ZOE ZENGHELIS:
FIELDS,
FRAGMENTS,
FICTIONS
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Zoe Zenghelis has been a painter and an architect throughout her professional life.

“Zoe Zenghelis has been a painter and an architect throughout her professional life.”
—Kenneth Frampton

Zoe Zenghelis has been a painter and an architect throughout her professional life.

Zoe Zenghelis has been a painter throughout her life. To be precise, for more than 60 years of art practice. Zenghelis has remained consistent: she has been applying oil and acrylic on stretched canvas or cardboard to make images. With thick layers of paint, abstract geometries, assemblies of forms, and evocative color palettes, Zenghelis meticulously composes pictorial surfaces. The limited flat surface of a painting is her stage from where she attempts, as she notes, “to express human emotions.” On my stage, she explains, “in the mist, at the dawn or under a layer of muslin, my geometrical elements dramatize themselves in the diffused light, mysteriously exterminating an atmosphere, a mood.”

Exploring this capacity of the medium of painting to capture and evoke emotions has been her primary, if not her only, preoccupation. In that sense, Zenghelis’s artistic inquiry returns to the fundamental question of how an art work generates affect. It doesn’t intend to solve a problem, to raise awareness, to analyze a condition, or to provide social commentary, but to evoke visceral emotional responses from the viewer. This is an ideological and aesthetic proposition that Zenghelis develops within the context of the mid-century art scene in London. Studying painting and set design at Regent Street Polytechnic in London during the 1960s, she was attentive to the arguments of her teachers Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff. Just like her teachers, Zenghelis abandons grand narratives and refuses to deploy art in the service of institutional, social, or political projects. She is invested in the localized and synchronous event of a painting is her stage from where she attempts, as she notes, “to express human emotions.” On my stage, she explains, “in the mist, at the dawn or under a layer of muslin, my geometrical elements dramatize themselves in the diffused light, mysteriously exterminating an atmosphere, a mood.”

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In architecture’s historiography, the work of Zoe Zenghelis is commonly associated with abstract shapes, captured in precise compositions, coated with hues of blue, gray, and pink. Although framed in crisp geometries, her work is inherently animated: lights and shadows lend a theatricality to the scenes as they unfold on the pictorial surface. Traces of these qualities can be found in her training as an artist. Zenghelis received her first lessons in painting from Orestis Kanellis, an expressionist painter of landscapes and everyday life scenes of rural Greece. In 1958, she moved to London to pursue studies in interior design, and then stage design at Regent Street Polytechnic. However, as she recently exclaimed, “it was terribly old-fashioned and restrictive; we had to study one play for the whole term, and everything had to be exactly placed in the way that was written in the play.” It was for this reason that she changed direction and focused her studies in painting at studios led by Auerbach and Kossoff, as well as Lawrence Gowing, and emerging artists-teachers who taught various techniques and media. The canvas soon became her stage and abstract shapes her protagonists. In her paintings, solid shapes melt in the air and mists crystallize into shards. In a perpetual movement, gaze is invited to leave the frame and follow lines as they collapse into shards. In a perpetual movement, gaze is invited to leave the frame and follow lines as they collapse into shards. In a perpetual movement, gaze is invited to leave the frame and follow lines as they collapse into shards.

However, Zenghelis never abandoned the world of design. In 1972, she joined forces with her first husband, Elia Zenghelis, who was teaching architecture at his alma mater, the AA. They worked together with Elia Zenghelis’s student at the AA, Rem Koolhaas, and artist Madelon Vriesendorp to submit an entry to an architectural competition held by Casabella titled “The City as a Significant Environment.” This marked the beginning of a collaboration that less than three years later became known as OMA. Their early work was a critical inquiry into the notion of space—and, in particular, the architecture of the city—which they read as the mere product of socio-economic structures. Yet, the four founding members were not interested in “problem-solving,” their aim was to dwell in the conflicts, release the spatial, social, and political forces, in order to liberate the discipline of architecture from its common constraints. In Zoe Zenghelis’s words, “the designs were a critique to the establishment. They were critical, theoretical, and shocking.” In fact, OMA’s early works were realized through their images; they were visual manifestos and provocations that celebrated the chaos and multiplicity of urban culture. “The extraordinary richness and delicacy of OMA's work decribe,” architectural historian Kenneth Frampton explained, and added that this ambivalence stemmed from the office’s attitude towards desire. Their work existed not to question it, but to fulfill it, presenting an alternative reality of radical potential equally critical of “positivistic production and populist kitsch.” By deploying irony, playful polychrome, and Salvador Dalí’s “paranoiac critical method,” OMA seduced the profession into a different way of thinking. In her fourteen years of collaboration with OMA, Zenghelis painted some of the most iconic architectural and urban ideas of the second half of the 20th century: OMA’s urban manifestos for the bench of the East River in Manhattan.
Zoe Zenghelis, City of our Choice (II), 2010, acrylic on card, 60 x 87 cm; Private Collection
Egg of Columbus Centre (1973), polemic social housing proposal for Times Square, Hotel Sphinx (1975), and OMA's entry to the competition in Paris, Parc de la Villette (1982) are only a few examples, among others.

