

# Inhuman Spaces Inhabited By Human Meaning

By MATT DAMSKER  
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If Peter Waite is Connecticut's — and certainly Hartford's — most original painter, then it's fitting that he originate a series of images for one of our most challenging spaces, the starkly soaring Zilkha Gallery at Wesleyan University in Middletown. With its 10-foot-high windows and limestone-block walls, Zilkha invites natural light into an almost Gothic chamber, and now Waite has populated it with his own deadpan symphony of American Gothic, mixing images of death, chance and monstrosity that seem startlingly appropriate, and powerfully new, in Zilkha's context.

## ART REVIEW

Commissioned specifically for the gallery, Waite's seven paintings — muted acrylics on aluminum panels, mostly 4-by-8-feet in size — continue his quiet obsession with the architectural details of real places and objects that he has photographed, then recast faithfully but freely in the glow and glower of his temperament.

Thus, a straight-on depiction of the wheel of fortune at the Crystal Palace Casino and Resort in the Bahamas glares at us, spectrally, amid the bilious green baize and garish backlighting of a deserted casino. It recalls the scene in Kubrick's "The Shining" where Jack Nicholson enters an empty barroom that is about to engulf him with ghosts and tempt him with his own buried pathologies.

Powerfully, this heightened image of chance and obsession is the center of a deathly triptych, bordered left and right by slightly varied frontal images of the electric chair at the Osborn Correctional Institution in Somers. As seen through the windowed observation area, the chair's minimal architecture of wood and restraining leather — and its awful metal skullcap — is lit by a reflective glow off the death chamber's institutional brickwork (with neatly echoes the Zilkha's own). Together, these images, so symmetrically, impassively rendered yet subtly heated by Waite's emanating play of flesh tones and light, become richly disturbing studies of death-in-life, life-in-death without a hint of sentimentality or

much more than passing irony.

But the documentary tour de force of this show has to be Waite's rendering of a corner of the trading floor at Chicago's Board of Options. Here, after hours, with tickertape littering the floor, we view a bank of dumbly efficient phones, dark computer terminals and redundant monitors, with the flags of trading nations drooping above it all. It's an image — call it Closing Time at the Capitalist Caf — that echoes the haunted vacancy of Waite's wheel of fortune, of gambling at the ultimate level, and of a culture fatigued by its imperatives.

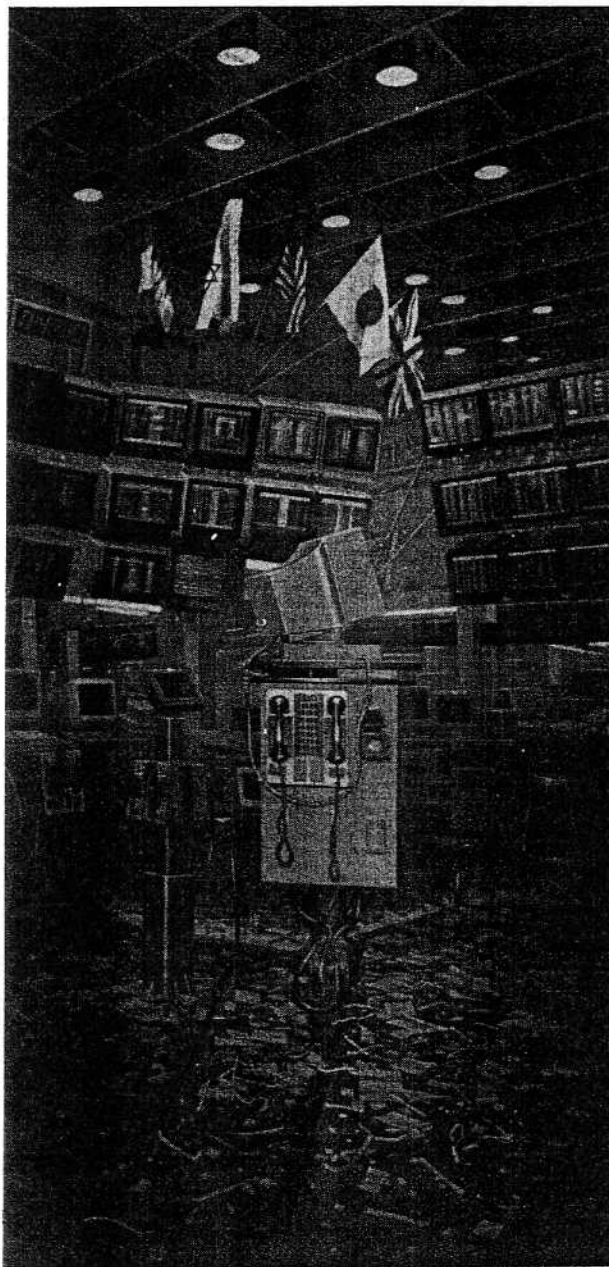
Waite's dispassionate, carefully detailed modeling of the trading floor's banal totems and its cold, cornered space take the photorealism of his style to a new height. It goes beyond the usual urban-mosaic quality of such painting, and into a psychic cul-de-sac where economic obsession and technology leave us spent, devalued, feeling like replaceable plug-ins.

The wild cards of this display — portraits of Boris Karloff's Frankenstein and Bela Lugosi's Dracula — are less in line with Waite's typical emphasis on the uninhabited but disturbingly human-stamped spaces that he seeks out for us.

Instead, these familiar monsters, drawn from reproductions to be found at the Witch's Dungeon Classic Horror Museum in Bristol, are sympathetic, wry and simply pleasurable.

In essence, they are effigies of effigies, as Waite conveys the latex rubber and wax-museum sculptural quality of these horror-flick icons and suggests, in the context of the show's other "Social Studies," that we are made monsters by science, technology and our sundry blood lusts. Set in raw nature, with creepier vines and tangled branches as backdrops, Waite's pale-shadow monsters are, perhaps, our stand-ins: predator and victim, innocent and damned, ultimately condemned but playing things out against the odds.

"Social Studies," new paintings by Peter Waite, continues through May 31 at the Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery at Wesleyan University, Middletown. Hours: Tuesday through Friday, noon to 4 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 2 to 5 p.m.; closed Monday. Information: (860) 685-2684.



PHILLIP FORTUNE

"OPTIONS," a 1997 acrylic on aluminum panel, is among the seven works by Peter Waite that were commissioned for the Zilkha Gallery at Wesleyan University in Middletown.