

# NESTOR ARENAS

*RECENT WORKS*









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Kendall Art Center

# Landscape, abstraction and syntax of the utopia in the work of Néstor Arenas.

by Dennys Matos.

The curtain rises at the start of the 90s with the fall of communism in Europe, and the east; not only this but the start of “el Período Especial” (Spanish for the special period) in Cuba during times of peace. On one hand the economic support of the Soviets disappeared and on the other the American embargo worsened, submerging Cuba into an economic collapse the likes of which they’re still suffering from. A great mass of artists and intellectuals leave the island and settle in diverse countries, countries like Mexico, Venezuela, US and Spain. This phenomenon was known as the “Diaspora”, expanded the field of contemporary Cuban art production like never before in the international circuits.

The discourse of the diaspora as described by Ivan de la Nuez revindicated the nomadic character of this new Cuban cultural subject. In consequence I believe new territories outside of the Habana Miami tensions had monopolized the imaginary Cuban political culture, as much in as out of the island. slowing down the development of Cuban culture after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989.

It is within this diasporic context of the 90s that in the style of the neo figuration, the work of Néstor Arenas emerges (Holguín, Cuba, 1964). The work of Arenas that would settle itself in Spain during the mid-90’s. His work has characterized itself from its beginnings for its reflections on two essential elements. On one hand the systematic investigation on expressive possibilities of the landscape as a historical style of painting and its symbolic strength in context with contemporary visual culture. On the other hand, the method in which cultural political ideologies of modernity and as well as what the postmodern has represented and represents the reality and the utopian world, life, and the sentiment of death, the nation and the individual, technology and the desires of the body.

These poetic interest and discourses where already present in three important individual exhibitions: Néstor Arenas. Paintings (Galería Colón XVI, Bilbao, España, 1995) “Paisajes y Fragmentos”, 1998, and “Paisajes Clásicos”, 2001 (Ambas en Galería & Lausín, Zaragoza, España). In this catalog Iván de la Nuez sample of work referring the theme park character that has been taking over contemporary culture pointing to “It is by these magnitudes that the extreme work done by Arenas throughout a decade on the subject of the landscape (...) in which he worked in the landscapes of his island that where exploding little by little” (1). Since which Arenas has deepened the relation between,

## Paisaje, abstracción y sintaxis de la utopía en la obra de Néstor Arenas.

por Dennys Matos.

Los años 1990 abren con el derrumbe del Bloque Comunista de Europa del Este y la entrada de Cuba en el Período Especial en tiempo de paz. De un lado, desaparecen las inyecciones económicas soviéticas y, del otro, se recrudece el embargo comercial estadounidense, sumergiendo a Cuba en un colapso económico del que aún no se ha recuperado. Una gran masa de artistas e intelectuales salen de la isla y se afincan en lugares tan diversos como México, Venezuela, Estados Unidos y España. Este fenómeno conocido como Diáspora expande el campo de producción del arte contemporáneo cubano como nunca antes en los circuitos internacionales.

El discurso de la Diáspora (Enunciado por Iván de la Nuez), reivindicó el carácter nomádico de este nuevo sujeto cultural cubano. En consecuencia, creó nuevos territorios fuera de la tensión La Habana-Miami, que había monopolizado el imaginario político cultural cubano, tanto dentro como fuera de la isla, ralentizado el desarrollo de la cultura cubana, posterior a la caída del Muro de Berlín en 1989.

Es dentro de este contexto diaspórico de los años 1990 donde emerge, en el ámbito de la neo figuración, la obra de Néstor Arenas (Holguín, Cuba, 1964). La obra de Arenas, que se afincó en España a mediados de los años noventa, se ha caracterizado desde sus inicios por una permanente reflexión en torno a dos elementos esenciales. De un lado, la investigación sistemática sobre las posibilidades expresivas del paisaje como género fundamental en la historia de la pintura y su potencia simbólica en el contexto de la cultura visual contemporánea. Del otro, el modo en que las ideologías políticas culturales de la modernidad y, también, de la postmodernidad han representado –y representan– la realidad y el mundo de la utopía, la vida y el sentimiento de muerte, la nación y el individuo, la tecnología y el deseo del cuerpo.

Estos intereses poéticos y discursivos ya estaban presentes en tres importantes exposiciones individuales: Néstor Arenas. Pinturas (Galería Colón XVI, Bilbao, España, 1995); "Paisajes y Fragmentos", 1998, y "Paisajes Clásicos", 2001 (Ambas en Galería & Lausin, Zaragoza, España) En el catálogo de esta muestra Iván de la Nuez, refiriéndose al carácter de Parque Temático que ha ido tomando la cultura contemporánea, apuntaba: "Bajo esas magnitudes, se ha extremado el trabajo que, durante una década ha realizado Arenas con el paisaje. (...) en las que se ocupaba del paisaje original de su isla que poco a poco iba

landscape as an omnipresent visual genre in present day cultural perception and the representations that has reached the cultural political ideologies of the societies that define the face of project known as modernity: Capitalism and the Communist utopia. It is on these axis's that Arenas embarked on a great reflective project "Paisajes transformers (Transformer Landscapes) I, II and III" a trilogy of exhibits showcased in Farside Gallery, (Miami, 2014), in Zona Franca, 12 Bienal de La Habana, (La Habana, 2015) and more recently in CCE (Miami, 2017).

In this trilogy Arenas develops different series like "Havana Transformers" or "Lego Painting" inspired on one vision of society and culture through the lens of the fall of the Berlin wall and the communist utopian project failure of the Cuban revolution. Works of large format whose figures look as if they've been cut out and placed on top of monochrome backgrounds, Establishing a contrasted staircase between background and figure, between painting and graphic design. Contrasts accentuated by a vision of a landscape that has been removed from the perspective of depth. From this, figures like Stalin, the soviet communist Yuri Gagarin, Mickey Mouse or the mascot Ronald McDonald covered in their pictorial representation, nevertheless have a "sculptural" aspect to them. "Sculptural" because their appearance is much like a frame of heavy material that breaks with weightlessness. Bodies of which their extremities are metallic prosthetics in the spirit that imposes its physical presence in the landscape that it habituates. Knitting an iconography as much as like that of communist mass culture as that of mass capitalistic consumption culture. Iván de la Nuez describes it as, "It offers us a method to unveil the petrification of the subjects in landscape itself" of antithetical social systems: one devoted to mercantilism and consumption (eternal and post historical communist future).(2)

In the exhibitions "Néstor Arenas. Dichotomous Structures" (Kendall Art Center, Miami, 2017), as well as "Looking forward" (Weitz White Space, Carleton College, Minneapolis, 2018) experiments with poetics and discursive displacement. For example, in the poetic the nonfigurative "landscape" slides in expressive elements of a calligraphic abstraction and though it the appearance of the painting becomes more like graphic design. This can be noticed in works like "Dichotomous Structures N 4, N 6 y N 7". These works emphasize a color pallet that brings out mute textures from the surface of the figures, like a sort of faded industrial factory. In the discursive, like in earlier series "Lego Paintings" the reflecting aspect gravitated towards the relationship between in iconography represented in the social cultural ideologies opposite in

"Dichotomous Structure" y "Looking forward", in light of this the world of urbanistic and architectural structures comes into focus. A world that sites on one hand emblematic architecture with reference to communist European constructivism. Millstones beset by those heraldic interpreting the utopias of those cultures and societies. On the other hand, the fantastical cities taken from videogames and present-day Hollywood sci-fi movies. These elements are very present in works like "Spomeniks-pok No5 No 6 y No 7" from "Dichotomous Structure" but also in the series "Havana Transformers" from the expo "Looking Forward". Between all of them they create a pictorial syntax that transforms and contaminates architectural codes and urbanistic of both representational languages. Distilling bizarre and overwhelming constructions at the same time. Constructions that take us to premodernist scenes of industrial factories, at the same time that it transports us to a habitat extra planetary of a hallucinated futurism.

When the work of Arenas is seen in perspective, a warning must be made on the pronounced iconographic trajectory. An iconography deeply tangled with the history he personally lived in Cuba, as much as the one he had to live through outside of. His landscapes, neo-figurative and abstract at the same time, project visions where the historical and the personal biography cohabitate. The same way in which he presents the capitalist world. "As I mentioned previously the work of Arenas submerges us in an imagination where memories are smelted, our drives and our desires. That which we have obtained, also, everything that we have lost. Losses and gains that return to us with the appearance of things and personal belongings and at the same time phantasmagorical. Images close but out of focus, distant landscapes and at the same time domestic that trembling navigate like Walter Benjamin said, "constellations between alienated things and exhaustive significations".

(1) Iván de la Nuez. El mundo temático. Exhibition catalog Néstor Arenas. Paisajes Clásicos. Gallery Lausín & Blasco. Zaragoza, Spain, 2001. Pages 2-3

(2) Dennys Matos. Néstor Arenas. Abstracción y Sintaxis de la Utopía. El Nuevo Herald, Sunday, January 14, 2018. Pages, 1 and 2 D



estallando “ (1). Desde entonces Arenas ha ido profundizando en esta relación entre, por una parte, el paisaje como género visual omnipresente en la percepción cultural actual y, por la otra, las representaciones que han alcanzando las ideologías políticas culturales de las sociedades que definieron el rostro del proyecto de la modernidad: El Capitalismo y la Utopía Comunista. Sobre estos ejes Arenas se embarcó en un gran proyecto reflexivo “Paisajes transformes I, II y III” trilogía de exposiciones expuestas en Farside Gallery, (Miami, 2014), en Zona Franca, 12 Bienal de La Habana, (La Habana, 2015) y la más reciente en el CCE (Miami, 2017).

En esta trilogía Arenas desarrollaba diferentes series como, por ejemplo, “Havana Transformers” o “Lego Painting” inspirada en una visión de la cultura y la sociedad tras la caída del Muro de Berlín y el fracaso del proyecto utópico comunista de la revolución cubana. Obras de gran formato cuyas figuras están como recortadas sobre fondos monocolor, estableciendo escalonados contrastes entre fondo y figura, entre pintura y artes gráficas. Contrastes acentuados por una visión del paisaje al que se ha escamoteado la perspectiva de profundidad. De ahí que figuras como, por ejemplo, Stalin, el cosmonauta soviético Yuri Gagarin, Mickey Mouse o la mascota Ronald McDonald en su representación pictórica cobren, no obstante, un aspecto “escultórico”. “Escultórico” porque su apariencia es como de armazón, como de materia espesa que rompe la ingravidez. Cuerpos cuyas extensiones son prótesis metálicas de un espíritu que impone su presencia física al paisaje que habita. Trenzando iconografías tanto de la cultura de masa del comunismo, como de la cultura de consumo masivo capitalista. Y ello, al decir de Iván de la Nuez, “se nos ofrece como un modo de desvelar la petrificación de los sujetos en el paisaje mismo” de sistemas sociales antitéticos: Uno consagrado a la mercancía y el consumo (el eterno presente capitalista), el otro, entregado a ideales heroicos (futuro eterno y poshistórico comunista).(2)

En las exposiciones “Néstor Arenas. Dichotomous Structures” (Kendall Art Center, Miami, 2017), y también en “Looking forward” (Weitz SpaceWhiteSpace, Carleton College, Minneapolis, 2018) el artista experimenta desplazamientos poéticos y discursivos. Por ejemplo, en lo poético el “paisaje” neofigurativo desliza elementos expresivos de caligrafía abstracta y por ello, la apariencia de la pintura se torna más gráfica. Algo notable en obras como, entre otras, “Dichotomous Structures N 4, N 6 y N 7”. Enfatizando una paleta cuyos colores dan a las superficies de las figuras texturas más apagadas, como de un desteñido fabril industrial. En lo discursivo, si en series anteriores como, entre otras, “Lego Painting”, la reflexión giraba en torno a la