Zoe Zenghelis and Vriesendorp's approach to art-making redefined the visual culture of architecture and opened new possibilities for thinking about space and the built environment through the medium of painting. Academic institutions took notice and sought to incorporate the two artists' exploration into their pedagogical programs.

In 1982, Zenghelis and Vriesendorp joined the Communications Unit at the AA and began their course Color Workshop, which they taught for 12 years. At the core of their teaching method was that painting was a mode of thinking and designing rather than a rendering tool, a visualization of a final outcome. Their course revolutionized how aspiring architects cultivated their spatial imagination. Black-and-white plans, sections, and axonometric drawings that had been the dominant visual language of architecture at the time, were replaced by fields of colors and play. Architectural projects that were designed, measured, and calculated to answer the lingering problems of 20th-century metropolises, were turned into hedonistic visions and bursts of affect. It was through the movement of brush as a tool that the students' imagination found its liberation from disciplinary rigidity. Landscapes turned into constructs and buildings dissolved into landscapes.

From 1985 to today, Zoe Zenghelis has concentrated more on her independent artistic practice. The two seemingly contrasting elements—stillness and dynamism—still co-exist in her work. If the former derives from the descriptive and representational characteristics of architecture, the latter imagination found its liberation from disciplinary rigidity: Landscapes turned into constructs and buildings dissolved into landscapes.

RELATIONAL SURREALISM
Jennifer Samet

Zoe Zenghelis's painting practice is founded on an understanding of the creative potential of collaboration. Collaboration takes on multiple meanings in her work and includes her involvement with OMA and her teaching in the Color Workshop at the AA. However, collaboration also encompasses the interactions of painting, place, and architecture: the relationships between forms, her multicultural experience as a British artist born in Athens, and the way that Zenghelis's content emerges, not through an a priori idea, but through the process. In her 1987 painting, Forest, the curtain of trees seems to arise as an outcome of the interactions between the faceting of the buildings and the energy of the cityscape. Zenghelis emphasizes a feeling of compression between the buildings and this "forest," with exaggeratedly angular bare tree trunks and branches. It is as if the trees have spawned this geometry in the architecture, or vice versa.

Zenghelis considered Forest her homage to School of London painter Leon Kossoff. In a recent interview with curator Hamed Khosravi, Zenghelis said, "I, myself, do not position my paintings within the tradition of English modern painting or any other modernist tradition. Time will answer that." In fact, while Zenghelis's work superficially does not look like that of Kossoff and Frank Auerbach, it shares concerns rooted to her educational background. Kossoff and Auerbach were young teachers at the Regent Street Polytechnic in London when Zenghelis was a student there. Kossoff wrote of London: "The strange ever-changing light, the endless streets, and the shuddering feel of the sprawling city lingers in my mind like a faintly glimmering memory of a long-forgotten, perhaps never experienced childhood." Zenghelis's Forest has a similar feeling of a partly imagined sense memory: geometry and nature bumping against one another to create a world dense but fractured. The shadows cast on surfaces evoke missing foliage, or cracks in the facade. A painting of the same year, Walls, foregoes the natural landscape and centers on geometric, architectural planes. However, it too contains a shadowy rupture. This linear form traverses the foreground and moves diagonally upward through deeper space. Part fissure, part shadow, part lightning bolt—the lines may reflect the energy of a fictional city or forebode doom. Walls has a muted palette of blue, yellow, rose, gray, and tan, with glassy planes refracting light. The ground, with its more thickly painted, repeated gray marks, is seemingly the most stable part of the painting, and yet it is where the cracks are born. Walls does not have one clear mood, which is a hallmark of Zenghelis's work. The planes seem to feed off each other like an exquisite corpse, a collaborative method where each participant does not know what came before. The scene, as it were, with its absence of human presence, invites our participation.

