The thread weaving the bulk of this issue together is CITIES. Moving from Tehran to Jeddah, Palestine, Beirut and Syria, Canvas looks at how artists are engaging with the urban fabric in their practices. Some comment on the impact of rapid urban transformation, while others lament the destruction of heritage and the erosion of human dignities. Meanwhile placing human beings centre stage in massive metropolises is the focus of street artist-provocateur JR, who gives Canvas an exclusive from NYC.

NAZGOL ANSARINIA ON TEHRAN
FROM JEDDAH TO ABU DHABI: AN ATHR SHOW AT WAREHOUSE421
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LAWRENCE ABU HAMDAN AND SYRIA
A sense of loss and melancholy pervades Gil Heitor Cortesão's subdued paintings. They carry an ambivalence that's somewhere between retro-futurism and ruin, a utopia that was never realised. Eschewing traditional painting on canvas, Cortesão composes his works on plexiglass using found images from the 1960s and 70s, creating uncanny tableaux that are dilapidated reproductions of interiors and landscapes from a modernist era, frozen in time. Arie Amaya-Akkermans speaks with the artist about his latest show at Dubai's Carbon 12 (which ran until 5 May), and his dream of lost futures.
In pieces such as Giorgio’s Room (2016) or the diptych Passage #2 (2017), the images are so familiar that they could be polaroids from a family album, or decomposing memories. It is akin to that imaginary moment when Gordon Matta-Clark or Rachel Whiteread were faced with a flat surface, just before they cut up the buildings or filled them with concrete. The pools, depicted in Passage #2 (2017) or in the quadriptych Circular Pool (2017), could conjure up many art historical references but here they’re placeless, cut off from the real.

Though the contrast between the slow methodical painting and the high-speed metropolitan textures of Dubai is very stark, Cortesão doesn’t seem intimidated – he has exhibited his heterogeneous yet consistent body of work with Carbon 12 four times in the last nine years – but in a broader reading, this unfinished business of modern architecture and the ever-changing nature of the UAE city complement each other in complex ways. Cortesão’s mesmerizing ‘anarchitectures’ slow down the seamless time warp of the global south; and Dubai, in turn, by means of establishing a radical distance from the European urban model of history, endows the works with the timeless quality of an artefact. The conversation between the artist and his host context remains dynamic and open-ended over the course of almost a decade.

The term ‘anarchitecture’ is closely associated in art theory with Matta-Clark, referring to a position that’s not necessarily posited against architecture as much as it encompasses a critical discourse about architecture that is shaped by the viewers and the world, instead of being conceived in merely functional terms. This of course applies to Cortesão’s work, but the definition falls short, precisely because of the role that architectural depictions have played in contemporary painting since the 1990s, when artists began exploring architecture in a painterly way. Two entire generations of European abstract painters passed before the objects of the world would become tangible for (or mediated in) the act of painting again, so that thinking about architecture from the 1990s has meant also being keenly aware of the abstract essence of (and influence on) spatial thinking today.

When asked about the relationship of figurative painters such as Sabine Moritz (Gerhard Richter’s wife), to both abstract European painting and his work on empty architecture, Cortesão remarks, “I was always very aware of the importance of abstraction in 20th century art; I think that in several ways it is like a post-abstract figuration, something like a second-degree figuration.” Overcoming the end of painting, once the ultimate project of abstraction, here also means to become sceptical about painting in general, experiencing constantly, as both viewer and maker, the empty spaces under our feet. It is difficult to tell where exactly we stand; Cortesão has aptly titled a number of his paintings Passage, in a series “that lend the impression of a permanent transition or threshold, a passageway, a double-entendre, and a labyrinth. We are left rootless and perhaps as Cortesão intended, our world has become undermined by the passage of a time that we have consistently failed to grasp or adjust to.”