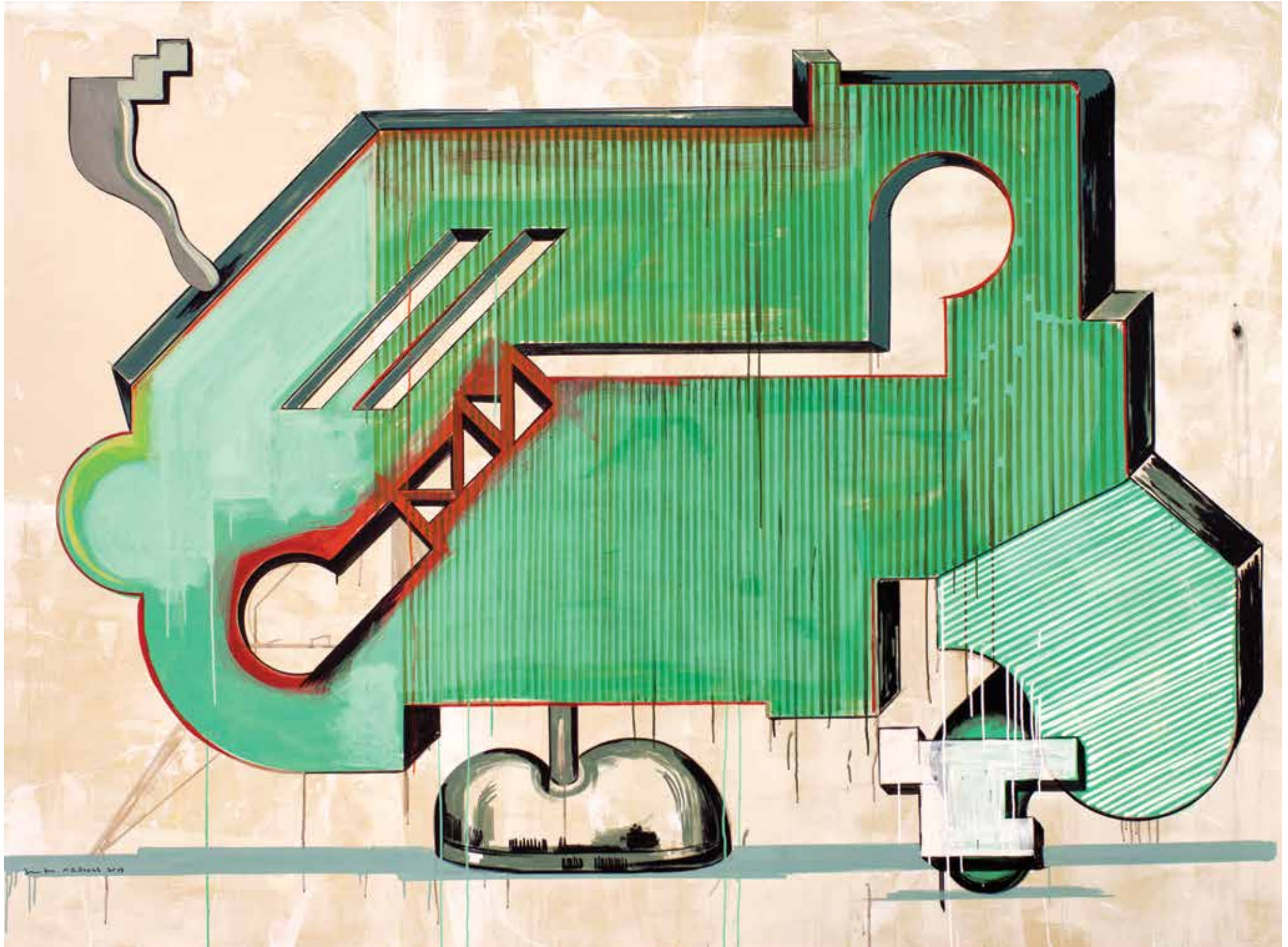
relación entre iconografías representativas de la ideología cultural de sociedades opuestas en “Dichotomous Structure” y “Looking forward”, en cambio, se enfoca el mundo de las estructuras urbanísticas y arquitectónicas. Un mundo donde se dan cita, de un lado, arquitecturas emblemáticas con referencias constructivistas de la Europa Comunista, jalonadas por aquellas heráldicas que interpretaban las utopías de esas culturas y sociedades. Del otro, las fantasiosas estructuras de ciudades sacadas de los videojuegos y películas de ciencia ficción más actuales de Hollywood. Ello está presente particularmente en obras como “Spomeniks-pok N ,5 N 6 y N 7” de “Dichotomous Structure”, pero también en la serie “Havana Transformers” de la exposición “Looking forward”. Entre todas producen una sintaxis pictórica que trastorna y contamina los códigos arquitectónicos y urbanísticos de ambos lenguajes de representación. Destilando unas construcciones sobrecogedoras y estrafalarias a la vez. Construcciones que lo mismo nos lleva a escenario pre modernos de signos constructivos y fabriles, del mismo modo que nos trasladan también a un habitar extra planetario de un futurismo alucinado.

Cuando se ve en perspectiva la obra de Arenas, se advierte el carácter marcadamente iconográfico de su trayectoria. Una iconografía vinculada tanto a la historia que vivió en Cuba, como a la que le ha tocado vivir fuera de ella. Sus paisajes, neofigurativos y abstractos a la vez, proyectan visiones donde cohabitan lo histórico con lo biográfico personal. Ello incluye el pasado de su experiencia de vida bajo la utopía totalitaria comunista, de la misma manera que el presente en el mundo capitalista. Como he comentado en otro momento, la obra de Arenas nos sumerge en un imaginario donde se funden el recuerdo, las pulsiones y los deseos. Aquello que hemos ganados y, también, todo lo que hemos perdido. Pérdidas y ganancias que retornan con apariencias de cosas y afectos cercanos y, a la vez, fantasmagóricos. Imágenes cercanas, pero ya difusas, paisajes distantes y, al mismo tiempo, domésticos que navegan temblorosos, al decir de Walter Benjamín como “constelaciones entre las cosas alienadas y las significaciones exhaustivas”.

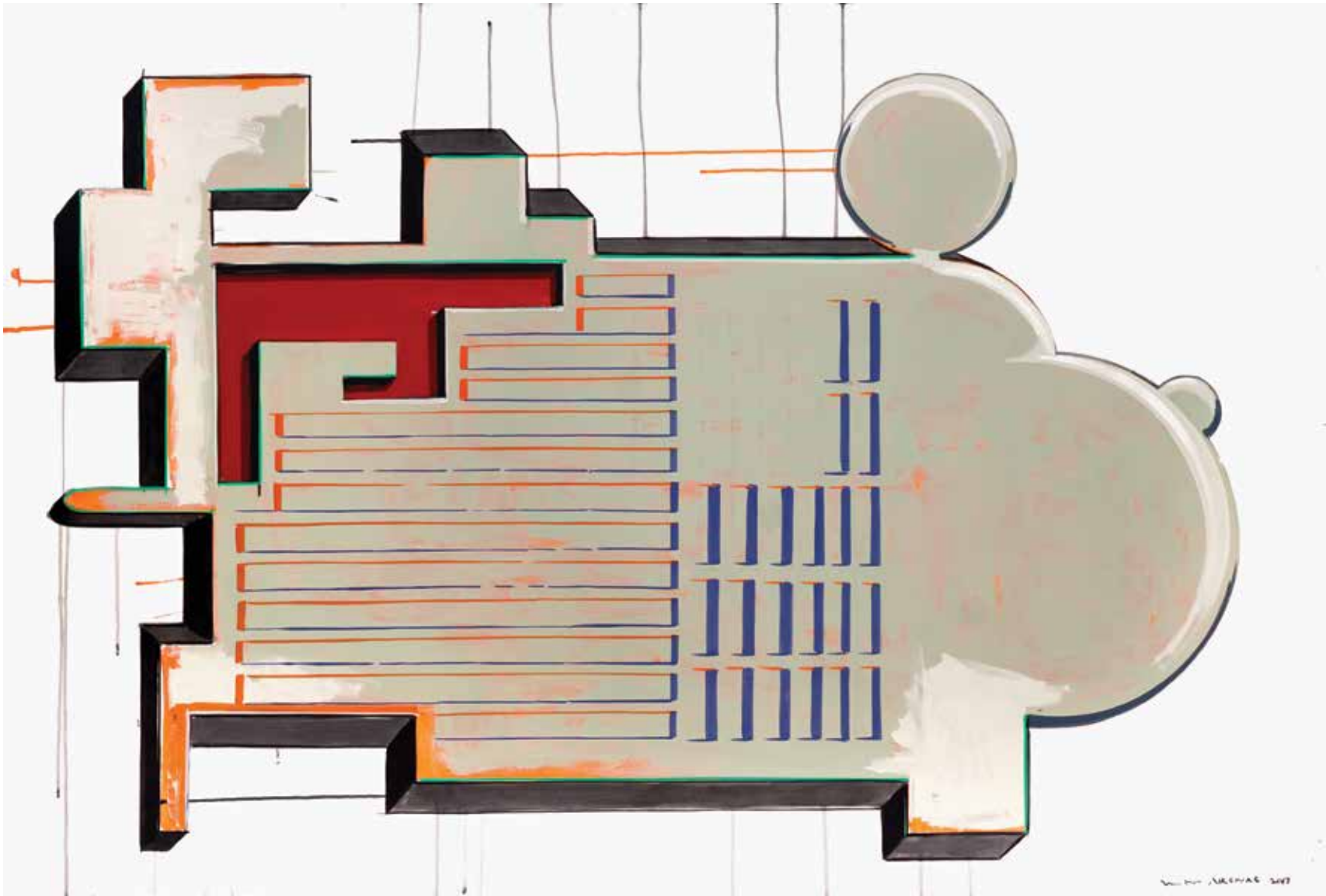
(1) Iván de la Nuez. El mundo temático. Catálogo de la muestra “Néstor Arenas. Paisajes Clásicos. Galería Lausín & Blacos. Zaragoza, España, 2001. Pags 2-3

(2) Dennys Matos. Néstor Arenas. Abstracción y Sintaxis de la Utopía. El Nuevo Herald, Domingo, 14 de Enero, 2018. Pag. 1 y 2 D



