



**SHIRLEY IRONS**  
LEXINGTON, VA

Unpeopled and electrically silent, the interiors in Shirley Irons' recent paintings are powered by an ultramodern aloofness [Staniar Gallery, Washington and Lee University; November 12—December 18, 2009]. Irons paints an odd mix of places based upon her own photographs of transient and seemingly empty moments—the cafeteria and an escalator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a hallway at Bellevue Hospital, an armory, and a corporate boardroom. The paintings' incandescent geometry has the melancholy of a winter sunset, brilliant color superseding cavernous grays. This luminous isolation echoes the kind of clinical coldness that pervades office buildings and institutions, whose reflective interiors are rife with chrome and fluorescence. With such chilly beauty, it is easy to feel lost in these places and in Irons' paintings of them.

Irons' oil paintings are not weighty. They feel, in fact, almost transparent and, while they are not blatantly painterly, her use of gesture, striation, and layering echoes the paint tracks in some modernist painting. Every painting pairs brilliant colors with darker shades: red and yellow, deep blue and tawny orange, peach and sage green, bright green and yellow. There is something in them of both the bright intersecting planes of Diebenkorn's *Ocean Park* series and of Hopper's forlorn, cooped up compositions. But Irons' painted habitats are more contemporary than either of these modernist predecessors. They recall Tony Gilroy's 2007 film *Michael Clayton*, which pairs cinematographer Robert Elswit's opening shots of the darkened, unoccupied interior of a Manhattan office building with the voiceover of the lucid madman who describes the offices themselves not as a "...vast and powerful law firm, but...an organism whose sole function is to excrete...the poison...necessary...to destroy the miracle of humanity." In these establishing shots, pulsating primary colors, transparent glass layers, and minimalist geometries form a shadowy, digitized Mondrian—a space both living and vacant.

Similarly, Irons abstracts an architectural subject into

pictorial space that is equally animate and hollow. Indicative of their three-dimensional sources, her compositions diagram boxes divided and subdivided. As such, the paintings function as models that viewers construct in their heads. In *Cafeteria, Met*, 2009, wide expanses of red floor and wall undulate around a set of overlapping colorful planes—blue-gray, pale green, and yellow—to create a sense of the presence of unseen recesses. The diminishing vertical planes in *Bellevue Hallway*, 2009, convey not so much solid walls but the cubes of air contained in the rooms behind them. The hallway is filled with ricocheting reflections, Irons' largely horizontal brushwork creating a luminous expanse that rocks like light on water.

"Reflection" has a double meaning, and these paintings invite an awareness of the seemingly insignificant moments when realization floods the mundane world. The series' empty corporate and institutional habitats suggest the sudden solitude before, between, or after some bland or clamoring event when the shape, size, color, and light of the indifferent environment seem to buzz. Into this suspended instant comes a brief concentration, in much the same way that the voiceover at the beginning of *Michael Clayton* overlays the silent interiors with a comprehending voice. The viewer is transient. So is the depicted space. The combination of the two creates an ephemeral focus that hovers and dissipates, as it does in similar, familiar fleeting reflections in everyday life.

—Dinah Ryan

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Shirley Irons, *Cafeteria, Met*, 2009, oil on canvas, 60 x 84 inches (courtesy of the artist)