Zenghelis's paintings often lead us into a kind of dreamworld akin to the deserted landscapes of Salvador Dalí or cloudscapes of René Magritte. In Zenghelis's case, the cool rationalism of the architectural elements against a surrealistic perspective heightens these contrasts. Architect and architectural historian Charles Jencks coined the term "surrational" to describe the OMA design Hotel Sphinx: a proposed urban hotel and mass housing complex with social clubs and cultural centers in Times Square, New York. The term "surrational" is also an apt way to describe the tendencies that Zenghelis embraces in her paintings, where geometry gives way to psychologically suggestive urban plazas.
Zoe Zenghelis, *Partitions*, 2008, oil on canvas, 50 x 96 cm; Private Collection
Shapes in Space (1992) conjures an endgame cityscape, where buildings, sometimes acting as personages, lean towards a circular plane and another deep rupture, with a nothingness beyond. Again, Zenghelis describes this abyss with the most painterly strokes of the canvas, seeming to suggest that the abyss is the most human component. Her brushwork highlights the material aspect of the work and becomes a marker of the distinction between her independent paintings and her architectural renderings. Indeed, although Zenghelis was not a painter who worked with the thick impasto that distinguishes Kossoff and Auerbach, her architectural renderings are more thickly painted than is typical of this genre.

As a member of an architectural firm, Zenghelis was especially attuned to the inherent material and spatial aspects, and their psychological implications. In City of our Choice [I] (1994), Zenghelis uses a reduced vocabulary of forms and compositional organization to suggest the range of psychological impact possible through subtle modulations. The foundation is rows of rectangular tiles moving into the distance at far right. Planar architectural shapes appear in different formations: singular, coupled, and semi-circular groupings. The way that they lean or tilt towards one another, or else stand in isolation feels human-like, reflecting isolation or community.

The material quality of her paintings also connects her work to the ideas of Russian Constructivism, particularly that of Kazimir Malevich, who sought to imbue the black square with meaning and content and was interested in removing all ties to representation by eliminating the horizon line. In many of her later works, Zenghelis also eliminates both ties to architectural formations and the horizon line. She uses the relationships between geometric forms to conjure moods. Her painting Happiness (2000) is especially evocative in this way. Diagonal forms in an array of colors rain down the painting. tightly clustered in the center, and gently spreading to the left and right. It is a painting about connection, abundance, and plenty.

The painter El Lissitzky would expand upon his mentor Malevich's ideas, developing a definition of his recurrent abstract form, the "Proun," which combines the monochromatic plane with architectural rendering. He stated, "Proun is no longer a picture and becomes a building that must be viewed (by moving around its outside) from all angles." Lissitzky explored this idea with axonomic projection, wherein all planes of a drawn form are visible, to create the illusion of volume (as in a drawn cube). For Lissitzky, axonomic perspective also symbolized a futuristic view into an infinite space of possibility and the imagination by moving beyond traditional Renaissance perspective. For Zenghelis, this method, which was fundamental in her architectural renderings, seems tied to her experience as an immigrant—a British artist who was born in Athens—working with artists and architects from a variety of backgrounds. Zenghelis explained this connection in terms of imagination:

OMA, and hopefully I, move towards the future, drawing inspiration from a state of perpetual change. OMA's modernity tries to be a continuous state of transformation in a continuously shifting world. OMA's paper architecture had such appeal because it represented ideas and imagination caused by our different backgrounds—the visual cultures of Greece and Holland mixed with our experience of living in Britain.

Several of Zenghelis's paintings suggest themes of borders and boundaries, while others allude to open plans, crossings, and an expansive, unrestricted space. In Partitions (2001), an uncharacteristically naturalistic—almost trompe l'oeil—line of barbed wire runs across and over a plaza indicated by pathways into the distance. A row of jagged upright forms creates a sense of danger.