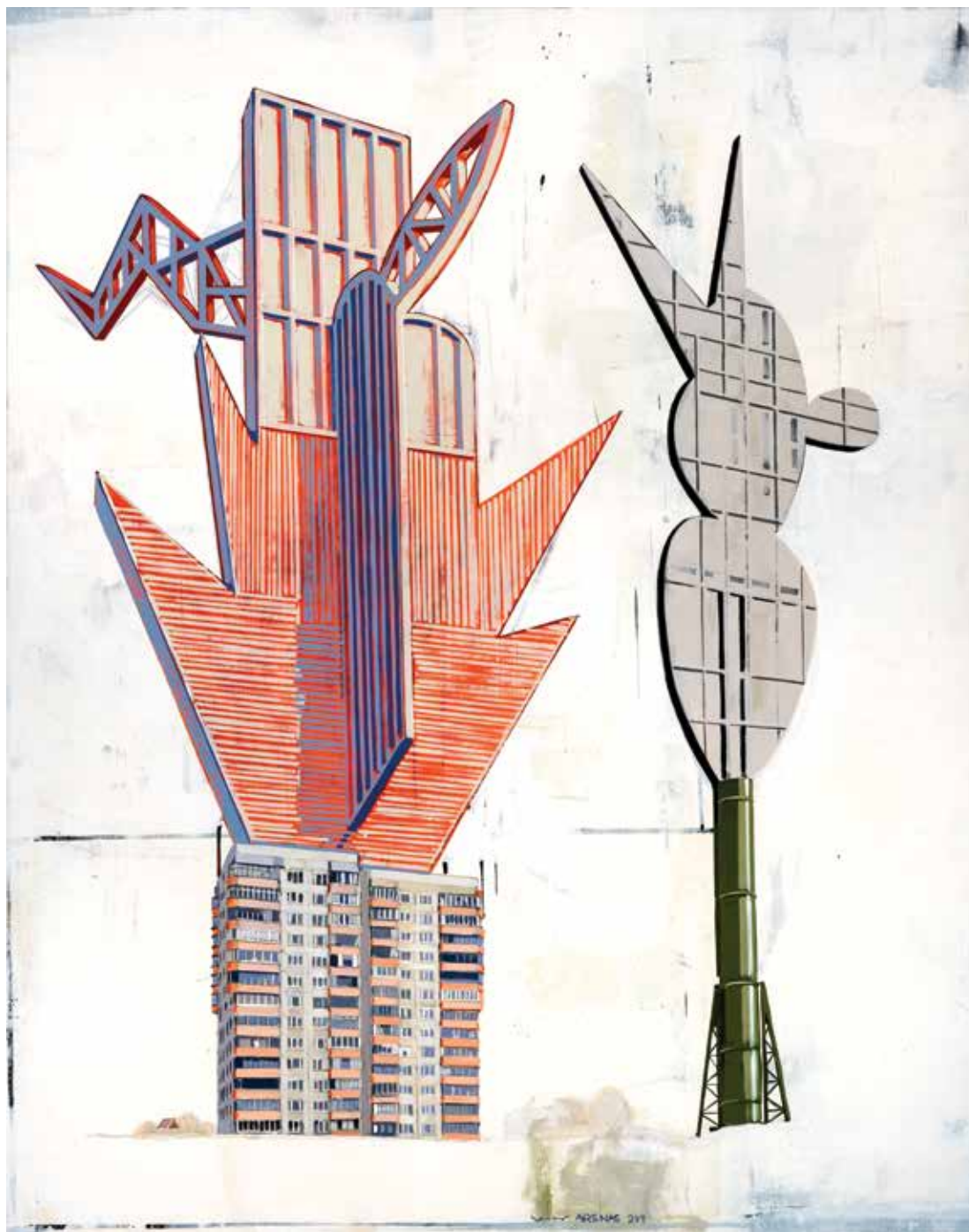


Dichotomous structures No 7, Acrylic on canvas, 66 X 89 in, 2017

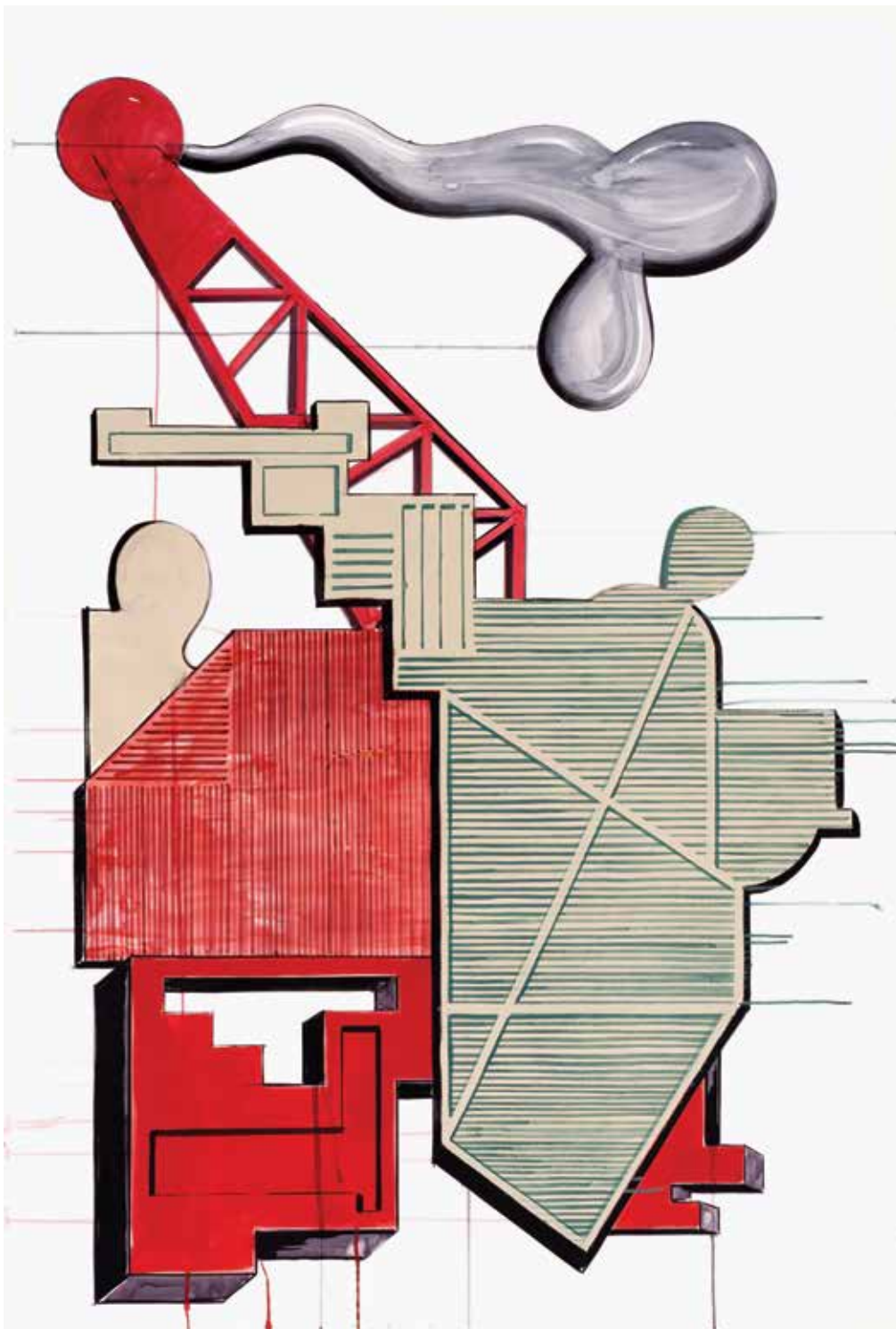


Dichotomous structures No 5, Acrylic on Fine art paper, 40 X 60 in, 2017





Spomenik-Pok No 9, Acrylic on canvas, 48 X 38 in, 2017



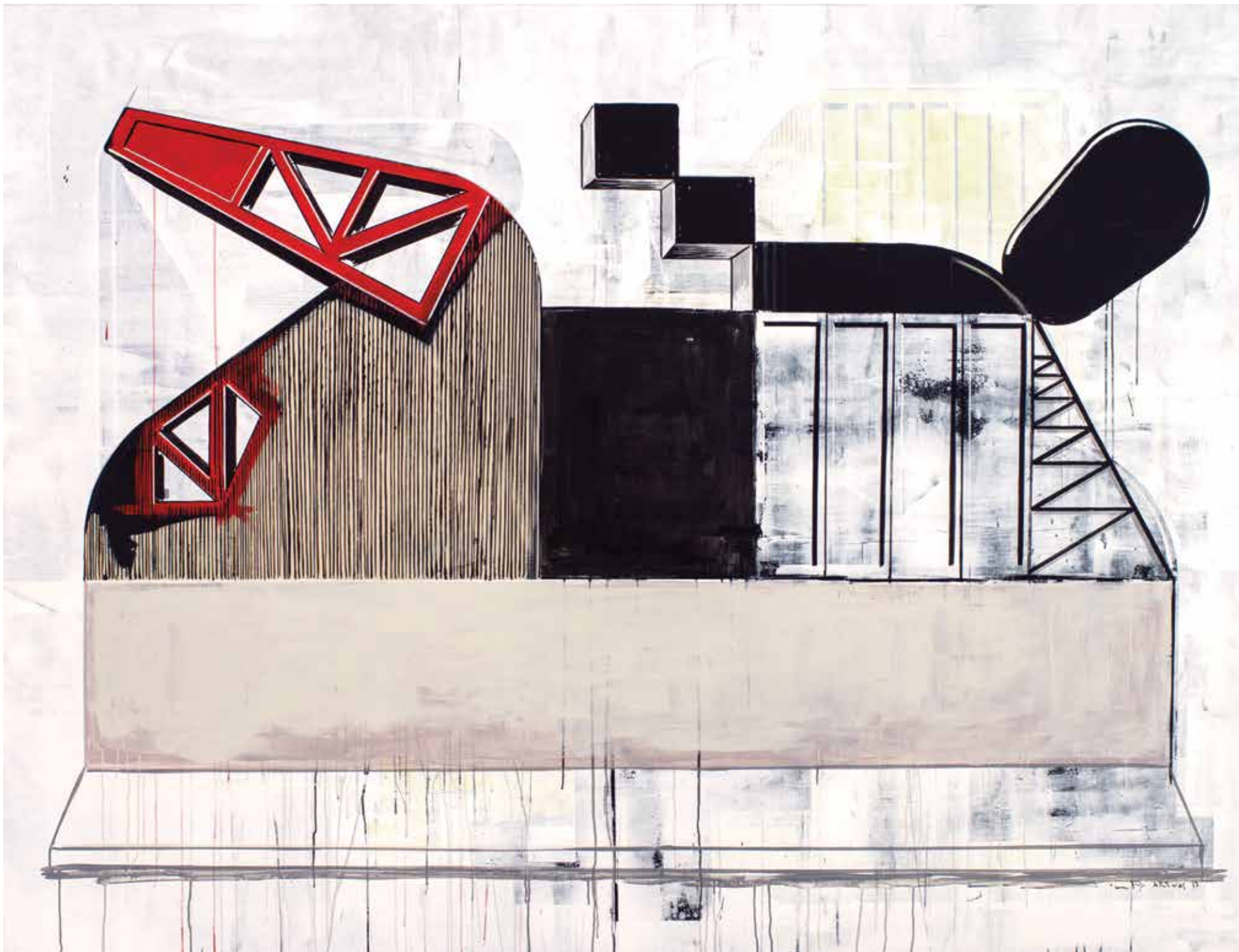




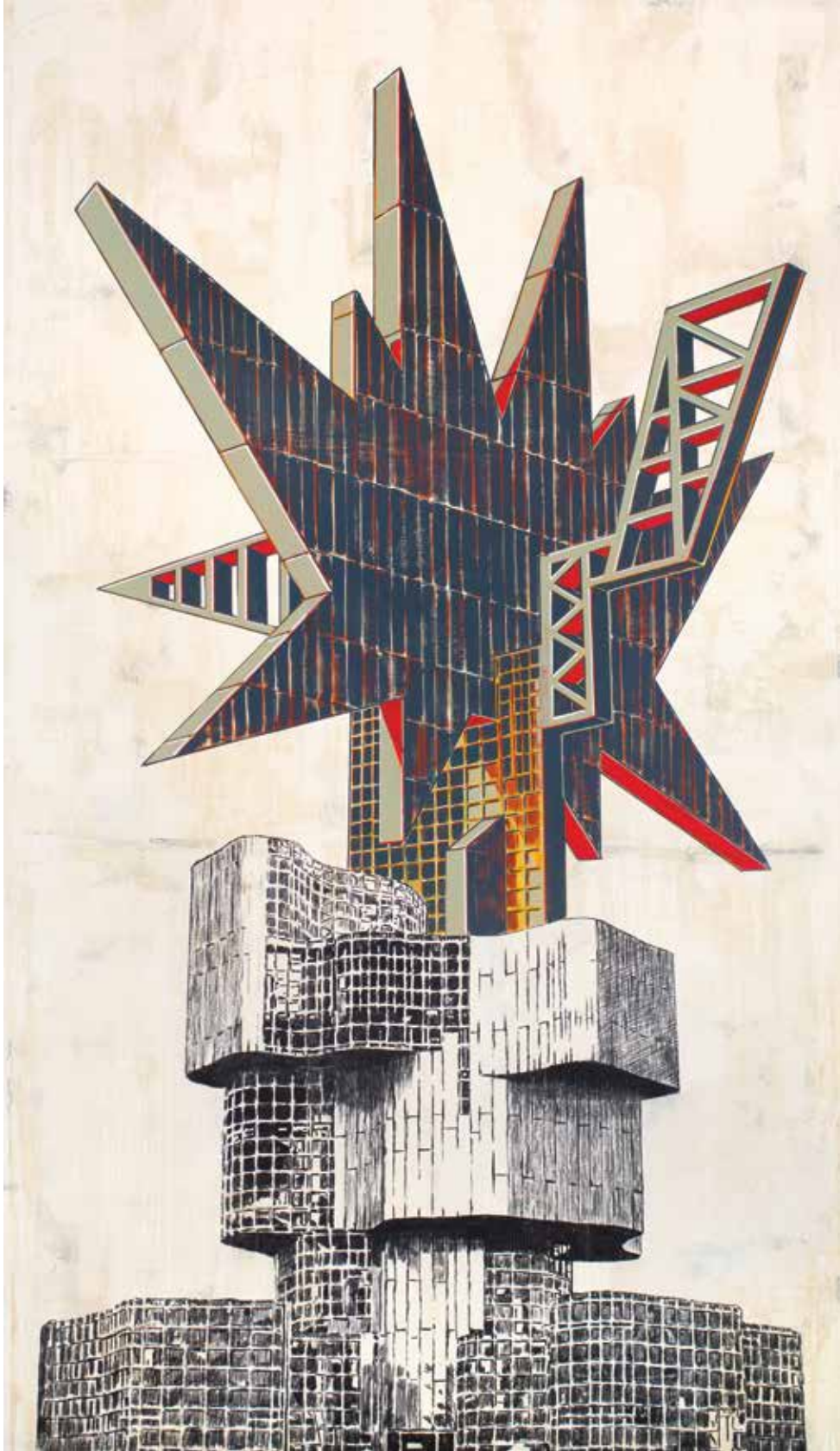
Dichotomous structures No 14, Acrylic on canvas, 66 X 86 in, 2018







