Twilight of the Houses
Notes on a Series of Paintings of American Dream Houses by Deanna Thompson

By Robert Dean

Robert Dean is the editor of the Edward Ruscha Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings *and the* John Baldessari Catalogue Raisonné.

Welcome to the desert of the real—the Southern California high desert some thirty miles north of Palm Springs. Though in relative proximity to all things Southern California, the landscape initially seems unwelcoming, even hostile, and you have to wonder: how can anyone live here? But, as progress chews up scenery, the Morongo Basin and Yucca Valley are indeed becoming inhabited. The current settlers seem to segment into military families and those who seek a reclusive scene—or non-scene, rather. Among their ranks you might find eccentrics, cranks, contrarians, and certain proprietors of meth labs. A new car dealership has recently made an appearance on the main drag, Highway 62. Things are looking up for civilization. As is often the case, though, nature itself can't be subdued so quickly. Just beyond the heat, the dust, and the rickety vegetation are the things quietly unique to this terrain. Roller coaster roads wind past hill-sized mounds of egg-smooth rocks: not to far a hop to a Tanguy painting. So it shouldn't surprise you that this is also a place slowly being discovered by adventurous artists.

Deanna Thompson is an artist who has crated a large body of paintings depicting old dessert cabins. These are the small structures sprinkled throughout the region, remnants of 1938's Small Tract Homestead Act, in which the U.S. government sold of five-acre parcels of what it considered useless land for somewhere between ten and twenty dollars an acre. This so=called "jackrabbit homesteading" peaked in the region after WWII and came to an end in 1976. Consider this quote from a 1950 issue of *Desert Magazine*: "Jackrabbit homesteads are only for folks who have a bit of pioneering blood in their veins. The land is generally rough, no water is immediately available, more or less road building has to be done. But fortunately there are many Americans who find infinite pleasure in doing the hard work necessary to provide living accommodations on one of these sites—and cabins are springing up all over the desert country."

But this homesteading dream had long exhausted itself by the time Deanna moved to the area in 2004 as a sort of redux homesteader, living herself in a refurbished cabin. One is immediately struck by the isolation around these habitats. Yet Thompson isn't anti-social—rather she is quickly gregarious and articulate, and opens up to conversations and ideas easily. She's quite cognizant of the oddball nature of this place and its populace, but doesn't look at it negatively.

At least it doesn't seem to bother her. She adores her isolation—she thinks of it, too, as pioneering—and it is this isolation that ultimately serves as her subject.

The majority of the homestead cabins are now desolate shacks, shells surrounded by discards and debris. As-is, these structures are inhabitable. Curiously enough, however, when we got up close and personal with one—its readily breached interior stuffed with triple bunk beds, trash, old newspapers, rusted canisters, busted glass—we found the front door locked. What was being protected? It started me thinking about Thompson's title for this series of work: "American Dream Homes." At first blush, "American Dream Homes" seems ironic. But her interpretations convey an idealistic representation even in their subjects' states of dilapidation. It is both, and this dual axis of irony and homage is where Thompson integrates her achievement. After all, Thompson resides in such a cabin herself, yet knows the reality and sacrifice at hand. Artists and photographers both have explored the idea as well as the terrain of the desert, but Thompson is unique; she is not a tourist, nor does she attempt to impose change or her will on the environment. Regarding influences, she admits to being taken by the work of William Eggleston, and indeed both share an archeological fondness for the discarded.

This marked duality, whether irony or homage, realism or idealism, whether withdrawal or connection, seems to have structured Thompson's paintings in their play between the figurative and the abstract. The main works are the abandoned cabins. She has also created ancillary work depicting desert and urban refuse. Thompson uses her own photographs as initial studies. In all, particularly the cabins, there is an editing process, an erasure of the landscape and a smoothing over from photograph to final paintings. Here is where the subject becomes more ideal while still grounded in the real, and where the landscape verges on the abstract while remaining totally recognizable.

There is a whole roster of contemporary artists who have depicted houses; here I am thinking not of the various photorealist painters but specifically of Ed Ruscha, whose silhouette paintings of houses have generally also been desert house—and who, like Thompson, has recently turned to roadside detritus as subject matter. Unlike Thompson, however, Ruscha renders his houses very nighttime and diffuse. Closer to Thompson is a curious 1932 painting, *Red House* by Kazimir Malevich, painted in his neo-primitive take on socialist realism. Here, even more than in Thompson's cabin paintings, the isolated structure is pressed against a space that has been flattened into a number of alternating horizontal bands of color, of which only the sky and mountains nod to realism.

A cabin, as rendered by Thompson, is an object of veneration; it also remains a derelict, dilapidated shack. Still, these abandoned shacks hold within them the memory of human presence. Nature is wide open while architecture delineates space, and with it creates the presence of the human. Thompson's landscape is thus denuded of all particulars, stripped down to its essentials, to a visual purity. The paintings have cooled off the hostile desert. It is here that these structures become dream houses. Her canvases are bisected horizontally, generally straight down the middle, creating an axis as if folding it in half. The lower zone represents the desert floor, the upper zone the sky. Centered on the canvas, usually just below the demarcation, is the cabin subject. The cabins are shown in isolation. To ensure some context—a maneuver that renders her subjects as something other than still-lives—she often adds a distant mountain range to delineate a horizon line and, occasionally, a wisp of clouds in the sky. Taken as a whole, one could call these serial compositions "settings," squares within the squares of the canvas, rectangles within the rectangles of the canvas.

In this series, Thompson has compressed spatial depth, flattening the background and directing our attention to a small object that feels almost tacked-on. The vacuum-like atmosphere surrounding these buildings evinces another kind of hostility—that of a curious spectator pulled into the subject as if racing at a high speed, a dynamic acceleration into collision. And yet there is quietude to this atmosphere as well—where the zones, as I call them, lose their specificity and enter a kind of Mark Rothko-like spatial abstraction.

The sun is never directly seen in Thompson's paintings but, as in the desert itself, it is all pervasive. Light is exterior to her pictures, indicated only and occasionally by the direction of shadows. Many of the paintings have thick coats of varnish, which cast a reflective glare reminiscent of the desert sun—a sun that gives light, but also bleaches, blanches, withers any object caught in its beam. As a body of work, the paintings share a common attribute: the depiction of isolated shacks in forsaken landscapes; for the most part there is no variation in the physical type of these shacks or one-time cabins, only degrees of dilapidation in the sun. In her way, Deanna Thompson, fingers to the brain, is like an Eskimo cataloguing types of snow, while the rest of us only see snow as snow.