The recent painting Courtyard (2018) is more open and lacks obstacles. The "courtyard" leads to a porous structural skin touched by light and pain strokes, with a deliberately central open "window." Through her use of transparent, subtle color modulations and shadows, Zenghelis indicates an intermixing of people and culture. Auerbach and Kossoff (who were both from Jewish immigrant families) depict the city of London in a similar manner: suggesting constant movement and passage through the streets and using impasto paint as a signifier of layers of experience and the passage of time. Kossoff said, "London, like the paint I use, seems to be in my bloodstream." It is telling that when Zenghelis expressed her ideas about color in lectures, she used the example of Rembrandt, rather than a more obvious "colorist." Rembrandt's work was heralded by the School of London painters for its visceral, expressive qualities, where the soul of the sitter seems to emerge from the inner light of experience. Zenghelis notes, recalling her paraphrase of Monet: What we call white depends on what we compare it with. If we compare the white in a painting by Rembrandt where everything else in the painting is very dark, except for a very luminous face with a bright white collar, with the color of a well-lit white paper, the Rembrandt white is almost brown. Nevertheless, it looks bright white because everything is so dark. Every line on a painting is altered by every touch of color that you add in other places.

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Zoe Zenghelis. Forest. 1987, oil on card. 42 x 52 cm; Private Collection

Zoe Zenghelis. Shapes in Space. 1992, oil on canvas. 91 x 122 cm; Private Collection
In the early years of the practice, during the 1970s and 80s, the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) was a hyper-cool collective with the air of a rock band. The four members, known to each other as ZZ, EZ, Rem & Mad (Zenghelis, her then husband Elia, Rem Koolhaas, and Madelon Vriesendorp), were in fact engaged in an intense collaboration, with work and family life often overlapping. They communicated to each other frequently in letters between London, Paris, Athens, and New York. “I am very optimistic and full of beans,” wrote Koolhaas to Elia Zenghelis in anticipation of collaborating on The Welfare Island Competition in 1975.2 Afterward, Koolhaas wrote to Zoe Zenghelis, “Somehow the balance of the four of us results in a paradoxical situation that much more people are actually against. [It] becomes irresistible.”3 Together, the four created images which have become part of the architectural canon. Yet, Zenghelis is characteristically modest about her work, saying of her contribution to OMA, “Really, we were just coloring their drawings.”4

Zenghelis and Vriesendorp, founding members of the group, were far from simply “coloring” drawings. They were highly skilled artists, working a kind of magic. Zenghelis was interested in mood, form, and materiality. She worked with color and tone to create depth both of space and emotion, sculpting surreal, geometric worlds on canvas. Working sometimes in oils, at other times in acrylic or watercolor, she used the texture of paint and brushstrokes to produce atmosphere and imply materiality. This adeptness with color and texture elevated the stark black-and-white ink drawings typical of architects at the time. Zenghelis and Vriesendorp were integral to the creation of the iconic aesthetic of those early OMA images and can be considered remarkable artists within and without the architectural firm. Of The City of the Captive Globe (1972), in which towers of differing material quality sit atop granite plinths, Rem Koolhaas wrote to Zenghelis, “I sent you a rough sketch and I received a masterpiece back.”5 Zenghelis’s painting transformed the drawings of Rem and Elia, such as its power.

The transformative nature of Zenghelis’s painting within OMA led to her being invited to paint color within OMA led to her being invited to the transformative nature of Zenghelis’s Rem and Elia, such was its power. (1994) pulls one toward an infinite plane, a deep vanishing point, that disappears into a haze. The haze is recurrent across paintings, where worlds create shifts in emotional tone. Sometimes one is sun-kissed, as in Three Houses (2016) and Four Houses (2008), which engage in a game of pure tectonics and color, at other times one is lost in bleaker spaces such as the haunting Awakening City (1991), which evokes the cool alienation of the metropolis. In the Compositions series (2018), which become pure abstractions of color and geometry—like a musician exploring themes on a canvas—Zenghelis seems, joyfully, to just play.

Zenghelis’s modesty, despite the power and distinctiveness of her work, is perhaps indicative of the relative way the contributions of men and women to architecture are viewed and valued by the profession and society as a whole. Women architects have often been edited out and given little space within the discipline. Hamed Khojasteh describes this as a “systemic, androcentric negligence,” an erasure of the work of women by minimizing and failing to credit their contributions.6 Despite OMA’s collaborative work at the time, forgetting women is something the profession of architecture does well. A singular perspective, often that of the default white male, defines its history. This has, until recently, meant that the work of people like Zenghelis has gone unrecognized.7 It is perhaps an inherent danger of the collaborative process, which can swallow up the voices of contributors. This amnesia is also in part due to editorial, archiving, and curatorial selection processes, which have perpetuated the fiction of architectural design as the product of a single genius.8 These practices have affected the entire global narrative around architecture, contributing to almost violent acts of omission.