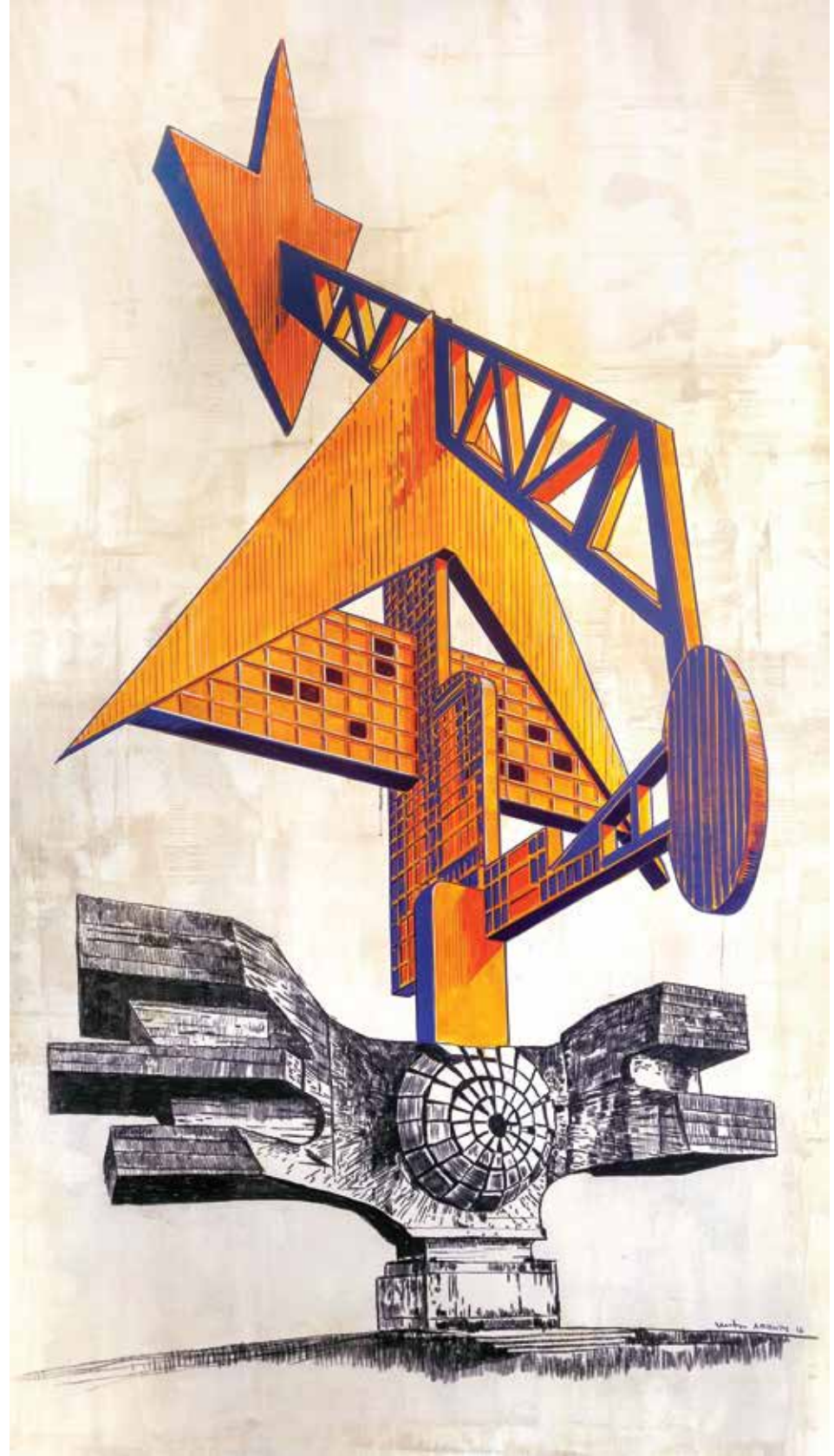
Dichotomous structures No 9, Acrylic on canvas, 66 X 89 in, 2017

