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“Painting the Glass House: Artists Revisit Modern Architecture,” a new exhibition at the Aldrich Contemporary Museum with a handful of works also at the Yale School of Architecture, is so obvious in its conception I am surprised it hasn’t been done before. The show assembles works by 16 contemporary artists who have responded to modern architecture and the sense of idealism and utopianism that it once embodied.

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Daniel Arsham's "M-House Got Lost Found Itself Floating on the Sea, Affecting Salination Levels in the North Atlantic" (2004).

Because modern architecture is often identified with dreams of social engineering, it makes perfect sense that the show starts with varying responses to this goal. Nostalgia pervades Dorit Margreiter's engrossing quasi-documentary video on the 1963 Sheats-Goldstein residence in Los Angeles, designed by John Lautner. The residence is a prototype for an ultramodern lifestyle, with adjustable and motorized architectural features that are a literal embodiment of LeCorbusier's description of the modern home as a “machine to live in.”

Le Corbusier's concept of the home as a machine seems to have inspired architectural gadgets in other Modernist homes, like the moving elevatorlike platform in the 1996 Bordeaux house designed by the architect Rem Koolhaas. The house is the setting for a 13-hour video showing here by David Claerbout. Nothing happens in the film, which centers on a conversation between a couple that is repeated over and over in different parts of the building. Some of the imagery is wonderful, but overall the video is snooze-inducing.

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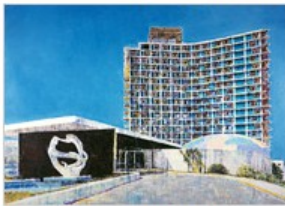
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Angelina Gualdoni's "Letter From the Generations" (2006).

More motorized architectural elements are the focus of Alexander Apóstol's video of the interior of the 1956 Villa Planchart in Caracas, Venezuela, designed by the Italian architect Gio Ponti. Two video monitors show how the architect incorporated rotating panels of shelves into a wall, the panels hiding and revealing the owner's hunting trophies — the heads of four large stuffed animals. More than just making you feel at home, the use of motorized architectural elements here has the power to whisk you away to a hunter's cabin in the wilderness.

By contrast, for a number of these artists modern architecture and its ideals have passed their use-by date. Gordon Cheung makes collage paintings that use pages of newsprint from The Financial Times to depict Modernist corporate towers in a state of ruin. “Above the Mist” (2004) is such a painting, showing a crumbling Modernist building rising above a cloud of toxic smog enveloping the earth as an illustration of failed ideals.

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Enoc Perez's "Havana Riviera" (2004).

Angelina Gualdoni and Russell Nachman also question the utopian promises of early Modernist architecture and those who believed it would transform life for the masses. Ms. Gualdoni paints engaging pictures of the dilapidated and derelict interiors of abandoned Modernist buildings in suburban settings across the United States. Her work is a comment on the way in which Modernist architecture, as Monica Ramirez-Montagut, the exhibition co-curator, writes in the show's catalog, “was increasingly replaced with cheap knock-off constructions with a Modernist ‘look.’”

Whereas Ms. Gualdoni paints abandoned suburban Modernist shopping malls, leisure centers and office towers, Mr. Nachman pokes fun at a loopy 1960s concept of mobile, nomadic architecture for urban inhabitants constantly on the move — hippies, basically. The prototypes were bubblelike tents with a futuristic quality to them. Mr. Nachman's detailed watercolors depict these minimal shelters amid rubble-strewn encampments — hardly an attractive, practical alternative to conventional urban building units.

Paintings of Modernist buildings are commonplace in this exhibition, ranging from Daniel Arsham's melancholy gouache studies of architectural foundations — modular pillars, for instance, emerging like ruins from a lush tropical landscape — to Enoc Perez's oil paintings celebrating facades of classic Modernist buildings around the world. “Havana Riviera” (2004) depicts the run-down entry and facade of the elegant 1950s Riviera Hotel in Havana. The building has a faded glory, a relic of an era when Cuba was a playground for

wealthy Americans.

All the works I have been describing are at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum. A very small portion of the exhibition is also at the architecture gallery of the Yale School of Architecture, though it is mostly similar works by all the same artists. A happy exception is a fun video by Terence Gower, “Ciudad Moderna” (2004), a pastiche of clips from a 1966 Mexican film about Modernist buildings in Mexico City and Acapulco accompanied by bossa nova and other Latin music, taken from the soundtrack of the original film.

Modernist buildings — whether in Europe, South America or the United States — were designed to achieve standardization, largely for cost and functionality. Every feature could be inexpensively duplicated. What is endearing about the works in both locations is how lovingly the artists have embraced the individual buildings — photographing, painting or recreating them with thought, feeling and emotion. They infuse the impersonal with the personal, with affecting results.

At the Aldrich, Lucy Williams’s ingenious mixed-media collages of Modernist architecture are like miniature models of the actual buildings. Her craftsmanship is impeccable, the artist injecting her admiration for the form into abstract shapes made from paper, cardboard, embroidery, quilted cloth, sand and other materials to mimic original architectural features. These buildings have probably never looked better.

“Painting the Glass House: Artists Revisit Modern Architecture,” at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 258 Main Street, Ridgefield, through July 27, and at the Architecture Gallery, Yale School of Architecture, 32 Edgewood Avenue, New Haven, through May 9. Information: (203) 438-4519 or www.aldrichart.org.