After OMA, Zenghelis established herself as a painter in her own right, shedding the constraints of architectural rendering, continuing her own explorations, and focusing more on the tectonic qualities of color and abstraction. Architectural forms remain, but in later works, these are more abstract and seem to emerge from her own imagination, perhaps memories of Greece. These enigmatic paintings seem filled with the pastoral greens and blues of the Aegean. They are paintings which transport: Tatiana’s House (1994) pulls one toward an infinite plane, a deep vanishing point, that disappears into a haze. The haze is recurrent across paintings, where worlds create shifts in emotional tone. Sometimes one is sun-kissed, as in Three Houses (2016) and Four Houses (2008), which engage in a game of pure tectonics and color, at other times one is lost in bleaker spaces such as the haunting Awakening City (1991), which evokes the cool alienation of the metropolis. In the Compositions series (2018), which become pure abstractions of color and geometry—like a musician exploring themes on a canvas—Zenghelis seems, joyfully, to just play.

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of erasure. Women and people of color are almost entirely missing from our histories about architecture. The compound forces of patriarchy and racism meant that women, such as Eileen Gray, were prevented from authoring their own projects and, consequently, had to circumvent the system. In Fruwirth's case, this initially meant getting private tutelage—because as a woman, she could not attend architecture school—and practicing under the name of the male contractors she worked with. Women like Fruwirth were also hampered by the fact that people of color were routinely omitted from articles in the architecture press in the United States during the early 20th century. Although Fruwirth is believed to have built an estimated 200 houses and churches across Virginia, few traces of her work remain.

What Fruwirth, Zenghelis, Scott Brown, and others like them all share is that their names are missing from the projects they contributed to, and, sometimes, even from those they authored. Through the reasons were different, the effect was the same. Absence. It may seem regressive or contradictory to argue for authorship and recognition, in an era where we are trying to move away from the notion of sole authorship in architecture, when even this essay rails against it. However, in case of historic omission, to be able to name would provide some small form of redress, balance. In so doing, it would enrich the discipline of architecture with a multiplicity of voices. Not doing so means the present generation, the future, indeed, is robbed. Speaking on behalf of a generation of women who have come of age as architects in the shadow of the solo male genius myth, it is a revelation to understand more about the process of the creation of these OMA paintings and Zenghelis's role. What is notable about Zenghelis is that through her work as an artist, a painter, she has claimed space in a way that is entirely unapologetic. It is significant though that this recognition came in a discipline other than architecture. In its organizational structures, architecture tends to mirror society and its constructed hierarchies: it is at times one of the most restrictive and conformist disciplines in the way it replicates and serves existing structures of power. This is due partly to the way architecture is financed and commissioned, which in turn has repercussions for what is valued, and therefore preserved through archiving.

The collaborative processes by which architecture is produced also often results in participants being submerging it into an overarching narrative, which omits their contribution. We need to make space for the voices and work of those from a perspective beyond the dominant narrative, including, and especially those of women. This includes physical and temporal space, so that the work gets made, as well as editorial and gallery space, so it is seen. In making such space, this exhibition reveals one of architecture's great talents, and gives a new perspective of one of its legends. It is part of a process of placing Zenghelis's work firmly in the narrative: a restorative, important, and continuing process of placing Zenghelis's work firmly in the narrative. It is part of a process of placing Zenghelis's work firmly in the narrative: a restorative, important, and continuing process of placing Zenghelis's work firmly in the narrative.

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4. Ibid., 23.
5. Ibid., 24.
6. Ibid., 25.
7. Ibid., 57.
9. Credit to Zoe Zenghelis's work is repeatedly omitted in presentation and reproductions of the early OMA paintings and Zenghelis's role. There are many reasons for this, including the fact that Zenghelis was often working in collaboration with the rest of the OMA group, and her work was not always acknowledged as such. In addition, the focus on individual authorship in architecture has often led to the omission of the contributions of women and people of color to the discipline.

In her essay, "Room At The Top," Denise Scott Brown writes poignantly: "To the extent that gurus are unavoidable and sexism is rampant in the architecture profession, my personal problem of submission through the star system is insoluble." Scott Brown writes about being excluded from lists of contributors or as the hero on projects, even when she and her husband had explicitly stated their respective roles. Architecture is seemingly so dependent on the image of the androcentric hero, that it must dominate the narrative to the obscuration of all others. Scott Brown was writing about editorial space, however the search for physical and temporal space in which to be able to have a creative voice has also long been a concern for women.