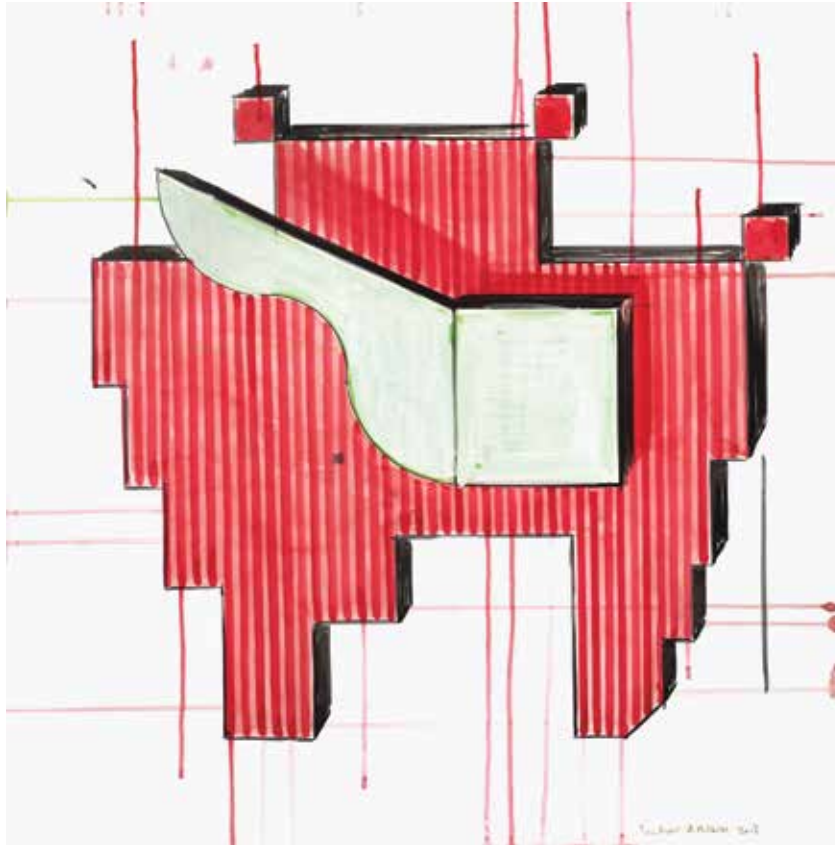


Spomenik-Pok No 3, Mixed media on canvas, 100 X 55 in, 2016

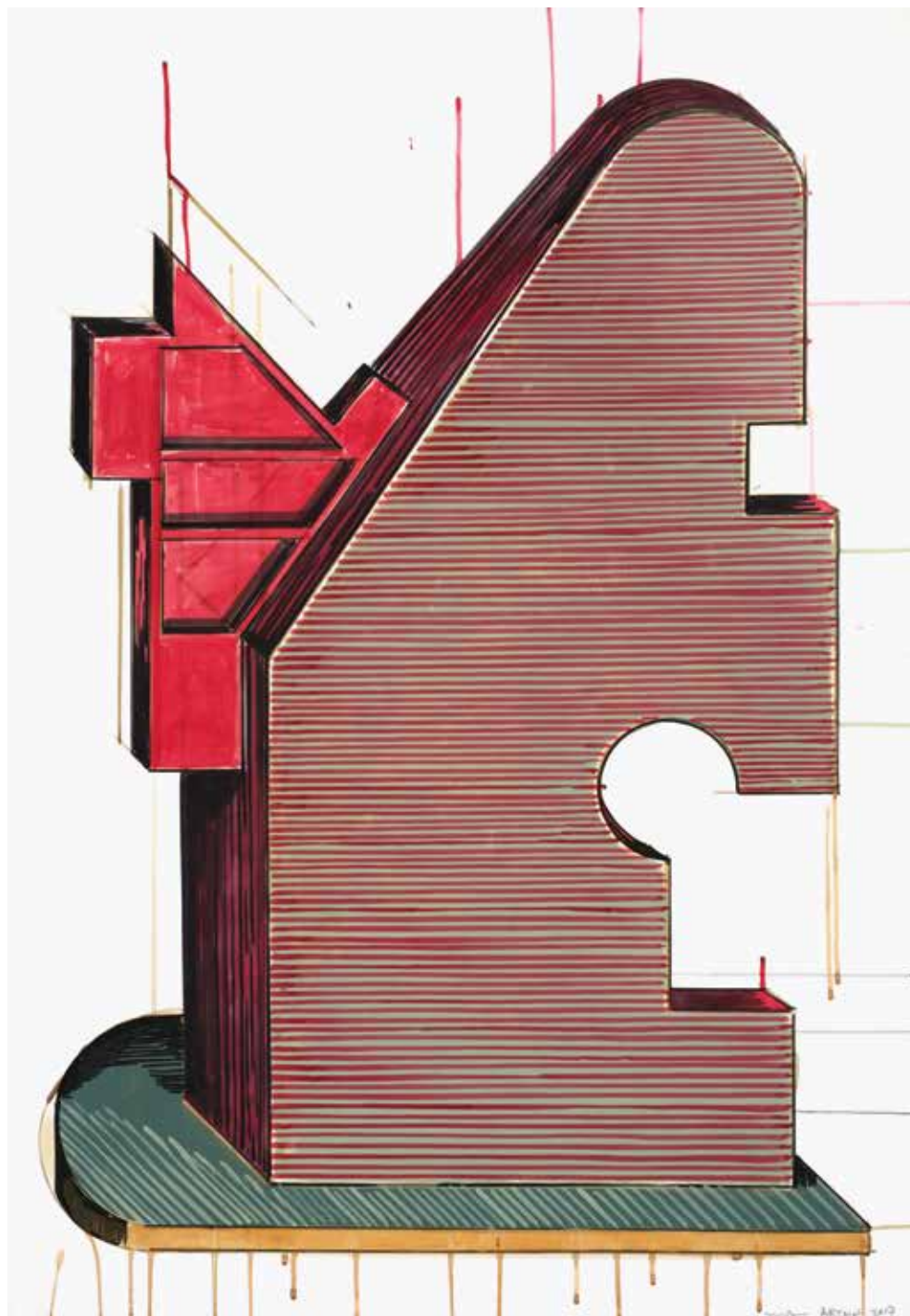


Spomenik-Pok No 4, Mixed media on canvas, 100 X 55 in, 2016

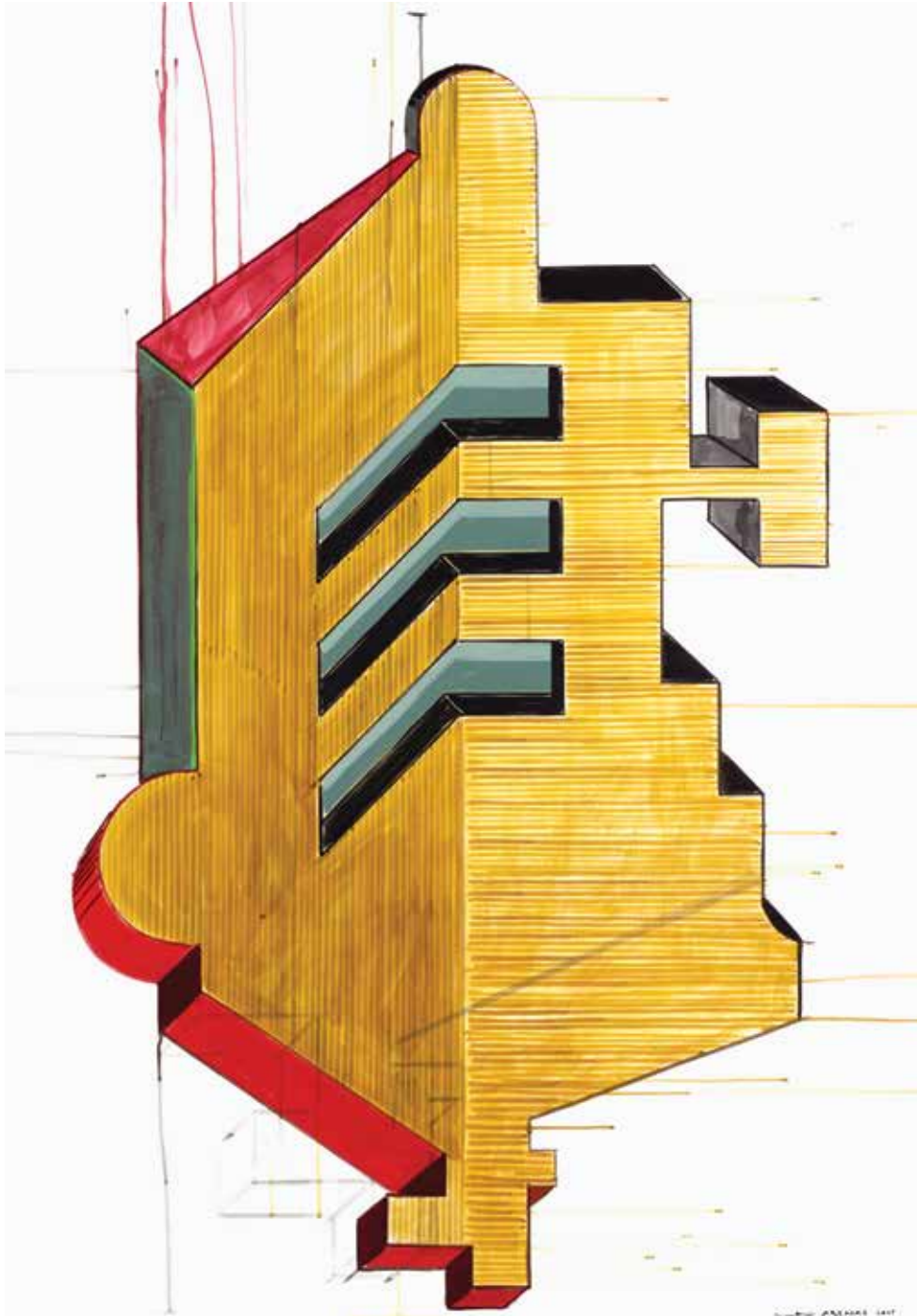




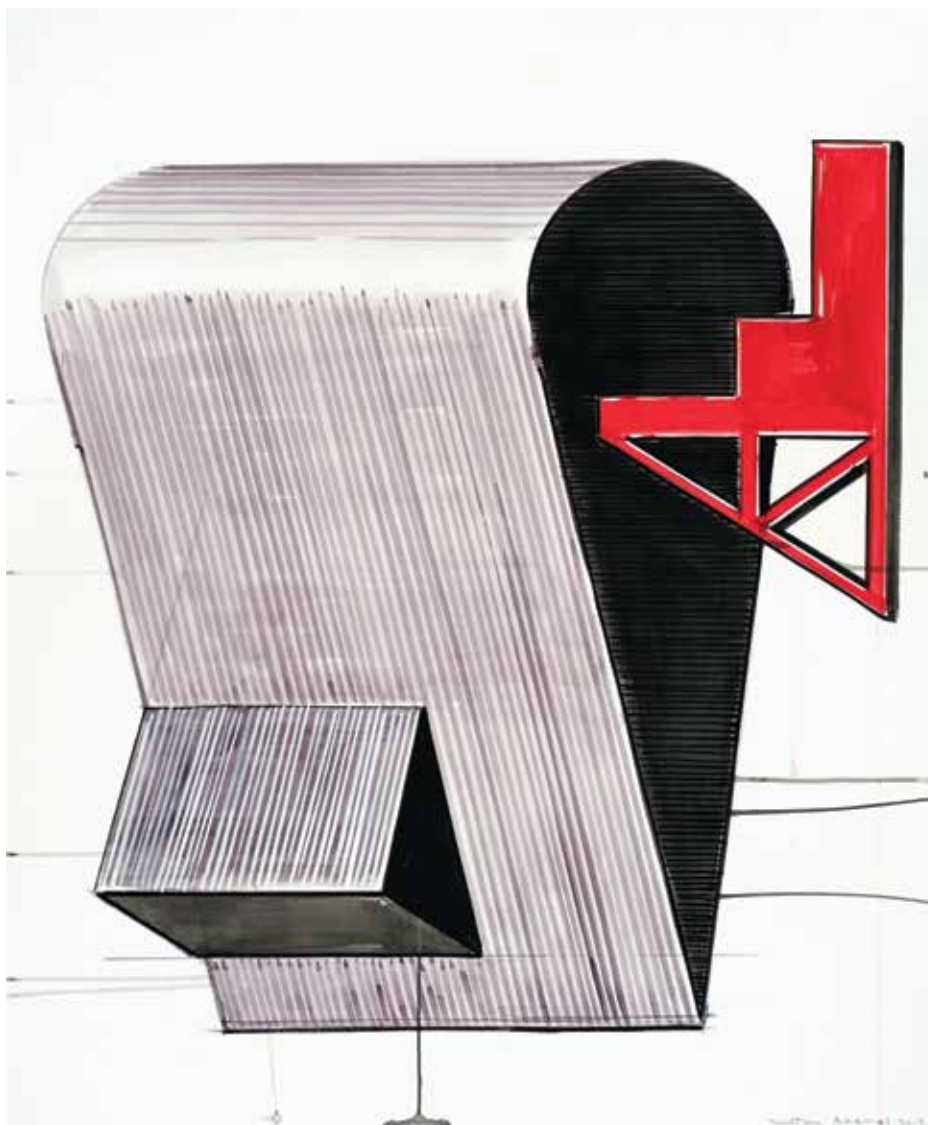




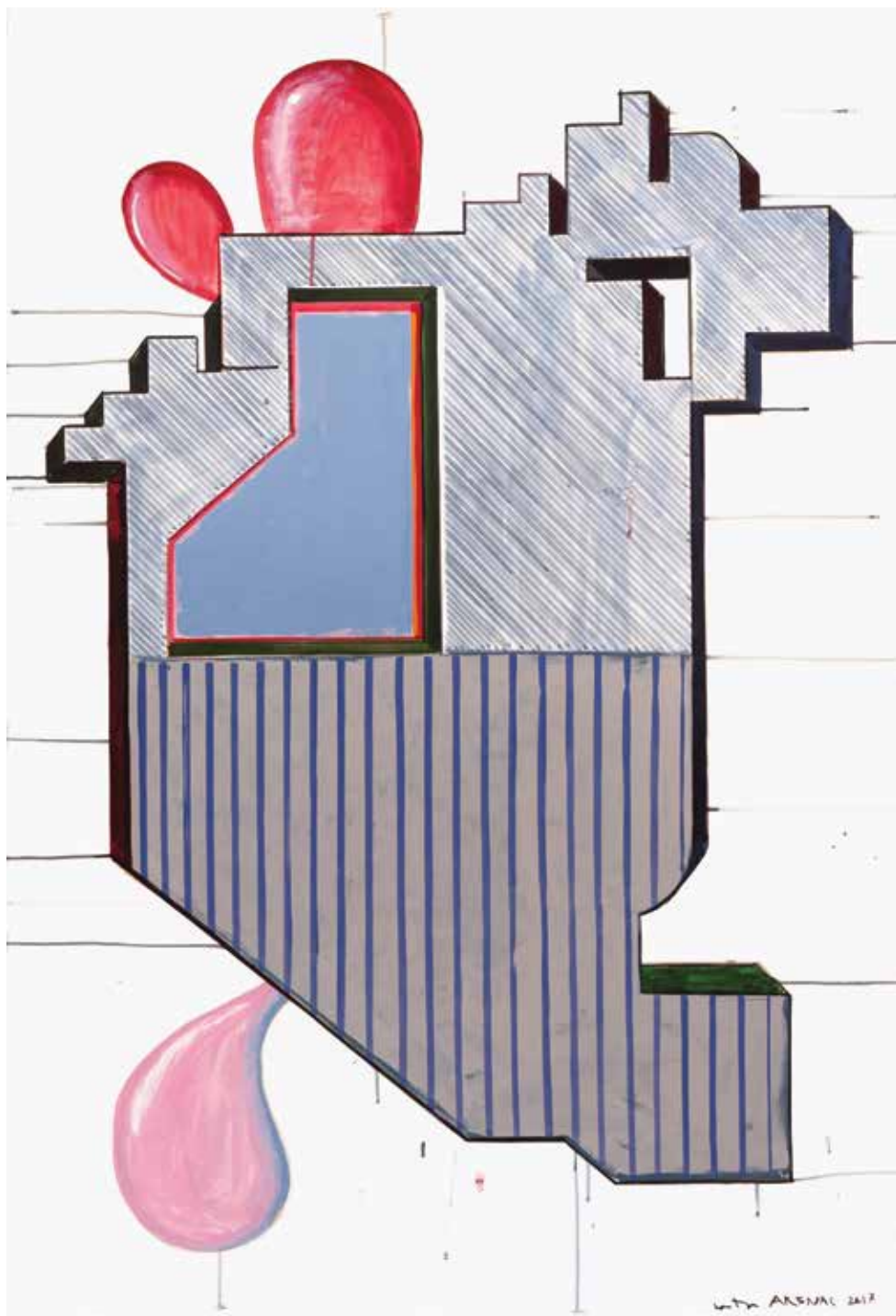
Dichotomous structures No 11, Acrylic on Fine art paper, 43 X 30 in, 2017



