

Two Drawings by Margaret Priest

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One of the more interesting evolutions of architectural opinion in Toronto in recent years has concerned the complex of buildings known as the Toronto-Dominion Centre, designed by the great German architect Mies van der Rohe and erected in the first half of the nineteen-sixties. Not particularly well-regarded by the public-at-large for some period of time after their completion, the buildings have in the past decade or so seen an ever-increasing body of respect accrue to them - particularly on the part of younger generations of architects in Toronto. By now, it can be said that they rank among the most highly regarded works of architecture in this city.

A fascinating role in this local cultural narrative has been played by two drawings by Margaret Priest: *The Debt Palace, I & II*. Priest was obviously aware of the Toronto-

Dominion Centre prior to the creation of these two images, having lived in the city for some time before she made them in 1989-90. But one suspects that her visual interest in them was focused sharply by the 1987 architectural exhibition, *Toronto Modern*. It included archival images from the date of the building's opening which had been taken by the distinguished Toronto architectural photographer of the nineteen-fifties and sixties, Hugh Robertson and juxtaposed them with a bold and comprehensive additional set taken specially for the exhibition by the young contemporary photographer, Steven Evans. Interestingly enough, two of Evans' photographs have in their turn formed the basis of Priest's drawings.

Several of Robertson's Toronto-Dominion images take the form of one point perspectives, emphasizing the gridded combination of flat frontal planes in the centre of the field of vision, these in turn having been animated spatially by the steep pictorial angles of architectural elements perpendicular to them. By these compositional means, Robertson's images succeed in establishing a strong pictorial analogy with the tectonic reality of the actual buildings-in-the-world.

To what extent Evans was consciously influenced by Robertson's photographs I do not know. But there is no doubt that his Toronto-Dominion images – particularly the two interiors of the main banking pavilion that have been used by Margaret Priest, read as dramatically intensified abstractions of many of the motifs already represented by Robertson.

This is a remarkable cultural chain of perceived readings of a haunting Toronto modernist interior. Robertson's photographs are already fascinating enough. In turn, Evans captures the spatial authority of the interior of the banking pavilion with great precision. Their representation of the sumptuous material palette of the building – granite, marble and teak – all disposed beneath the optically corrected luminous ceiling, makes them definitive photographic icons of modern Toronto architecture.

All the more remarkable then that Priest's apparent reprises of Evans' images have become icons in their own right. Based topologically quite directly on Evans' images, her drawings also re-read their material representations with intriguing new intensity. If, in reality, the buildings' presence already interrupts quotidian daily experience – a condition aptly captured by both Robertson and Evans; the Priest images, with their circumspect,

meticulous and precise renderings of granite, marble and teak, take this condition, and pitch it decisively into a realm at once hieratic and delirious. Her discreet edits of the putative reality of these spaces (for instance, plants and chairs have disappeared) produce a startlingly accurate effect I can only describe as a highly charged serenity.

For those of us Torontonians who have known – or rather thought we have known – these buildings over the span of the quarter-century of their existence, Priest's images have performed a remarkable role. Not only have they caused us to be able to see, and to understand the power of Mies van der Rohe's Toronto spaces anew; in their carefully studied particularity they have succeeded in getting beneath the surface of our conscious perception of them. For those of us who have been privileged to study these works of hers, they have by now become indissolubly bound up with our very mode of perception of the artifacts of our local world.