STEPHEN PRINA
secession

As He Remembered It

Sometime in the early-to-mid 1980s, Chris Williams and I found ourselves on La Brea Avenue in Los Angeles late one night. From across the street, we could see a spotlighted, pink object showcased in a storefront window, but, from our vantage point, we could not identify it. We crossed the street to gain a closer look. Conveniently, a label describing the object as a piece of furniture by R. M. Schindler was on display. Clearly, this desk that had once been built-in had been pried out of its surroundings with the attempt to render it freestanding. However, it appeared to us as an amputated limb.

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Honeysuckle 2011 Color of the Year

Thomas Lawson
Rhapsody in Pink: Stephen Prina Paints

Pantone LLC, an X-Rite company (NASDAQ: XRIT), and the global authority on color and provider of professional color standards for the design industries, today announced *PANTONE® 18-2120 Honeysuckle*, a vibrant, energetic hue, as the color of the year for 2011. A dynamic reddish pink, Honeysuckle is encouraging and uplifting. It elevates our psyche beyond escape, instilling the confidence, courage and spirit to meet the exhaustive challenges that have become part of everyday life.

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Artists and writers carry ideas around with them all day. These half-formed thoughts and random pieces of information jostle against each other, mostly making no sense. This is the quandary of the creative mind, full of inspiration but staring at a blank page, into an empty room. Then a pathway appears, an opening suggests itself. I suspect that Stephen Prina carries around more ideas than most, ideas about art and architecture and music and the relationship between high culture and pop, and a lot else besides. In his work he attempts to triangulate between historical reference, popular culture, and the personal, seeking an exquisite pleasure in the exact balance between these areas of interest. But first he must begin.

For his installation at the Secession, *As He Remembered It*, Prina's starting point is a thirty-year-old memory that resonates along the finely tuned path that connects Vienna and Los Angeles throughout the twentieth century. Two young artists, Prina and his friend Christopher Williams, are walking along La Brea, one of Los Angeles' major boulevards, late one night in the early 1980s. This is in itself unusual; walking in Los Angeles? Perhaps they have been to catch a show at the Ranchera transvestite bar at La Plaza. Perhaps they were looking for a late-night snack after those drinks, maybe stopping at Pink's famous hotdog stand, following the heavy footsteps of Orson Welles, who in those years was reputed to stop there every night on his way home from dinner. But the echo of these steps distracts me as it reverberates back down the shadowed streets of Vienna, looking for that elusive third man, forever changing identities, translating the past to the present.

Back in bright, neon-lit Los Angeles, and stopped in mid-conversation, the two artists are simultaneously transfixed by a lighted storefront across the wide street. In it, under a fierce spotlight, stands an oddly incomplete piece of furniture, painted pink. Intrigued, they hazard traffic and cross the street for a closer look. It's a desk, but one originally built-in, here revealed to be maimed in some way, removed from its supporting wall, the paint attempting to give it a renewed sense of completeness. But even in its distress the desk was compelling, a crippled sign for a "post-studio" artist's workplace.[1] Looking for some explanation the artists found a label identifying it as the work of R. M. Schindler, an architect whose work was only then beginning the long path back to recognition. For two artists exquisitely attuned to the nuance of culture, to the spaces that open up when an object or action slips into visibility, that must have been a memorable night out.

In 1911, in a similarly revelatory moment, a young architecture student in Vienna saw the recently published portfolio of Frank Lloyd Wright designs and began to dream of another life far from the overwrought mannerisms and hothouse feuds of his home city. He knew Wright lived in Chicago, which to him was the epitome of the modern city, and began a one-way correspondence. By 1914 Rudolph Michael Schindler had found a job apprenticing to an architecture firm in the windy city, although he had

yet to hear from Wright. Once there he did finally meet his hero, and in 1920 traveled with him to Los Angeles to help develop a sprawling hilltop complex for the wealthy art lover Aline Barnsdall.

In Chicago, Schindler had met Pauline Gibling, an intense young musician and political activist who taught at Hull House, the Nobel laureate Jane Addams' pioneering housing and education project for the poor, that also served as a center for progressive thinkers in Chicago. Schindler and Gibling married, and once out in Los Angeles began to plan their own much smaller and more experimental house. Partly inspired by Addams, partly by Barnsdall, they contrived a shelter for themselves and another couple, Clyde and Marion Chase, who helped with the construction, in an experiment in communal living. But they also intended the house to serve as base for a variety of social and cultural activities, as a hub for art and politics. As Pauline wrote her mother, "One of my dreams is to have, some day, a little joy of a bungalow, on the edge of the woods and mountains near a crowded city, which shall be open just as some people's hearts are open, to friends of all classes and types. I should like it to be as democratic a meeting-place as Hull House where millionaires and laborers, professors and illiterates, the splendid and the ignoble, meet constantly together."[2]

The house itself is an arrangement of fluid spaces constructed of simple elements that look as though they had been prefabricated and each lend support to the next. It contains four low-ceilinged wood-and-concrete studios forming two L-shapes, each facing a small courtyard. Each studio fronts its yard with glass walls and sliding screens to enable easy passage of eye and person from inside to out. The courtyards are conceived as outdoor living spaces, with fireplaces to take the chill off the Los Angeles night. Where the two L-shapes meet there is a kitchen and a guest room. Too hot in the summer, too cold in the winter, the house is severe yet beguiling, a test model for a life in art. It is a collective campsite and plein-air studio, ideal for young artists who want to share living and working experiences, and have a place to invite friends and associates over to play music, discuss politics, plan projects.