Dichotomous structures No 1, Acrylic on Fine art paper, 57 X 40 in, 2017

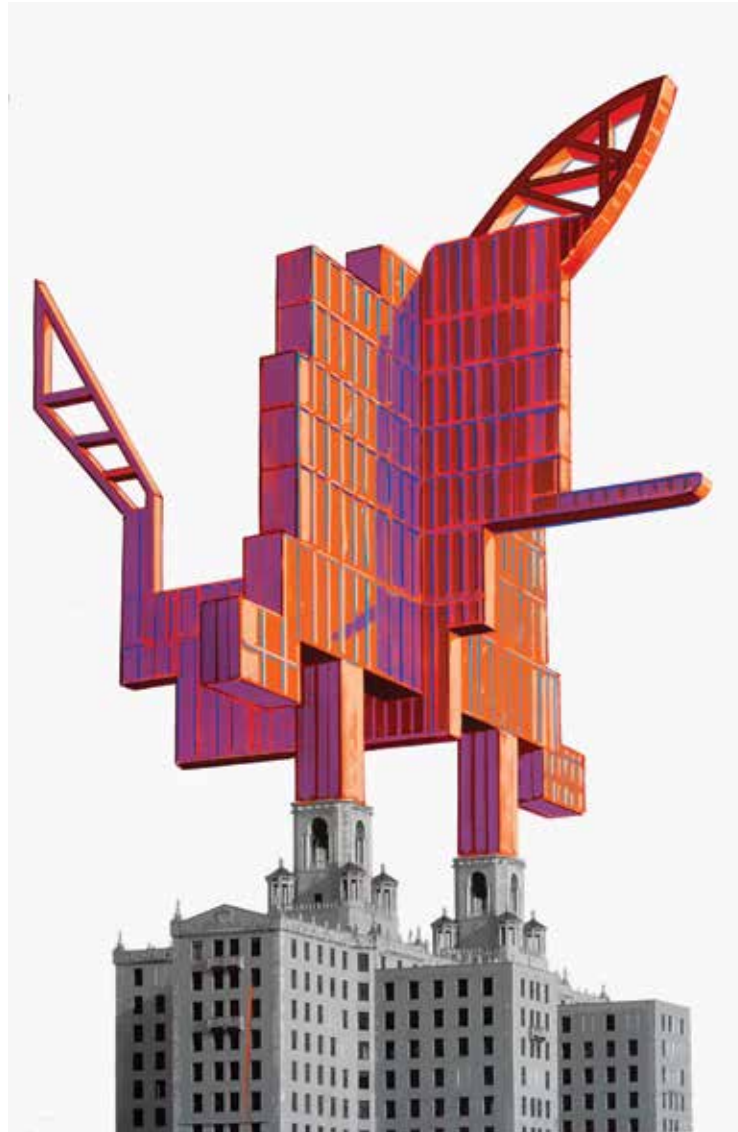


Dichotomous structures No 12, Acrylic on Fine art paper, 46 X 30 in, 2017

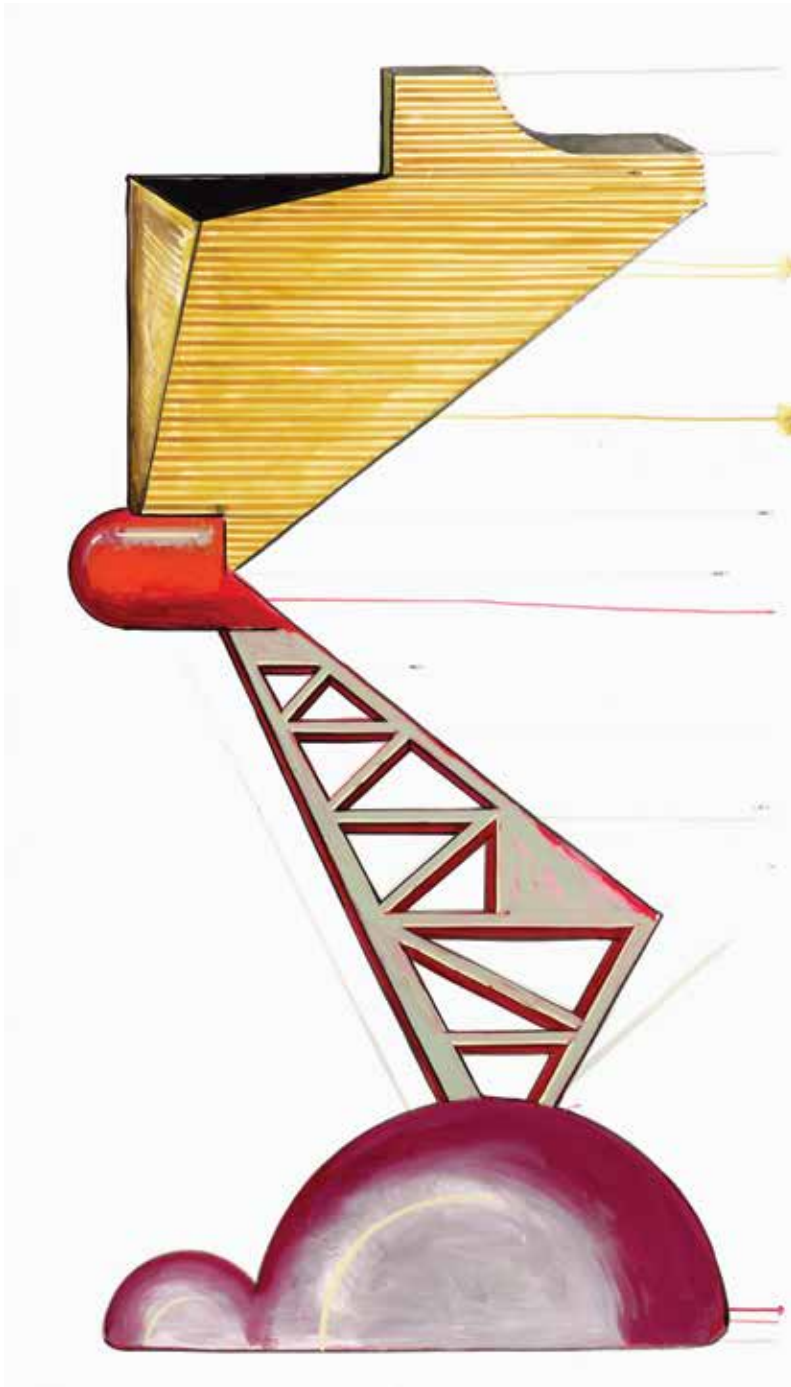


Dichotomous structures No 3, Acrylic on Fine art paper, 60 X 40 in, 2017





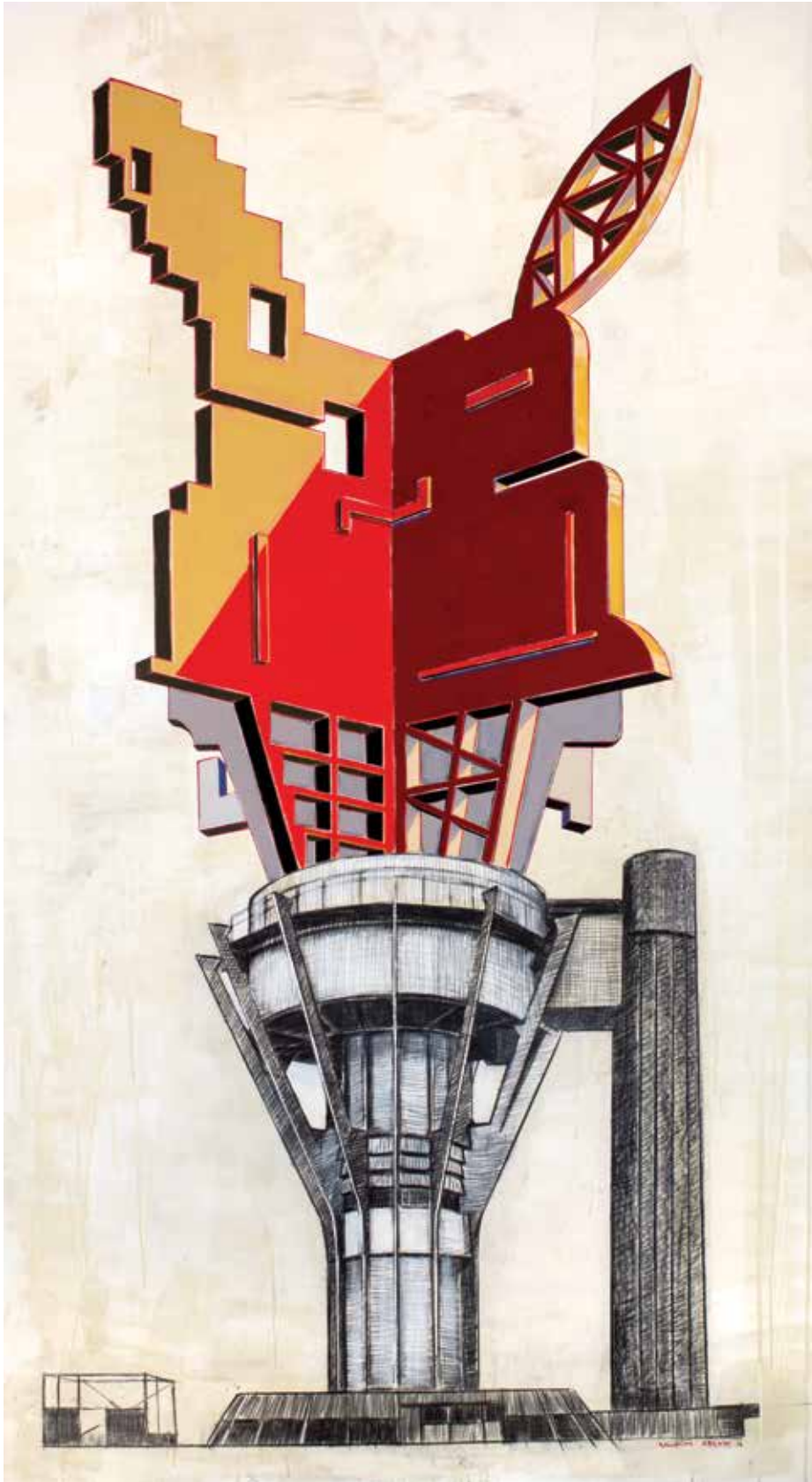
Havana Transformer No 21, Mixed media on Fine art paper, 40 X 26 in, 2017



