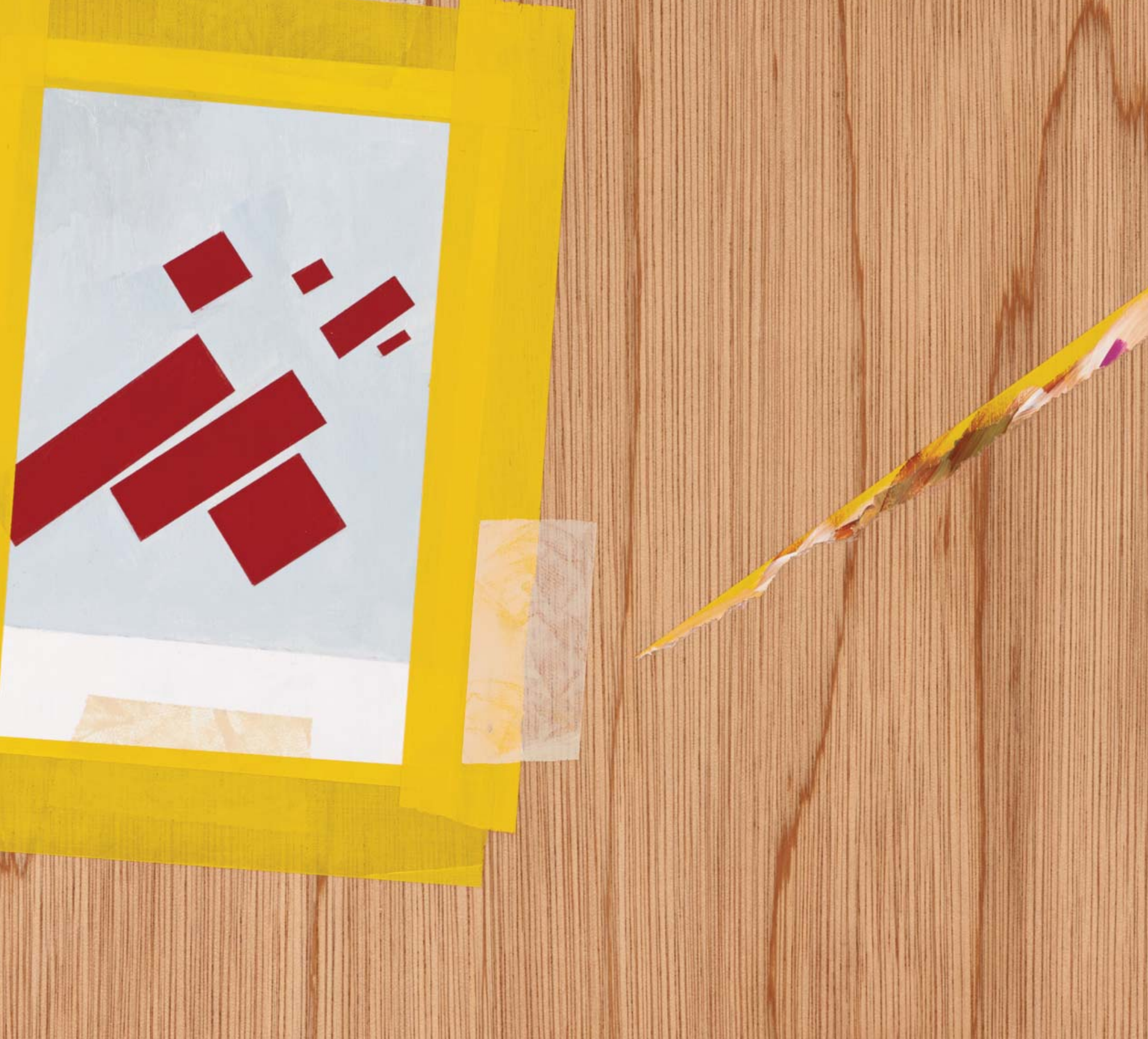


Souvenirs from the Waste Land
Alastair Gordon



Ahmanson Gallery, 2017



Second City: Alastair Gordon's Mimetic Imagination

Nicole Miller

In his novel *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino imagines a dialogue between the explorer Marco Polo and his patron, the emperor Kublai Khan. The traveler describes a city called Valdrada, built on the shores of a lake that provides a mirrored reflection of the parapets and verandas of the place—a second city. According to the traveler, everything that happens in the first city—loving or murdering—happens in the second: the same. “At times the mirror increases a thing’s value, at times denies it. Not everything that seems valuable above the mirror maintains its force when mirrored,” writes the traveler. “The twin cities are not equal.”¹

What are we to make of this double vision, two cities alike but not equal? The scene brings to mind another pair of places, described by philosopher Giorgio Agamben in his book *The Coming Community*:

The Hasidim tell a story about the world to come that says everything there will be just as it is here. Just as our room is now, so it will be in the world to come; where our baby sleeps now, there too it will sleep in the other world. And the clothes we wear in this world, those too we will wear there. Everything will be as it is now, just a little different.²

We find a version of this story in many traditions—think of Saint Augustine’s City of Man, mirrored and redeemed by the City of God. Here we find a mystery: how to account for the difference between the original and its copy? If the other world offers a glimpse of some ultimate value—or indeed, brings that value into being—what intervention might render our world just a little different? And what correspondence can there be between Valdrada and its shimmering double?