> His own house, 1922,
> An experiment in the enclosure of space
> Became the prototype of California modern.
> Its lyrical quality is in contrast to the abstract forms
> of the early European moderns
> The inspiration for the S-shaped house came from the
> camp shelter
> Each room has a masonry wall to the street,
> With sliding canvas doors and glass opening
> Into a garden.
> Prefabricated tapering concrete walls were cast on
> the ground, tilted into place
> The units are joined by narrow streamers of glass,
> Which allow space to filter through.
> The floor is a concrete slab, level with the garden.
> Space itself is a material in the house.
> Uniting house and garden.
> Space forms are part of the integral decoration.[3]

The Schindler House is a defining icon of art in Los Angeles—it is experimental in materials and methods, and works with space in highly original ways to enable a rethinking of social conventions. Designed as a working salon, it served as a hub of interdisciplinary activity. The house was never comfortable; it was more, as Reyner Banham says, "a brave experiment in balancing the community and privacy of serious and experimental

people. It didn't work, the Chases pulled out early and the Schindlers were at loggerheads from 1927 or so, until RMS himself died in 1953."[4] After the Chases moved out, the Neutras moved in, then a young John Cage, the German collector Galka Scheyer, and the dancer John Bovingdon. None stayed long, but all left a mark. In its heyday, from the 1920s through to the 1930s, the Schindlers' house hosted music and dance performances, readings and discussions, while supporting very idealistic attempts to combine the personal and the political through collective activities, from playing music to real political organizing.

Pauline Schindler lived there continuously from 1938 until her death in 1977, in the half that had first been the Chase studio. As the one person to really inhabit it, she left her mark on the house. She made it more livable, improving the plumbing and adding carpet to the concrete floors. We know from the archives that she gave permission to various tenants to paint the Schindler side various shades of white, and, as Stephen Prina notes, she painted her side pink.[5]

In view of the very spare aesthetic of the building, pink seems rather an extreme decision. In fact, it sounds so much like sacrilege that we are bound to ask its meaning. So who was Pauline Schindler? To return to Banham, a longtime friend and supporter, "She was small—*birdlike* is the word, I'm afraid—gentle-voiced, searingly intense and *pure* Hampstead socialist."[6] And further,

> She was an original, her own woman. And that was one of the reasons one should not have been so surprised at her; California is where you go to be your own person, do your own thing, including Marxism . . . then I remembered how strong is the socialist tradition in the southland. Not just Upton Sinclair and all that, nor Will Rogers, the long-time socialist mayor of Beverly Hills, but all those reds who, in the era of the Hollywood blacklist, were not under the beds, but *in* them, legally and peacefully as normal citizens until the inquisition struck.[7]

In short, she was a pinko.

But perhaps it is too much of a stretch to claim she painted the walls to reflect her politics; maybe she was simply trying to update the modernity of the house. In the 1957 musical film *Funny Face*, in which Fred Astaire plays a Richard Avedon-like figure in the fashion worlds of New York and Paris, and Kay Thompson inhabits a version of the mind-bendingly declarative Diana Vreeland, Thompson sings a barnstorming "Think Pink," a rousing anthem in favor of chucking all color for pink. The song and dance sequence in the movie is a paean to the everyday use of pink, from clothes to toothpaste, to interior walls and doors; pink is modern, pink is alive, pink is now. As the much later Pantone website declares, "Paint a wall in Honeysuckle for a dynamic burst of energy in the family room, kitchen or hallway. A brave new color, for a brave new world. Let the bold spirit of Honeysuckle infuse you, lift you and carry you through the year. It's a color for every day—with nothing 'everyday' about it."[8]

Pink is, indeed, the element that defines *As He Remembered It*, with its large group of sculptural objects arrayed in a grid, each colored, somewhat unevenly, in an aggressive tone of dark pink that is very definitely not for everyday. The objects are recognizably furniture of various sorts, but they are all a bit limp and lean-to, clearly cut off from supporting walls and rooms. Something indefinable is missing. There is an air of discomfort—the display is not so much IKEA as the storage space for a

film or stage set. The spaces delineated by the furniture, the space between bed and closet, or table and piano, are cramped, adding to this sense of unreality. The grandeur of the Secession gallery magnifies the inadequacy of the objects, and over time, as gravity pulls against the lack of architectural support, that melancholic weight will cause a heavy sigh to slowly permeate the building as surfaces sag and droop.

