactions bound by geographical placement. Where are we in the space, where do we want to go and where do we belong?

Barbara Grad is a professor of painting at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design in Boston where she has taught since 1981. She is the recipient of several grants and awards, including a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. Grad will attend a residency at The Ballinglen Arts Foundation in North County Mayo located on the seacoast of Ireland in March 2011.





Barbara Grad, Restructure, 2008, oil on linen, 48 x 42", Courtesy of the artist.



Barbara Grad, Dark Slide, 2008, oil on linen, 54 x 31",  
Courtesy of the artist.



Barbara Grad, Executive Shift, 2008, oil on linen, 54 x 29",  
Courtesy of the artist.





Barbara Grad, *Video Villa*, 2010, oil on linen, 57 x 90", Courtesy of the artist.



Barbara Grad, *Erosion*, 2008, oil on canvas, 46 x 60", Courtesy of the artist.