Virginia Woolf's 1929 essay, A Room of One's Own, makes an argument for a literal and figurative space for women, in the male-dominated world of literature. Woolf uses a fictional sister to Shakespeare, Judith, to highlight gender inequities across time, which meant that historically women have not had access to the same opportunities as men. Judith, she argues, even if in possession of equal talent, could not have achieved what her brother William did. Women lacked money, power and, consequently influence, all of which denied them space to write. Woolf argued this patriarchal culture did not want to create room for women because it threatened men's superiority. These factors were the answer to what she calls the "precaution puzzle" of why "no woman [in the Elizabethan age] wrote an extraordinary word of literature, when every other man, it seemed, was capable of writing a song or a sonnet." Woolf also alludes to classism, and today we must consider racism as a condition that creates barriers, both to entry and recognition in architecture.

I have discovered similar barriers during my own attempts to search the archives to find histories of women architects of color. They are largely absent. I have met many dead ends and frustrating voids, indicative of similar processes...
The Office for Metropolitan Architecture is known for its critically acclaimed and provocative projects; yet it also offered an innovative model for collaborative work and creative affiliations. In addition to the four founding members and the short-lived partnership with Zaha Hadid (1977–1979), architects Stefano de Martino and Alex Wall were among the early and critical members of the Office. The two architects and AA graduates followed and expanded the painting and representational inquiry in architecture that Zoe Zenghelis and Madelon Vriesendorp had initiated. Although their association with OMA ended in the mid-1980s, the friendship between Zoe, Stefano, and Alex has lasted for more than four decades. The following conversation took place via Zoom on September 24, 2021, in preparation for the exhibition at Carnegie Museum of Art and has been edited for length and clarity.

Stefano de Martino (SdM): How marvelous to see you, Zoe and Alex!

Zoe Zenghelis (ZZ): It was fifteen years ago that I saw you, Stefano in Berlin, but how long has it been, Alex? Thirty? Thirty-five years? I don’t remember exactly when you two joined the office.

Alex Wall (AW): Stefano was the earliest in this group. Is that right, Stefano?

SdM: That’s correct. I joined in 1979 just after getting my diploma from the AA. I worked for a couple of years in Rem’s and Maddie’s flat. That was the office and I was the only person working there. Zoe and Elia were in the States at the time.

ZZ: You stayed for a while with Rem and Maddie, didn’t you?

SdM: I stayed many days and weeks working through the night; if that’s what you mean. But no, I didn’t live with them.

ZZ: I remember Maddie saying that you’re the best babysitter since you were always there.

SdM: Indeed. There were long days and weeks of working non-stop to meet the deadlines. I don’t know why architecture is one of the things that people put so much pressure in doing the work. It’s ridiculous. We see in the pandemic that it’s absolutely not necessary to stress ourselves through days and nights in the office.

ZZ: That’s why architects always try to convince their children not to become architects for that reason precisely. It’s such a painful job that never stops.

SdM: It is all self-imposed pressure that doesn’t do you any good. I can assure you.

AW: You’re very right, Stefano. It’s going out of fashion I would say.

SdM: Deeply. There are many other emergencies in the world. Today was this marvellous event organized by Greta Thunberg in Berlin, broadcasted globally to raise attention to the climate crisis and really urgent issues. While some people still think their little egos are more important than anything else happening in this world. This is unfathomable. This is another discussion though that we should have another time.

It’s wonderful to see the news of your recent exhibitions, Zoe. Seeing your work played a significant role in looking at nature and landscape differently. It was by seeing how you perceived it and how you represented it through your work that helped me—and us—have a conscious relationship with our environment. Once you started making those wonderful paintings of the so-called Greek projects, and the work you were doing besides the OMA projects, with your own perception and production as an artist, I found them as amazing inspiration for my own work. I

ZZ: So did I, Stefano. I thought you were the best painter in OMA. Just incredible! Your talent was something else. We all thought so.

AW: Now you can imagine what it was like when I came to OMA later, in 1982, when different kinds of representations, yet equally strong, were being practiced daily.

Stefano, you made a very good point about Zoe’s paintings, particularly referencing the Greek projects. I often refer to them in my courses, lectures, and writings on the four unrealized OMA projects on the island of Kefalonia. Though extremely important for the development of OMA at the time, these [landscape] projects in Kefalonia have been forgotten due to the uncoordinated split between Rem and Elia. After the split, Rem and OMA lose a certain link, touch, or feel for landscape.