Consider the picture postcard. The postcard came of age in the early 20th century, as mass media print culture expanded, as new modes of travel became available and postal deregulations allowed correspondence to be written on the address side of the card. As it circulated images of

¹ Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 54.

² Giorgio Agamben, “Halos,” *The Coming Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 53.

main street storefronts, seaside resorts or canyon vistas, the postcard, with its frontal perspective and “honest, direct” appeal, provided certifying evidence of an invisible city.³ Yet these relics of transport or the sublime were cheap consumer goods, purchased and posted for pocket change, hoarded and hung on the refrigerator with a plastic magnet or tape.

Alastair Gordon is interested in the dialogue between these two worlds: the disposable and the highly esteemed; the ephemeral and the permanent; the gift shop and the gallery. His *trompe l’œil* renderings of postcards, sketches, and residual papers posit an alternate world alongside ours, resembling ours in minute detail, down to the wood grain and the tacky tape.

“There’s an interesting thing that happens when you paint something in a figurative, still-life tradition,” Gordon told me. “It somehow elevates that subject matter. Oil and acrylic is permanent. It will be looked at for many years to come.” But an image of a painting by Caravaggio, say, might be reproduced and circulated by digital media or printed on a throwaway postcard. “Printed replication would seem to devalue the painting,” he told me, “but actually I think it makes it a more democratic image, as more people can see it.” By painting the image of a postcard, “I return it back to the original, authentic painting, which gives it that sense of elevation.”

He sees his work as merging the sacramental tradition, which sanctifies the material world by referencing a spiritual realm, with the late-modern, Abstract Expressionist commitment to exploring the craft’s formal possibilities. In this tradition, Gordon is attentive to the gestural properties of the brush mark or paint. “To me, the masking tape and postcards act like those kinds of expressive gestures,” he said. “They exist in the real world though I use them in a very gestural way. An expressive smear of paint is replaced by a swipe of masking tape or an abstracted splurge of blue becomes a figurative postcard with a blue image on it.”

Here, Gordon moves away from the pure abstraction advocated by modernist critic Clement Greenberg in response to a culture of mass-produced, commercial images. Instead, Gordon approaches a culture of kitsch as a salvager and syncretist. Like a Pop artist, he makes replicas of consumer objects. Like one of the Neo-Dadaists, he does something painterly with

³ Walker Evans, quoted in Jeff Rosenheim, *Walker Evans and the Picture Postcard* (New York: Steidl & Partners, 2009), 14.

the image, taking a high-art approach to low-art materials. He merges the Brillo box with one of Rauschenberg’s combines.

What does Gordon add to the image? The artist invents a context. His paintings purport to be scenes from his studio—renderings of works in progress, windows into the master’s process. These parallax artifacts play to our fascination with the artist’s workspace and our belief that the studio reveals something of the maker. (Picture Picasso’s studio, with its paintings and bundles and empty cigarette boxes stacked one on top of the other, his brushes scattered among tubes of paint, his enormous pot-bellied stove—evidence of exuberant surplus; or Giacometti surrounded by his rough, narrow sculptures, which mirror their maker’s own craggy form; or Pollock’s paint-splattered barn, which reveals, we think, the inner anarchy of the artist.) “The studio becomes an artefact in its own right—an extension of the artist him- or herself,” according to curators of a recent exhibition in Paris at the Petit Palais.⁴

In Gordon’s paintings, the artist is present in the role of collector. He stores up flotsam like Walter Benjamin’s ragpicker, “a man whose job it is to gather the day’s refuse in the capital. Everything that the big city has thrown away, everything it has lost, everything it has scorned, everything it has crushed underfoot he catalogues and collects.”⁵ In this way, Gordon elevates not only the ephemeral image, but the site of creation and, by extension, the creator. He claims for the artist consecrating power—a magus in his workshop or standing outside the city where, on the shores of a lake, the place is just a little different.

⁴ Wall text, *Dans l’atelier: l’artiste photographié, d’Ingres à Jeff Koons, Petit Palais*, Paris, 2016.

⁵ Charles Baudelaire, quoted in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 48.

Into the Laquearia

2017 | acrylic on birch ply | 70.8 x 94.4 x 1.8 inches

