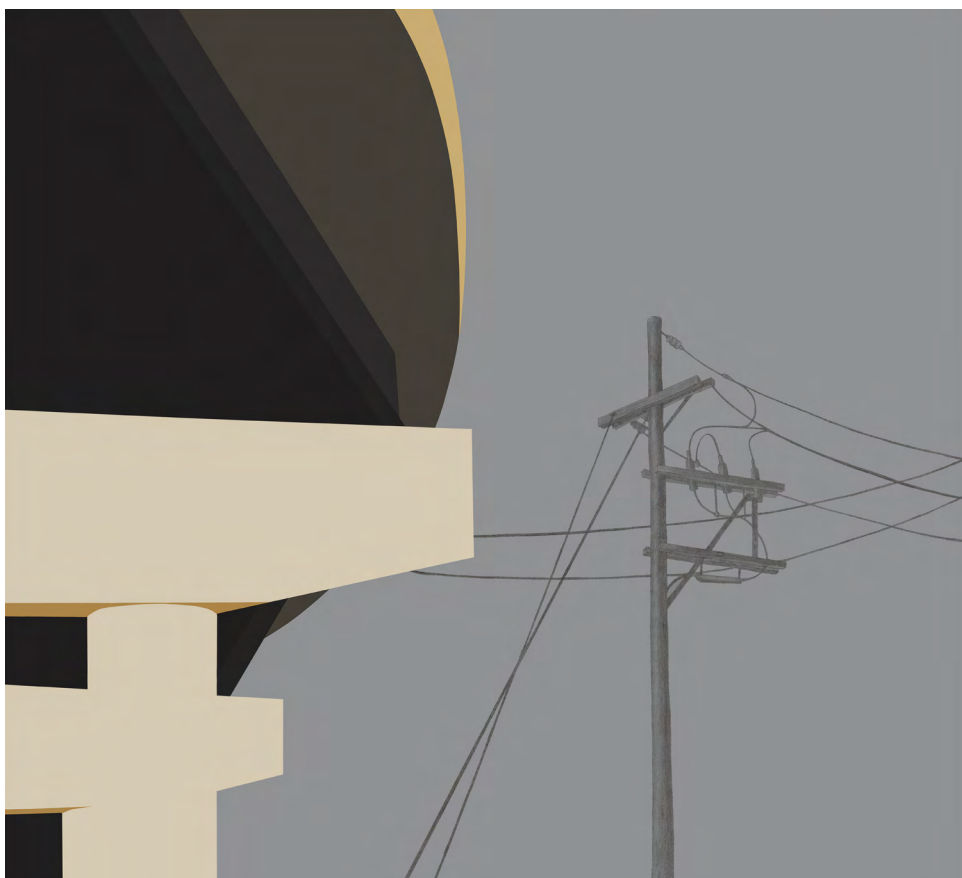


Allan D'Arcangelo

BY JEFFREY KASTNER



Landscape, 1976–1977, acrylic and graphite on canvas, 54 1/8 x 60 1/4 inches

It's no great trick to locate signs of American culture in Allan D'Arcangelo's work. The paintings on which he made his reputation in the 1960s and '70s are, of course, filled with them: road signs sleekly abstracted into directional tangles, advertising logos floating with uncanny serenity along the dark edges of empty highways. But even as D'Arcangelo, who died in 1998 at the age of sixty-eight, began to move away from these early signature motifs, he continued to conjure a kind of echt American landscape, producing enigmatic environments populated with elegantly stripped-down infrastructural and industrial forms. If at first these monuments of the built environment read as emblems of the deeply ingrained American cultural ambition toward spatial conquest, they are in fact considerably more nuanced, also signaling a melancholy that inevitably surrounds any attempt to stake out a lasting presence in the transient precincts of its wide-open spaces.

The recent show at Garth Greenan Gallery of nine large acrylic-on-canvas paintings from the middle portion of D'Arcangelo's career—the first solo showing of the artist's work in New York in nearly a decade—provided a bracing reintroduction to the unexpectedly sumptuous rigors of this underappreciated artist. Bringing a latter-day Precisionist approach to his figurings of the physical manifestations of American modernity, one whose flat plain-spokenness also drew liberally on strategies from Pop and hard-edge abstraction, D'Arcangelo reimagined his surroundings as a psychogeographical terrain imbued with a certain kind of existential, even spiritual, longing. If Precisionism depicted a nascent period of American industry with coolly sublime monumentality, D'Arcangelo's works, made a half-century later, augur the diffuse, nebulous systems of a postindustrial world, one in which capitalism has become so complex that it challenges the powers of representation and finally becomes legible only via fragments and traces.

The two earliest works on view, both from 1974, were intriguing outliers insofar as they focus on objects absented from any larger spatial context. *Mr. and Mrs. Moby Dick* features a pair of matched industrial forms, one white and one orange, set against a brilliant cobalt field. Lacking anything against which one might compare their scale, the gape-mouthed volumes might be hand-size flanges or gargantuan containers, bits of a plastic model kit or hundred-ton components of an oceangoing leviathan. This sense of scalar indeterminacy is similarly present in *Numinosum*, which displays the intersection of thick gray crossbeams and a draping cord, once again on a blue background. Yet the intimation of a cross, not to mention the work's allusive title, suggests more explicitly than most of D'Arcangelo's oeuvre that even the most superficially secular bit of infrastructure might, under the right conditions, be placed in dialogue with something approaching the sacred.

D'Arcangelo occasionally experimented with idiosyncratic compositional schemes—here seen in the blocky multiverses of *Two Tanks*, 1978–79, in which the title objects are set amid a series of rectangular windows containing shards of sky and prairie and electrical lines, an unusually literal (and untypically fussy) evocation of the interpenetration of the built and “natural” worlds. More characteristic is his cool summoning of both the serenity and the estranging decenteredness of air travel in *Wing One or 16A* and *Wing and Cowl* (both 1982)—the disembodied bits of plane rendered from the point of view of a passenger in a jet gliding silently above the crenelated expanse of the cloud tops. The same peculiar mixture of tranquility and alienation is produced, from the opposite perspective, in *Pi in the Sky*, 1981–82, and *Without Sound Two*, 1982, the former centered on a communications tower and streaking contrail seen from the shadow of a block portico that takes the form of the titular Greek letter, the latter featuring a pair of vapor trails crossing a patch of sky visible from beneath another utilitarian architectural colonnade.

For all the appeal of these works, D'Arcangelo's sensibility through this period is perhaps most fully expressed in *Pike* and *Landscape*, a pair of related paintings from 1976–77. With their unadorned titles and similarly straightforward palettes of black, cream, and gray, these works depict a dynamic world, filled with overpasses and power lines, in a moment of apparent abeyance, slowed down to a state of sublime immobility. The artist adds penciled shapes to the compositions—careful renderings of utility poles and streetlights, ghostly forms juxtaposed with bold, highly stylized elements of infrastructural architecture that in both paintings loom into an expanse of flat, leaden sky. The works are characteristically depopulated, but there is something deeply human in their immanent quietude: a stillness that suggests both aspiration and desolation.