



The "map" of Brillhart's *Inner 4* shelf piece, indicating how it should be assembled.



Inner 4



*Brillhart draws some inspiration from the warehouses and low-slung buildings dotting Liberty City.*

## building a better painting

JENNY BRILLHART'S ARTWORK MINES LOCAL ARCHITECTURE IN UNEXPECTED WAYS. BY BRETT SOKOL

"This is the Miami people don't usually think about," Jenny Brillhart explains, motioning to her paintings hanging inside her Fountainhead Studios space. You can say that again. Although local architecture features prominently in Brillhart's work, don't expect to see either the familiar Art Deco façades of South Beach or the gleaming glass-and-steel towers dotting Brickell's skyline. "They're beautiful, but they're decorative," she says of these iconic structures. "I'm more interested in something not as traditionally pretty, and which lends itself to becoming a more abstract thing so I can put my own style into it. There's a space between representational and abstraction. Architecture is what I use to get there—it's a map."

Accordingly, Brillhart draws inspiration from the unassuming warehouses and low-slung buildings dotting Fountainhead's surrounding Liberty City, as well as the often forgotten neighborhoods of North Miami. In their seemingly nondescript designs, Brillhart hones in on specific

geometric forms, resulting in starkly memorable scenes of a rarely discussed urban landscape. South Florida's tourism bureaus aren't going to be featuring any of these paintings in their advertising campaigns; nonetheless, at their best, they possess an austere beauty.

All of which is a far cry from the bucolic setting of Brillhart's childhood, having grown up in a 19th-century farmhouse in rural New Hampshire. "They weren't total hippies," she chuckles, referring to her parents. But between her father's hand-built furniture and her mother's rug weaving and pottery, a love of craftsmanship was in the air. "I made my own prom dress—dorky, I know!"

Despite this affinity for artmaking, Brillhart's initial encounters with the contemporary art world—or at least the theory-heavy, conceptually minded version taught in her classes at Massachusetts's Smith College, where she also studied history—left her cold. "Half the time, I didn't even understand what they were talking about," she recalls. "I wanted an education that was more tangible, that would focus on how to actually use paint, how to develop your technique." That formal training would come several years later via an MFA at the New York Academy of Art. But the real breakthrough arrived with a subsequent move to Miami.

Brillhart was part of the crowd poking around the Saxony Hotel's 2005 "Everything Must Go!" demolition sale, as that mid-Beach hotel prepared to make way for a luxury high-rise (still in the works seven years later). But while historic preservationists gnashed their teeth over the loss of another cherished building (one that was the toast of the town upon its 1948 opening), and bargain hunters scouted out the vintage furniture, Brillhart's own eye was drawn to a pile of discarded mattresses and the hotel's drained

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VAGABOND HOTEL



Brushes and oil paint in the background

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pool. Those were the images that ended up in her work.

“The fact that the Saxony is getting torn down is really sad for some people—the whole idea of South Beach becoming gentrified is an interesting idea to think about,” she says. “But it’s a non-issue in my work. I’m interested in how those mattresses are stacked, not in a political statement about how those mattresses got there. I’m not saying, ‘Look at how dirty this pool is.’ But because it’s dirty and empty, I get to see the tiles along its sides. And we both get to focus on the essence of the pool, as opposed to the idea that we might go swimming in it.”

Brillhart’s most recent paintings follow this thought to its logical conclusion, at times departing from the canvas altogether, resulting in three-dimensional Rauschenbergian assemblages containing multiple paintings, drawings, and carefully cut materials, all arranged just-so to play off one another and cohere as a whole. Many have detailed blueprints so their various parts can be detached and then carefully reassembled as they travel to a Wynwood exhibition or overseas to her Berlin dealer. “My initial impulse was that painting was making me feel claustrophobic. Even looking at this wall—” she says, gazing back at one of her older, straightforward paintings of a warehouse, and actually shuddering at the sight of it, “Enough! But when I put that same painting next to a piece of sheetrock, or even some blank Xeroxes, suddenly it took on its own voice.”

So what’s next? Brillhart cites Hans Hofmann as a key influence, and the parallel isn’t hard to see—especially in that painter’s early ’60s works featuring blocks of varying color in what Hofmann termed a “push and pull” relationship, one that produced an underlying tension that viscerally draws in a viewer. “You see those same shapes if you start driving down Biscayne Boulevard,” Brillhart says.

Which raises the question: Given her passion for lived-in architecture, has



Inner 3 with Studio Trailer



*Brillhart’s paintings at times depart from the canvas, resulting in three-dimensional assemblages.*

she ever considered designing her own real-life building? Perhaps a little motel on Biscayne? “Maybe,” she offers, a slight smile forming on the corners of her lips. “But there won’t be any water in the pool. And there won’t be

anything in the rooms except old mattresses.”

*Jenny Brillhart’s artwork will be featured in the By Hand group show opening July 27 at ArtCenter/South Florida, 800 Lincoln Road, Miami Beach, 305-674-8278; artcentersf.org. It will also be on exhibit through September at the Dorsch Gallery, 151 NW 24th St., Miami, 305-576-1278; dorschgallery.com; e-mail: brett@oceandrive.com OD*

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