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Francesca Gabbiani: 'Vague Terrains/Urban Fuckups'
Abstracting the Observable Worldl

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by Jody Zellen



In her breathtaking works, Francesca Gabbiani depicts the urban as well as the natural landscape as a collage of ink, gouache and cut colored paper. Her mixed media works on paper are time consuming constructions in which she painstakingly montages cut pieces of paper into intricate pen and ink drawings. In her latest body of work, *Vague Terrains/Urban Fuckups*, she layers shards of paper over both black ink and colored washes creating ambiguous spatial relationships. These pieces are simultaneously extremely detailed and abstract.

Gabbiani states she is *“interested in spaces that are overlooked, forgotten or in transition”* and makes photographs of areas that catch her eye— places where the natural and man-made co-exist, yet have a contentious relationship. She begins by making casual photographs with her iPhone and later transforms these into small and then larger drawings which are finally projected onto sheets of paper and carefully filled in by hand.

The layered nature of the work references time, not only the time it takes to make the pieces, but to historical and geological time and notions of decay and destruction. Many of Gabbiani's images picture what she terms *Vague Terrains*, (referencing the 1995 essay, *Terrain Vague* by Spanish Architect Ignasi de Sola-Morales that makes an important connection between photography and how cities are seen and understood). Her work depicts interstitial, or non-places, where weed-filled hills lead to crisscrossing electrical wire silhouetted against the sky, as in *Vague Terrain* (2018). In this intriguing work, leaves cut from orange, rust, yellow and brown paper, dot the textured foreground— a black and white, high contrast, tangled hillside seen from below looking up toward a dark, cloud-filled sky. Like most of Gabbiani's work, there is great satisfaction in looking close, examining the details of her constructed environment noticing how seamlessly and carefully she juxtaposes gouache, ink and colored paper.

The composition in *Unresolved Story* (2017) also leads from the ground to the sky. In this piece, a decaying stairway curves upward to connect with a dilapidated brown-toned wall above which Gabbiani paints a threatening sky. Here, she also carefully composes with cut paper, black ink and blue gouache: Irregularly shaped fragments of cut paper pop from the surface to create both texture and a glimmer of hope in the otherwise inhospitable terrain. *Lookout* (2016) similarly presents an ambiguous environment, a deserted lookout embedded into a sandy facade framed by bright green cut paper vines. As in her other works, Gabbiani alludes to the power of nature to survive and grow in an otherwise lifeless landscape.

While the five large-scale constructed works (105 x 72 inches, both vertical and horizontal) describe uncanny places and offer a sense of disquiet, her smaller black ink on vellum drawings are even more haunting. With the absence of color, these works transcribe the natural world into line and pattern— abstracting the observable world into a trace. Gabbiani asks the viewer to fill in the gaps, to delve into their subconscious and memories in order to complete the image of a landscape under transition, or a place that is no longer there. All the works in *Vague Terrains/ Urban Fuckups* remain in the mind's eye, long after viewing the exhibition.

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