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here is a specific stillness to the nine paintings of Portuguese artist Gil Heitor Cortesão. The somber expanses of architecture exist halted in time, as though you stumbled across an old photograph (*Giorgio's Room*, 2016) or a space quietly abandoned the morning after (*Passage #2*, 2018). There is an abruptness to the serenity, rendering the tension uneasy—and the translation of its Latin title, “shadow”, offers no reprieve. The narratives linger ambiguously; you're left questioning if these paintings, with delicate, uncanny realism, are public or private spheres peered at voyeuristically, or if they are dreamscapes buried somewhere within your memories.

Cortesão's reverse painting technique on Plexiglas or glass, which involves painting on the opposite side to that which is exhibited, depicts inner and outer volumes of Modern and Late Modern architecture from the 1950s-70s. “They completely eliminate urban identity,” says Kourosh Nouri, Carbon 12 co-founding director. The paintings read equally nostalgic and futuristic. “They have the quality of looking quite familiar,

but at the same time, there's a sense of distance,” explains Cortesão. “Distance is both temporal and spatial, and I'm interested in ideas of ‘future-past’ and retro-futurism.” The omission of linear chronology, geographical roots, and often figures, creates a peculiar, haunting atmosphere within the near monochromatic works, easily interchangeable as a living room in Tehran or LA (*Umbra #2*, 2018), or a Tokyo hotel lobby or entryway in Brazil (*Umbra #1* (Triptych), 2018). Interior and exterior perspectives, frontally or from high corners, hint of palpable histories contained within, but remain just disorienting enough that individual schemata step up to rectify the scenarios.

Stripped of formal corporeal identification, this very reduction is what incites such visceral rationalisations. Cortesão's limited incorporation of people does not overpower the traces of the lives that could



*Umbra #1*, 2017. Oil on Plexiglas. Triptych. 200x375cm.

# Bated glimpses of restless memory

**Gil Heitor Cortesão's fourth solo exhibition *Umbra* at Carbon 12 through paint, leaving the viewer oscillating uneasily between**

**appropriates Modern and Late Modern architecture voyeurism, memory and space, discovers Katrina Kufer**

have lived, or perhaps still do, within the works. “Frequently in the more ‘architectonic’ works, the human figure is absent,” admits Cortesão. “It is a way to bring the viewer into the painting, to make them more conscious of what is being seen. Due to viewpoints, there is always an implicit person, someone entering into this illusionary space.” Engaging psychological and social manipulations of perception and interaction with environments, the line between private and public space, let alone whose, is dissolved, and you become an intruding spectator. “Gil’s composition and general absence of people creates this Hitchcockian narrative,” observes Nouri. However, though you are paramount in interpreting the nuances, Cortesão is also present, his person prevailing over the lack of painted others via the splashes, drips and smears of *Passage #1* (2017) and *Circular*



*View with a Room*, 2017. Oil on Plexiglas. 72x72cm.



*Passage #2*, 2017. Oil on Plexiglas. 72x135cm.

Despite firm rooting in photographs discovered in old books, magazines and postcards, or taken by the artist himself, *Umbra* is surreal, inciting gentle pleasure in relishing the disquieting space between the familiar and the unknown. “You ‘read’ an image according to the cultural codes you know,” says Cortesão. “If you show a perspective drawing to members of certain tribes, it won’t be recognised as a translation of a real spatial experience. It will remain incomprehensible if you aren’t aware of the code used.” While the universality of Cortesão's imagery paradoxically encourages its implacability, Nouri implies that they are a reminder of utopic intentions to build perfect urban environments, rendering *Umbra* somehow so appropriate to the city in which they are currently shown. “The works don’t age a minute,” he says. Indeed, they rest static, floating in the unsettling confusion of unsure glimpses into your, or another’s, real or imagined memory. ■

*Umbra* runs until 1 May. Carbon12dubai.com

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