The original desk, a pale pink memory, is the palimpsest to this excessive overwriting. What seemed the momentary staging of an imagined workspace is blown up into a nightmare vision of the domestic as it might appear in a fevered dream. There is a dread little sleeping area, with unmade bed sliding into curtained closet. Empty bookshelves and credenzas, vanities and other storage units crowd one's vision. Perhaps the strangest space of all is another tight corner housing upright piano, kitchen table, and banquette. Nearby, a stepladder rises, hopelessly.

The furniture that Prina has reconstructed was originally designed for two small houses, and in those spaces there was certainly pleasure in the economy of it all. How marvelous that the owner can enjoy playing the piano after all. As the writer Ellen Janson described them, Schindler's "unit-furniture" pieces were

> so designed and constructed that they can be combined and recombined and separated variously to make up all desired units, such as sideboards, bookcases, double and single seats, tables, couches, and can be arranged and rearranged so as to follow the lines of the room and give an added effect of spaciousness. No single piece of furniture is static; the units are not symmetrical and self-centered like so many boxes forming mechanical pigeonholes, but are designed to combine into groups which again achieve on a larger scale.[9]

But the houses in this case no longer exist, and the replicas here inhabit too much space: the dynamic illusion of spaciousness is replaced by the airless oppression of the showroom. There is a devious humor at work, both reticent and bold, creating a receptive field alive to uncertainty. Prina talks about this odd mistranslation, the fact that his work is an improvisation on the back of a set of drawings which were themselves the point of origin for a work of improvisatory cabinetry; that he is creating a ghostly presence.[10]

First they were built of poplar plywood, not fir. Then they were stained to enrich their surfaces. Both cheapness and the attempt to improve on it are in sympathy with Schindler's methods. So was the decision to stain the surfaces with colors found near the original sites of the buildings, an ochre and a green, both toned down to a beige suggestion of color. So far we seem to follow Prina as he carefully, respectfully follows the research, cleaving to the true path. But then the wild, brushy, almost slapdash application of this pink gloss paint throws the eye a curve. The paint pools on the surface, creating visual depth, which in turn suggests emotional complexity, but then it is not so well done after all, and the surface reeks of insincerity. Is this really the repressed rage of the widow, her desire for better politics, more modern comfort? Or Prina's detached humor? "And it just happened that this year it is pink, this very particular 'Honeysuckle' that is dark and vibrant and has yellow in it."[11] As he notes, using this color helps him get past his own personal story while flipping the historical one on its ear. For the work is in the translation, the gap into which meaning collapses as

we chase it down. These objects do no have the gloss and sheen of minimalism and do not share that kind of certainty of presence. Rather, they exist in a nether region of the indeterminate, splotched, and wounded; objects of thought, constructed.

And what haunts this entire installation is an idea about painting. We have been talking about the color pink, the aggressive skin given these orphaned objects. But that skin is blemished, overloaded with the marks of its making—strokes, drips, pools of paint. Every surface is painted, but first it is also stained. The objects themselves have been so carefully recuperated from the archive—original drawings studied, considered, and completed, structures built. But in the end these objects do not stand alone, for they are now elaborate supports for the complex act of painting. They are specific objects, real in the world, given over to the unreality and mystique of painting. They bear the evidence of having been labored over and handled by someone simultaneously taking care, and caring less. The details of such distinctions become all-important, for it is our task to give an equal consideration to the task of decoding the conundrum in front of us. Our bodies, our eyes, are entrusted with taking the measure of our often absurd relations with the world we live in, and given that trust, we recognize the folly of it.

I want to thank Susan Morgan for her help in pointing me to various invaluable sources concerning R. M. Schindler, Reyner Banham, and Esther McCoy. And of course also Stephen Prina for taking time to talk to me while the paint dried between coats.

1 In writing about conceptual art, Lucy Lippard was the first to discuss a move away from the studio to the office as emblematic of a new kind of artist. In her later sociological analysis of the first years at CalArts, *Artists in Offices: An Ethnography of an Academic Art Scene* (Transaction Books: New Brunswick, 1979), Judith Adler pushed the notion further, suggesting a desk-bound model for the artist in academe. Prina and Williams, as recent graduates of the school, would have been hyperaware of the connotations.

2 Robert Sweeney, "Life at Kings Road: As It Was 1920–1940", in Elizabeth A. T. Smith and Michael Darling, *The Architecture of R. M. Schindler*, exh. cat. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001), p. 87.

3 Esther McCoy, voice-over narration in Erven Jourdan's 1950 film *Architecture West*.

4 Reyner Banham, "Woman of the House", *New Society* (6 December 1979): 556.

5 "Modus Operandi," Interview with Stephen Prina by Annette Südbeck (Vienna, May 6, 2011), p. 96 in this catalogue.

6 Banham (see note 4): 556.

7 Ibid.

8 www.pantone.com

9 Ellen Janson, unpublished biographical notes on R. M. Schindler, 1939. Esther McCoy papers, Archives of American Art.

10 Interview by Annette Südbeck (see note 5), p. 95–96.

11 Ibid., p. 97.