Dichotomous structures No 2, Acrylic on Fine art paper, 53 X 30 in, 2017

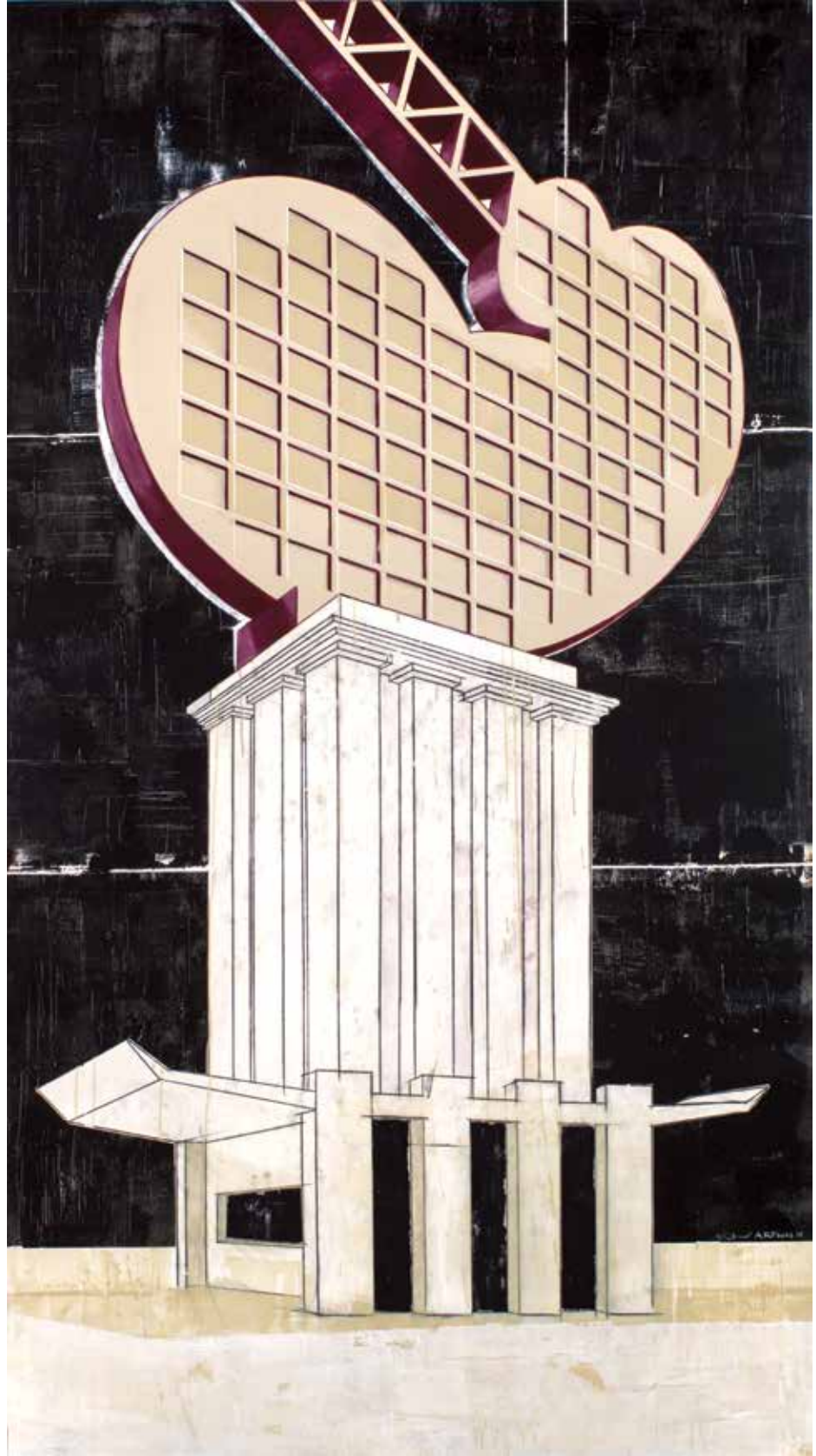


Havana Transformers No 16, Mixed media on Fine art paper, 40 X 26 in, 2016



Spomenik-Pok No 2, Mixed media on canvas, 100 X 54 in, 2016

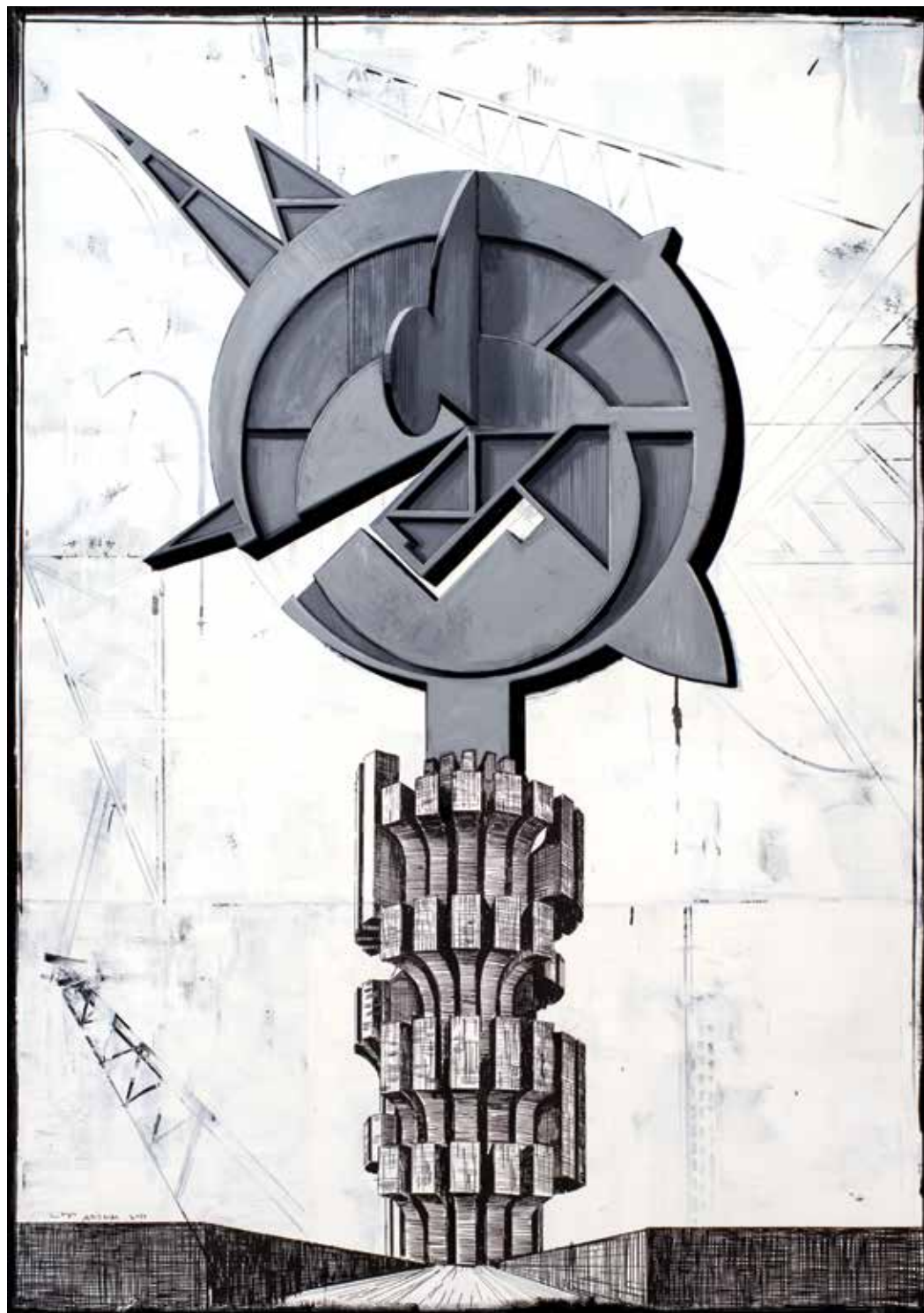




Spomenik-Pok No 1, Mixed media on canvas, 100 X 55 in, 2016



Havana Transformers No 6, Mixed media on Fine art paper, 40 X 26 in, 2015



Spomenik-Pok No 6, Acrylic on canvas, 80 X 56 in, 2017





Spomenik-Pok No 8, Acrylic on canvas, 53 X 36 in, 2017

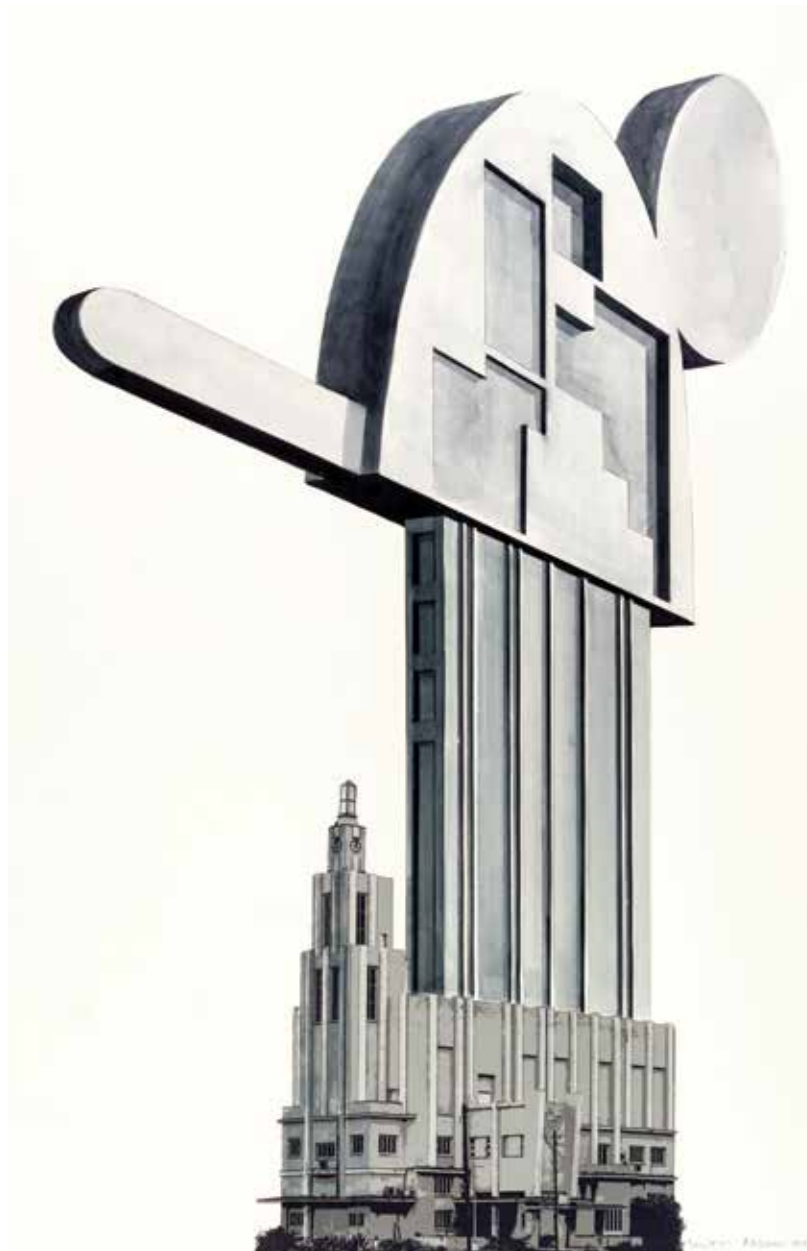




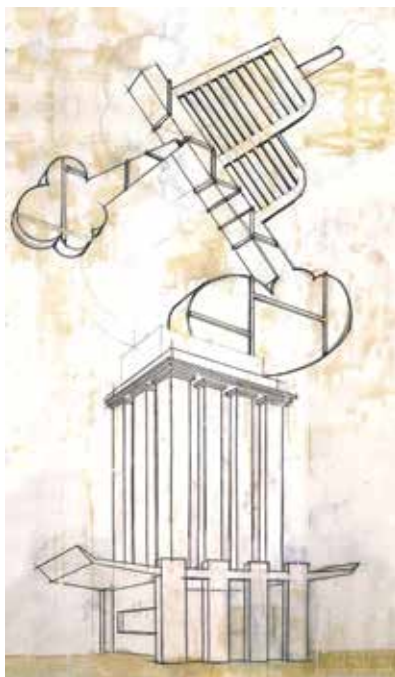
Mc-transformers No 3, Acrylic on canvas, 52 X 36 in, 2017



From the Serie Mc-Transformers No 1, Mixed media on paper, 14 X 8 in, 2016



Havana Transformers No 15, Mixed media on canvas, 40 X 26 in, 2015



From the Serie Spomenik-Go No 1, Mixed media on Fine art paper, 12 X 7 in, 2016

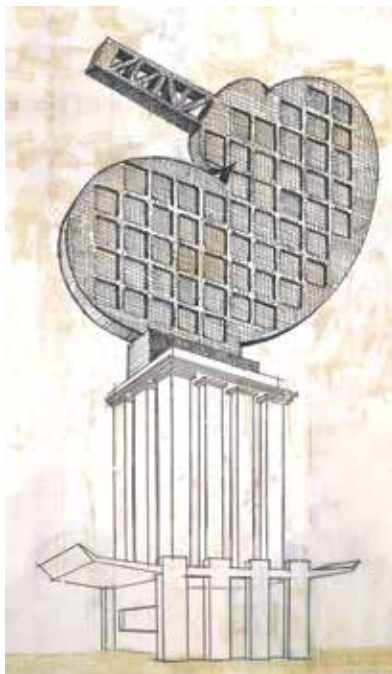




Spomenik-Pok No 7, Acrylic on canvas, 56 X 36 in, 2017



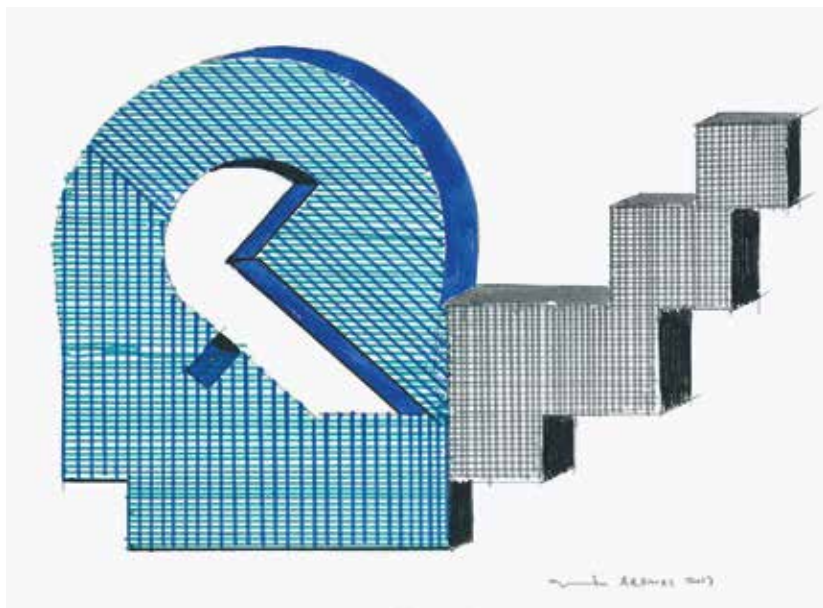
Spomenik-Pok No 10, Acrylic on canvas, 35 X 27 in, 2017