These projects, unlike other OMA projects, are about landscape, and even more, they were about what Elia often describes as Arcadia transposed or,
Zoe Zenghelis, Cassette, after Parc de la Villette, Paris, 1983, acrylic on paper, 53 x 86 cm; Courtesy of Drawing Matter Collections
as they were titled in L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui. "Arcadie: Le Paradis transposé." For the redevelopment plans for St. Gerasimos Sacred Plain, the design elements such as paths and seating were presented in two-dimensional drawings—architectural orthographic representation and motifs—with the landscape in the background. That's one side of the project, but the other side is Zoe's painting, the painting of the sacred avenue and the St. Gerasimos monastery in the plain surrounded by mountains. In this painting, you could see how the design fits within its setting and performs within the landscape.

Then, in the painting for the redesign of the access and supporting infrastructure for the beach near Argostoli, you could see all the designed elements: platforms, pavilions, paths, that can hardly be grasped in a plan, relative to each other and the strong topography. The painting provides a view that you might gain from swimming out in the water or a bird's-eye view. We can see all these elements linked by what seems very tentative or modest gestures but together, they create a very strong network. That's just a very impressive quality about these two works. But Zoe's subsequent work introduces an idea of a parallel imaginative consideration of what our conventional architectural motifs are or could be.

If one tries not to use a formal critical observation, Zoe's studies could be described as "volumes in relationship to each other." Of course, the colors bring a new dimension and invites us in. Stefano, what do you think about these more abstract studies?

SdM: What I have always enjoyed about Zoe's work is that it doesn't seem to focus so much on any ideological position. It doesn't sit on a grand narrative as many works of OMA used to do. Rather, I find its greatest quality in describing and seeing things for their innate qualities. It's a question of light, color, texture, and how they reflect differently. All these make me look back to Zoe's landscapes again and again to see the colors of the olive groves and the shimmering of the water seen against the light (1000 Olive Trees, Hotel Therma), and the endless shades of color through which she sees that landscape and projects it.

There's a sensitivity to an ambience and inherent qualities of things. Beyond any way of rationalizing, Zoe's paintings are simply describing what surrounds you. It is a very sensory perception that puts you in a direct relationship with where you are [Sacred Plain of Saint Gerasimos, Kefalonia, 1984]. It is not about imagining that you're somewhere else. In another history, another time, rather, it makes you very aware of where you are at the moment and how you relate to things around you, and how they relate to you. There is something deeply involving and political in this way of seeing and representing.

ZZ: Not to forget Alex's fantastic drawings. You can see that the combination of all of us was quite unique. When Alex joined, the whole ensemble was completed. His amazing skills in drawing was complementary to the paintings that we were doing. Remember [OMA's participation in the competition for the Parc de la Villette project], there are pages and pages of your drawings, of all plants, objects, figures, etc. I believe your gift is something amazing.

AW: I thought Stefano made a good point about the sensuosity of Zoe's paintings even to the point of being so-called 'painty'—that means the brushstroke and thickness of the paint being part of the composition and aesthetic of the painting. Her work was so different from Madelon's. I think Stefano's pastel paintings had the same kind of sensuousness, they were another category of its own. With pastel, you'd get an effect that dominates the lines. Even if they start from a crisp line-drawing, at the end, the pastel colors are dominating. I think on my side, it's more about the lines rather than the colors.

ZZ: I totally agree. Our works and skills were all complementary to each other and each one had its own characteristics and appeal. In fact, I am getting a bit upset this work is being solely associated with architecture. It was painting!

AW: Thinking about what you were just saying. At first, I found it a bit contradictory to what Stefano said in respect to how your paintings help him to understand and perceive the actual landscapes. But then I realized that it can actually work in the way both of you described. When a constructed or fictional landscape becomes a signifier of the actual one. In that regard, something that came to my mind was seeing the architectonic landscapes as thickened brightly painted air. The buildings are not like these hard standing volumes surrounded by nothing, they're thickened brightly painted air. Or remembering how Stefano described them: myriad olive trees changing shades, or the flickering water. We get a chance to consider all other things beyond the buildings. As if we have been mis-visualizing space, whether it is in a city or countryside.

SdM: And these qualities that are so evident in natural elements are transcribed in Zoe's blocks, surfaces, and architectures. As if there are inscriptions of all these elements onto the human-made spaces. If there would be a mission for architecture to stop being architecture for its own sake, and rather be a medium—something that can also carry the qualities or aspire to attributes and properties that one finds elsewhere—it would then become an active agent that works
systematically with other forces instead of being a formalist gesture. Such a crossover from one to the other is a significant contribution that is implicitly present in Zoe’s work.

