

Eamon O'Kane

Ideal Homes.

Selected Paintings 2004 - 2020

Opening Thursday 10th September 2020, 6-8 p.m.
Exhibition 11th September – 7th November 2020

Is it possible to build or construct true bliss? In his novel Corrections (1975), Austrian author Thomas Bernhard (1931-1989) tells the story of a man named Roithamer, who wants to build a cone-shaped house for his sister, expecting the house to be a locus of bliss for its inhabitants.

Most of us will understand the notion that, somewhere, there is a place or space that, metaphorically speaking, breathes happiness. We usually seek such a place in an unidentified Paradise-like space. Some people, however, believe that it is possible for humans to create such a Paradise – architects among them.

Visual artist Eamon O'Kane is concerned with modern architectural notions of Paradise. He draws, paints and photographs architectural structures from Bauhaus to Brutalism. His Ideal Homes series features the homes designed and built by various generations of renowned architects and designers, including Frank Lloyd Wright, Walter Gropius, Frank Gehry and Mies van der Rohe. Even if their architectural concepts display a wide range of variations, these icons of architecture share the fact that they saw themselves as visionaries – and are seen as such to this day – and that their designs and buildings are exemplars of near perfection.

It is by no means a new notion that stone structures are capable of capturing both happiness and relevance. The modernist conjunction of pedagogical and ideological concepts gave new momentum to the design idea – at Bauhaus, for example, where notions of “good taste” smoothly merged with the esoteric. Many people still believe that “Bauhaus” was the thing, and associate the term with anything that looks modern and plain.

In one painting, Meisterhaus Dessau, O'Kane features one of the Masters' Houses in Dessau that Gropius designed for himself and other Bauhaus masters. At first glance, O'Kane's version appears to closely emulate the buildings in black-and-white that Lucia Moholy photographed in 1926. In its clear visual design, the painting shows a scattering of pine-trees that surround the house. Following Gropius' concept of a large-scale construction kit, the houses themselves are varying constellations of smooth cuboid volumes. In O'Kane's rendition, however, the cubes diverge from the original insofar as they are neither smooth nor white. Featuring squares and rectangles in various colours, the exterior elements underscore Gropius' construction kit concept. O'Kane's representation asks the viewer whether ideal spaces can really be assembled from standardised elements.

O'Kane's subtle and delicate painterly approach questions modernist architecture. His visualisations are as neat and cool as the Modern style itself.

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Frank Gehry House represents the home in Santa Monica, CA, designed and built by the Canadian/US-American architect and designer for himself and his family based on a 1920s home. In O'Kane's version, however, the Gehry house is framed by an imaginary garden of tropical plants that obscure most of the building. The garden stands for a kind of Paradise or locus of bliss. The concept of bliss and locus amoenus, however, is rooted in a different school of thought. Both architecture and gardens as ideal locations require human design. Gardens, however, retain a close relationship to nature, to growth and the unpredictable. Frank Gehry House illustrates ideal concepts that mutually devour and displace each other: in O'Kane's work, the modern 1920s house, built in Gehry's de-constructivist style in the late 1970s and early 1990s, is all but overgrown by the garden.

Eamon O'Kane was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and lives in Denmark and Norway. He has received various awards including the Taylor Art Award and a Fulbright Award, and has had solo shows in international galleries and museums such as the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles; the Sheldon Art Museum in Lincoln, Nebraska; the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin; and Museum Frieder Burda in Baden-Baden, Germany. Eamon O'Kane is Professor of Visual Art at The Art Academy, Faculty of Fine Art, Music and Design, University of Bergen, Norway.

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