

ARTFORUM

500 Words: Karl Haendel
As Told to Aram Moshayedi
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Left: Digital rendering for Lever House installation. Right: Studio image of Lever House maquette. (Images courtesy Karl Haendel)

The Los Angeles–based artist Karl Haendel has exhibited his precise graphite drawings, which often touch on American production, nationally and internationally since the mid-2000s. Here he talks about the conditions surrounding a recent commission by the Lever House Art Collection in New York and his show at the quintessential modernist skyscraper that opens on March 25.

THE LEVER HOUSE IS A GLASS BOX, and glass boxes don't really do very well with two-dimensional art. There's an obvious reason: no walls to hang work on. Other artists who have had exhibitions here have built walls at predictable locations inside the lobby, but I thought that that would feel too stale and normalized. I wanted the space to activate my work, but I also had to keep in mind that these are drawings; the medium itself has conditions that must be met.

To deal with this problem, I first thought to tape the drawings to the glass walls of the lobby, facing out. This seemed like an elegant solution because I wouldn't have had to build any interior walls, and in effect the building would become a frame for the drawings. (The pedestrians outside would be the viewers instead of those inside the lobby, so it would also be more legitimately "public.") But this presented an archival problem. Every paper conservator I talked to said it wouldn't work and told me not to do it. There would be problems with adhesion, condensation, light, temperature, etc. I did some tests on the windows of my house and they were right. And since the drawings ultimately had to enter the Lever House's collection, I couldn't destroy them in the process of mounting the show. I'm not the kind of artist who wears white gloves while working, and though I don't mind rips or stains in my work, that kind of premeditated destruction seemed too nihilistic and depressing.



Working drawing for Karl Haendel's Lever House press release.

The other option was to simply build walls, but just not where you would expect them. I decided this would be an opportunity to introduce diagonals, as the Lever House is a strongly rectilinear building; there isn't a non 90-degree angle in the place. The walls I built are intrusive, they interrupt the way people move through the lobby and force them to take a different path. People will have to navigate around the work. The walls obstruct the view through the building, which will challenge its transparency, both literally and metaphorically.

Orthodox site-specificity, especially those iterations that fell under institutional critique, was on my mind, but I realized that the terms of that debate aren't applicable. This is a corporate lobby. A corporation isn't masquerading as a cultural institution here, it's just a corporation, and there is nothing for me to "reveal." The glass in the building is clear, just as the tenants' profit-motivation is clear. Sometimes museums make half-hearted efforts at transparency, but still the machinations of the institution remain relatively obfuscated, because we prefer our culture pure, unsoiled by capital. So there is a degree of honesty in this show because there are no illusions. I wanted to make this honesty formally salient; thus the drawings, which are unframed, will be stapled to the walls, and all my marks, tears, and jottings are visible. Thematically, I wanted to challenge the unity of the modernist structure and its principal, so a number of the works depict cracks in different ideal forms, for example, there are cracked eggs or fractured square mirrors. As well, there are a number of text-based works that play around with inherited wisdom, such as "Happy Though Married?," "Lull Before Drinking," and "The Joys of Discontent." These are images of societal and formal fragmentation and dissolution.

I realize that there are new terms now. The issue is not one of site-specificity, but one of situational awareness. It becomes about audience. Who is walking around Midtown Manhattan? Who is passing through the lobby? What are their expectations for lobby art? Where are my viewers within in their day—mentally, physically, and temporally? I realized that this work is not just "for" the Lever House Art Collection; it is also "for" a great number of people who might not often or ever take the time to see art in a museum or gallery. The Lever House offers a form of address that is very different from a museum or a gallery, and perhaps I shouldn't privilege these more rarefied forms of viewership. It's not very democratic nor honest.