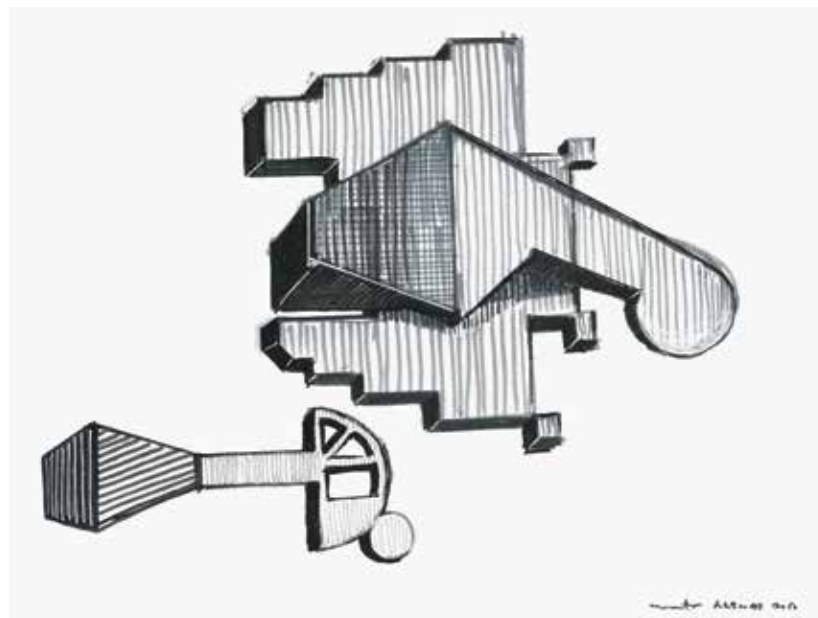
From the Serie Spomenik-Go No 2, Mixed media on Fine art paper, 12 X 7 in, 2016



From the Serie Spomenik-Go No 3, Mixed media on Fine art paper, 12 X 8 in, 2016

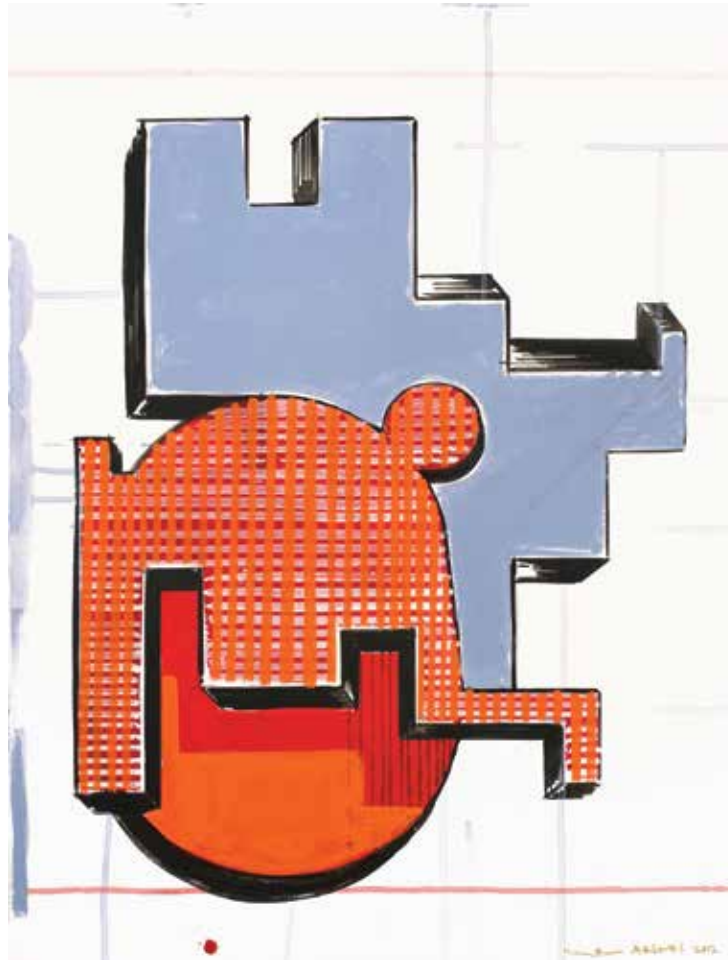


Structure No 1, Ink on Fine art paper, 12 X 16 in, 2017



Structure No 2, Ink on Fine art paper, 12 X 16 in, 2017





Dichotomous structures No 13, Acrylic on Fine art paper, 20 X 15 in, 2017



Havana Transformers No 7, Mixed media on Fine art paper, 40 X 26 in, 2015



Havana Transformers No 8, Mixed media on Fine art paper, 40 X 26 in, 2015



Dichotomous structures No 4, Acrylic on Fine art paper, 53 X 40 in, 2017





Havana Transformers No 9, Mixed media on Fine art paper, 40 X 26 in, 2015



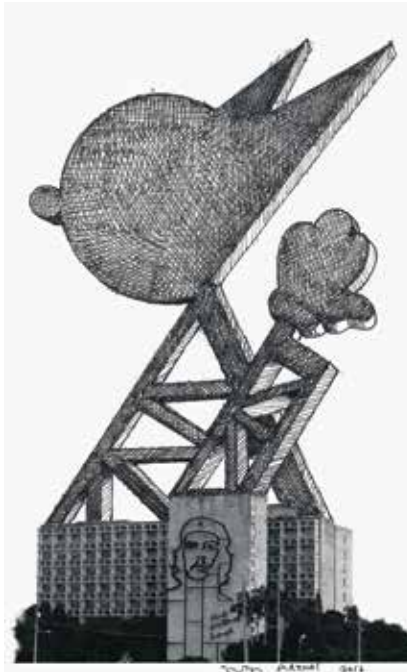
Havana Transformers No 17, Mixed media on canvas, 38 X 26 in, 2016



Havana Transformers No 18, Mixed media on canvas, 61 X 35 in, 2016







From the Serie Havana Transformers No 9, Mixed media on Fine art paper, 12 X 7 in, 2016

Néstor Arenas  
(Holguin, Cuba, 1964)

Painter and Photographer

#### EDUCATION

1985-1990 Graduated at Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA), Havana, Cuba.

#### GRANTS

2003-2004 Studio Residency at the Art Center of South Florida, Miami Beach, Florida, USA.

#### SOLO EXHIBITION (SELECTION)

2018 - Looking Forward, Hamlin Creative Space Weitz Center, Carleton College, Northfield, Minnesota.  
2017 - Dichotomous Structures, Kendall Art Center, Miami, FL.  
2016 - Paisajes Transformers III, Centro Cultural Español, Miami, Florida, USA.  
2015 - Paisajes Transformer II, Zona Franca, collateral complex Cabana-Morro, 12th Havana Biennial.  
2014 - Paisajes Transformers I, Farside Gallery, Miami, Florida, USA.  
2010 - Lego paintings, Lyle O'Reitzel Gallery, Miami, Florida, USA.  
2008 - Solo show, ISM Gallery, Miami, Florida, USA  
2000 - Classical Landscapes, Lausin & Blasco Gallery, Zaragoza, Spain.

#### GROUP EXHIBITIONS (SELECTION)

2017 - Identity and Belonging. Wall Street Fine Gallery, Jacksonville, Florida, USA.  
2016 - La madre de todas las Artes. Centro de Arte Contemporaneo Wilfredo Lam. Havana, Cuba.  
2015 - Di-Verse. Mexican Cultural Institute, Miami, Florida, USA.  
2015 - Who Keeps the Dog. MAC Fine Art, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, USA.  
2014 - Trayectos de Ida y Vuelta: Gráfica Transibérica desde Miami. Museo de Huelva, Spain.  
2013 - Too much is not enough. Haitian Cultural Center, Miami, Florida.  
2012 - Arte y Urbe. Kertiles Art Space and Project. Miami, Florida.  
2010 - Arturo Mosquera Collection. Freedom Tower, Miami, Florida.  
2008 - Cuban Americans in Focus. Lehigh University Art Galleries. Bethlehem, Philadelphia.

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- 29- Spomenik-Pok No 1, Mixed media on canvas, 100 X 55 in, 2016
- 30- Havana Transformers No 6, Mixed media on Fine art paper, 40 X 26 in, 2015
- 31- Spomenik-Pok No 6, Acrylic on canvas, 80 X 56 in, 2017
- 32- Spomenik-Pok No 8, Acrylic on canvas, 53 X 36 in, 2017
- 33- Mc-transformers No 3, Acrylic on canvas, 52 X 36 in, 2017
- 34- From the Serie Mc-Transformers No 1, Mixed media on paper, 14 X 8 in, 2016
- 35- Havana Transformers No 15, Mixed media on canvas, 40 X 26 in, 2015
- 36- From the Serie Spomenik-Go No 1, Mixed media on Fine art paper, 12 X 7 in, 2016
- 37- Spomenik-Pok No 7, Acrylic on canvas, 56 X 36 in, 2017
- 38- Spomenik-Pok No 10, Acrylic on canvas, 35 X 27 in, 2017
- 39- From the Serie Spomenik-Go No 2, Mixed media on Fine art paper, 12 X 7 in, 2016
- 39- From the Serie Spomenik-Go No 3, Mixed media on Fine art paper, 12 X 8 in, 2016
- 40- Structure No 1, Ink on Fine art paper, 12 X 16 in, 2017
- 40- Structure No 2, Ink on Fine art paper, 12 X 16 in, 2017
- 41- Dichotomous structures No 13, Acrylic on Fine art paper, 20 X 15 in, 2017
- 42- Havana Transformers No 7, Mixed media on Fine art paper, 40 X 26 in, 2015
- 43- Havana Transformers No 8, Mixed media on Fine art paper, 40 X 26 in, 2015
- 44- Dichotomous structures No 4, Acrylic on Fine art paper, 53 X 40 in, 2017
- 45- Havana Transformers No 9, Mixed media on Fine art paper, 40 X 26 in, 2015
- 46- Havana Transformers No 17, Mixed media on canvas, 38 X 26 in, 2016
- 47- Havana Transformers No 18, Mixed media on canvas, 61 X 35 in, 2016
- 48- Havana Transformers No 19, Mixed media on canvas, 59 X 39 in, 2016
- 49- From the Serie Havana Transformers No 9, Mixed media on Fine art paper, 12 X 7 in, 2016

## KENDALL ART CENTER

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Finance and Operations Director  
Leonardo Rodríguez, Jr.

Art Director and Curator  
Henry Ballate, M.F.A.

Critical criteria and selection  
Dennys Matos

Museography  
Art D Plus & DM ArtPro



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**Néstor Arenas** (b. Holguín, Cuba, 1964). He graduated from the Higher Institute of Art (Havana, 1990). Arenas have widely exhibited his work at solo exhibitions and group shows throughout the U.S., Cuba, Spain and China. Recent exhibitions include, 12th Havana Biennial (2015), “Legopaintings” (Lyle O’Reitzel Gallery, Miami, 2010), Arteaméricas Art Fair (Miami, 2009 and 2010), Shanghai Art Fair (China, 2010). His work is part of several private and corporate collections such as, Forrest Capital (Miami), The Mosquera Collection (Miami), Jorge Reynardus Collection (New York and Sarasota), Leigh University (Pennsylvania), Universidad de Valencia (Spain), among others.

The work of Néstor Arenas immerses us in an imaginary where memory, impulses and desires merge. What we have won and, also, everything we have lost. Losses and profits that return with the appearances of things and affections that are close and, at the same time, spooky. Images that are close, but already diffuse, distant landscapes and, at the same time, domestic that tremble, say Walter Benjamin as “constellations between alienated things and exhaustive meanings.”

When the work of Arenas is seen in perspective, a warning must be made on the pronounced iconographic trajectory. An iconography deeply tangled with the history he personally lived in Cuba, as much as the one he had to live through outside of. His landscapes, neo-figurative and abstract at the same time, project visions where the historical and the personal biography cohabitate. The same way in which he presents the capitalist world. “As I mentioned previously the work of Arenas submerges us in an imagination where memories are smelted, our drives and our desires. That which we have obtained, also, everything that we have lost. Losses and gains that return to us with the appearance of things and personal belongings and at the same time phantasmagorical.

Dennys Matos.



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