



FRANK WEBSTER

3/29/10

BLACKSTON

by amanda church

NEW YORK In pared-down paintings that intersperse nature imagery with urban scenes, 43-year-old, Brooklyn-based artist Frank Webster purveys an ethos of isolation. High-rise buildings and patterns formed by electrical wires, chain-link fences, scraggly vines and tree branches are depicted against wide expanses of bleak grayish skies. Portentously titled “In the Landscape of Extinction,” this exhibition reduced urban existence to these few elements, which are repeated in six large-scale acrylic paintings (either 80 by 60 or 86 by 65 inches), along with two smaller canvases and a series of 12 watercolor and pencil drawings on paper (all works 2009).

With their *Twilight Zone* eeriness, Webster’s landscapes look like post-apocalyptic wastelands, barren and depopulated, but each painting’s expanse of sky leaves room for a reverie of escape. That longing seems fulfilled in the tiny plane heading off into the distance in *The Departure*. The artist’s “just-the-facts,” as he calls it, representation of the world reduces objects to their essence, even as these bare truths allude to a spectrum of affect, from dreaminess to dejection. Webster’s conveyance of physical and psychological isolation conjures the despair of Hopper’s solitary figures in spare settings, an impression reinforced by Webster’s palette of subdued grays, blues and yellows. The austere depiction of architecture echoes the deadpan cool of Ed Ruscha’s paintings of buildings, minus the ironic humor.

Layers of thinly applied acrylic paint and varnish mimic the subtle shifts in color of a melancholy late afternoon sky. In *Haze*, a crisscross of wires is interrupted by the silhouette of a dangling pair of sneakers and a hazy sun trying to break through the shroud of a foreboding sky. Architecture, such as *High Rise*’s prisonlike structure behind a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire, tends to look ominous and vaguely futuristic. The building in *The Tower* juts upward on a dizzying diagonal but conveys little about its purpose, leaving us with what is essentially a geometric abstraction in the shape of a skyscraper—an homage to Brutalism. Two versions of *Plastic Bags*—one large, one small—are more descriptive, the torn bags caught in the web of tree branches and suggesting desiccated bird corpses. As in *Tree and Fence*, a near abstraction comprising a solid white fence in the lower half with a strange configuration of leafy branches reaching skyward from behind, Webster’s paintings are most affecting when elements of nature and city life coexist.

Photo: Frank Webster: Plastic Bags, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 60 by 80 inches; at Blackston.