

## ***Gamer vs. Hippie: two landscapers who will get you lost***

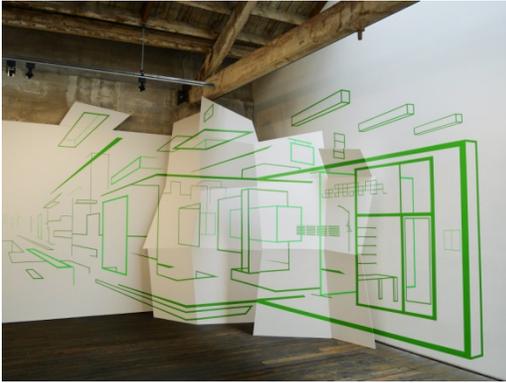
Damien Gilley, *AXIS INDEX*

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The Stranger

<http://www.thestranger.com/seattle/Content?oid=16898093>

29 May 2013



*AXIS INDEX* by Damien Gilley, photo by Damien Gilley

"I'm proud to be a lower middle class suburban white male," Damien Gilley says in a phone conversation. "I'm not interesting," the artist adds, getting to the heart of what he's proud of, which is not class or race or gender per se but the way they add up to nothing much. It's the kind of shared nothing-much with contours you can guess at: He played video games as a kid, right? Yes. Nintendo and Atari, "first versions." He's in his 30s. He grew up in Southern California, moved to Las Vegas, and settled in Portland. He grafts blueprints of three-dimensional extensions onto two-dimensional surfaces. He takes walls that are already built and softly unbuilds them. They become places instead, traversable and segmented like corridors in video games.

He starts by visiting a place and taking pictures of, say, one of the walls. Back in the studio, he uploads the photos and sketches on them in Adobe Illustrator. He then takes the finished digital drawing to the site, projects it onto that same wall, and lays down his sketch in colored sticky tape. The result often looks like a cross section gone crazy, with doorways leading to nowhere, overhangs floating in midair, staircases detached. Then again, the scene is grounded in reality. If you can just approach it from the correct angle, the shapes will fall into place and unlock another three-dimensional world.

Gilley's computer screen might look like the screen of a working architect whose building is still in unmoored parts, moving around, being mixed and remixed to see what fits where. *AXIS INDEX*, his latest installation, is at Suyama Space, the art gallery in the belly of a functioning architecture office, Suyama Peterson Deguchi. Gilley's two-part drawing installed on either end of the gallery has a very uptight name for a fun experience. Each drawing is in spring-green tape. Each is done in one-point perspective, pulling toward a distant vanishing point, making it look like the walls on either end of the gallery have disappeared, and you could just walk right through and continue down the street in both directions.

It's only semi-fictional. Gilley did walk the street and borrowed some of the structures he found. He quoted others from within Suyama Space: rafter beams, cutout windows, bookshelves. On the southern-facing wall, there are skyscrapers drawn in the "distance," just as real towers rise to the south of the gallery down Second Avenue. Low roofs like Key Arena's cluster at the farthest point in the northern drawing, on the wall nearest the actual Key Arena.

But these aren't flat drawings only. The drawings extend beyond the walls onto tiered rows of foam-core boards, arranged so that if you stand precisely at the center of the room—and at roughly the artist's height of five foot nine—the shapes all line up perfectly to create this imaginary continuation of Second Avenue beyond the gallery walls. Or almost perfectly. Gilley leaves the tape slightly, humanly messy. And only a camera, with its monoscopic eye, can make every last line match up. If you're like me, the imperfections will only draw you in. I kept moving to get one shape to line up and losing another, bobbing and weaving like I'd been challenged to a logic puzzle. It kept me *because* I couldn't solve it, because the ground literally seemed to shift underfoot.

Walls are world-defining surfaces that can easily disappear into the background in everyday life, Gilley points out. He tries to use them to re-obsess you with views and what's blocking them, using only the sparest of lines and shapes, allowing the mind to fill in the rest. I saw another of his works in 2010 in Portland; it was in a crowded exhibition and didn't work on me. This new piece is a nerdy marvel.

The nerdiness is a matter of style, of the nothing-much expressionlessness of blueprints. Nerds, gamers, architects, and cartographers form one strand of the double helix of Northwestern landscape art. The other strand is hippies, stoners, and romantics. The hippies are into mold, dripping, growing, engulfing, altered states, fever, and chills. They have a strong new inductee in Peter Scherrer of Bellingham. I recommend back-to-back visits to *AXIS /INDEX* and Scherrer's show of oil and ink paintings, *Everything Right and Anywhere Now* at Platform Gallery (hosted by SEASON). The artists totally agree this is a good, if counterintuitive, way to go.

Scherrer, like Gilley, bemusedly lives up to the type. His parents were hippies in Bellingham. "I wasn't allowed to play video games as a kid," Scherrer says on the phone. "We, like, dug holes in the backyard and made tree houses." He solo-hiked for fun as a teenager, worked for a potter. Today he's a 30-year-old parent and a carpenter. After he went to art school in California, he came back, entranced anew with old things, both for better and worse. The majestic but shadowy woods. The childhood friends who stayed and became drug addicts. His landscapes contain kid jokes—*there's a doodled chipmunk*—ensnared in gothic nests. Cartoon froggy eyes bug out of a claustrophobic thicket; a cutely sketched pocketknife rests on a tree whose gnarls block out all the sun in the world.

Scherrer's brushstrokes veer from controlled to feral. "I like the push and pull," he says, "between 'Awesome, how did he do that?' and 'My kid could do that.'" I lose him when he uses ink—it's too flat. When his oils are right at that point of being as clear as they are muddy, I fall right in.

-Jen Graves