ZZ: What you’re saying, Stefano, is very true. In my work, I have always tried to make visible this coexistence of forces and spaces into composed settings. As you might remember, I made a painting after the famous La Villette that I called then Cassata. I was fed up with the complicity of the project as so many things were happening in the design. So, I took the liberty of removing some of the elements that we designed for the competition and instead created a new landscape where the colors are more dominant and present.

AW: Another example of such an artistic reading of the project was in your painting on the plan of Villas in Antiparos. The villas themselves were drawn in architectural details and were arranged in triangular, square, or circular frames—a formal and convenient structure. But for me, this only becomes powerful in the swirling color of the landscape that blends them together.

Perhaps a visitor to your upcoming show at Carnegie Museum of Art should see it less as an exhibition of one of the OMA partners but a presentation of pure sensuous color, energy, and objects. In other words, we should enter your world first and then be exposed to the colors and shades and perhaps the OMA exhibitions are exhibited somewhere in the back.

SDM: Even in the office there was, consciously or not, an influence of Zoe’s paintings in the OMA projects and how we approached the design. We were all exposed to these great OMA projects and how we approached the design. Whether it is closed form or open, would shape a line, or what texture you would get from it. Whether it is grid or open, transparent, or translucent, they all, at least for me, indicated relationships that can be made between ourselves, our imagination, and reality. In one way, we can also say that it is about architecture. It is about different ranges of spatial relationships or interfaces.

ZZ: What you’re saying, Stefano, is very true.

AW: I gave a lecture talking about some of these works that was called “Before Perspective and After the Digital.” It was at the dawn of all these digital media and at the time when architect Greg Lynn and many others were developing “parametric” design using new software. There is, I think, nothing like the communicative force of non-digital media, the haptic sense of paint in comparison to printed computer-generated drawings.

SDM: Well Alex, I wouldn’t be so dismissive of the qualities of new media. I think what is important is to have that experience or knowledge that you talked about in your background which makes you approach the digital technology differently. To some extent, I am trying to do that myself. To explore digital forms of representations that would have not been possible by using other media. That makes me able to push its limits. I certainly learned from Zoe and Maddie’s classes as well as from my own students. Encouraging to do paintings, models, hand-drawings, and collages and then asking students to do the same with computer programs, algorithms, and software. In fact, through their analogue experience, they were able to create something innovative digitally. It was very interesting to see that they started exploring the limits of things they can do manually and physically by their bodies to the things that could be generated through digital media.

ZZ: You can indeed end up with something completely different when a different medium is used. This was very fun!

SDM: It is a pity that we cannot hug each other in Zoom.

AW: Hopefully there will be a lot of hugging in Pittsburgh.
WORKSHOP: HOMESCAPES—CITIES, COLOR, BELONGING
Led by Sarah Akigbogun
April 30, 2022
10 a.m.–1 p.m.
Carnegie Museum of Art Theater and Studio

“The idea of place, where we belong, is a constant subject for many of us.”
—bell hooks, Belonging: A Culture of Place

Inspired by the exhibition Zoe Zenghelis: Fields, Fragments, Fictions (March 26, 2022—July 24, 2022) multidisciplinary practitioner Sarah Akigbogun leads an interactive design workshop called HomeScapes—Cities, Color, Belonging.

Zoe Zenghelis’s work is full of depictions of her homeland, Greece, and explorations of the metropolis, depicting the mood of place with intense use of color. Taking her work and these themes as a point of departure, this workshop will explore the notion of home as something we carry with us as we travel, go about the day to day, move from one country to another. Working with filmmaking and performance, this workshop will explore what it is to arrive, move through, and settle, briefly, in a place.

The workshop is co-presented with the Carnegie Mellon University School of Architecture.

This event is generously supported by the Steiner Visitor Invitation Grants through the Frank-Ratchye STUDIO for Creative Inquiry.

$15
Space is limited; please register in advance at cmoa.org. Fee includes museum admission.
The design methodology behind this printed program and the exhibition graphics engages with Zenghelis’s practice in a speculative and narrative way. An invented line-based device appears as a navigation system, divider, and contemplative space for resettlement; it appears crossing the fold and unfolding, in between turns and glances, flips and pauses. We encourage visitors to explore the exhibition by following the relevance between Zenghelis’s voice, images, colors, and words.