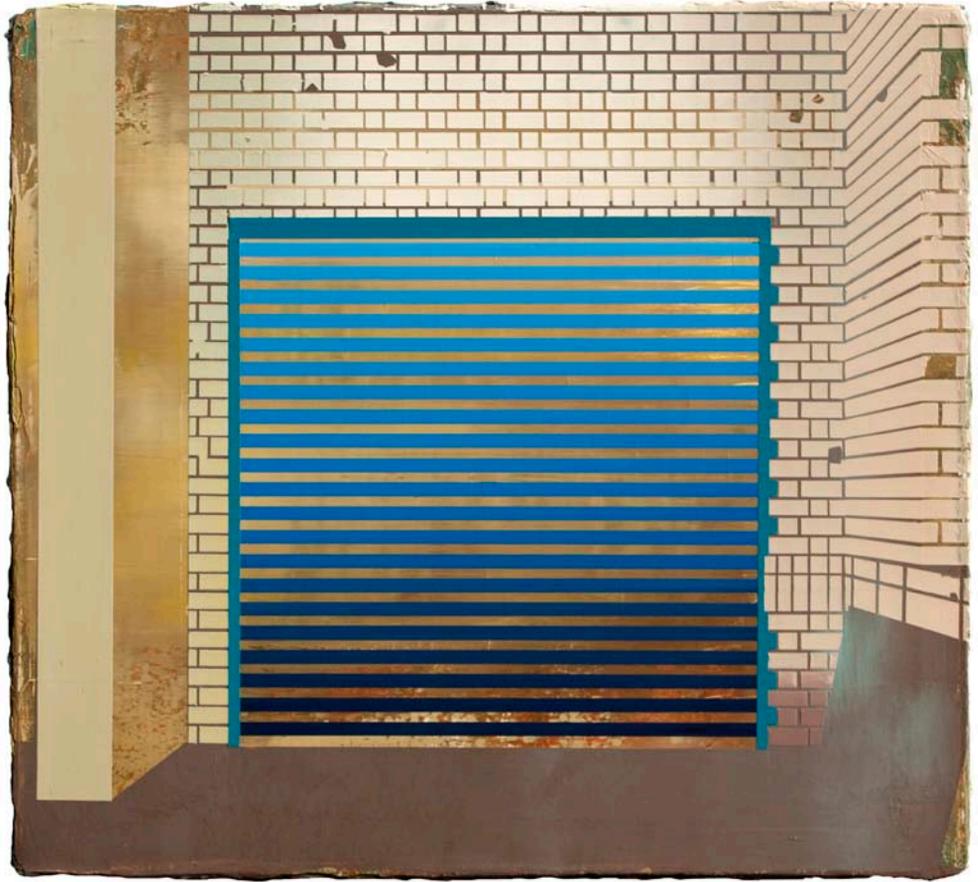




Aaron Koehn
Self Storage

Cover:
Loading Dock, 2011
oil on canvas, 21.75 x 18.25 in.

Right:
Garage Bay, 2010
oil on canvas, 23 x 25 in.



Right:
Room 202, 2011
oil on canvas, 47.5 x 58 in.

Far Right:
Room 101, 2010
oil on canvas, 35.5 x 44 in.



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Jun 3–Jul 30, 2011

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Rooms Without a View

Aaron Koehn's abstracted interior spaces seem built, rather than merely painted, conveying an impression of objective solidness—almost as if they were pried loose from real scenes and somehow shrunk-fit and friction-bonded to the painted surface. There is a stylish mysteriousness about their making, which is part of their allure and integral to the message of alienation that they ultimately convey.

Koehn constructs his compositions from thick, smooth or subtly textured painted planes, joined and divided by sharp lines and deep shadows. As images his most recent works allude to universal contemporary sights including rolling industrial garage doors, office or classroom furniture, and Venetian blinds. Most are oriented horizontally, in “landscape” configuration—a traditional mode that also invites associations with the ubiquitous big and small screens of our era; in this way they quietly smuggle haptic, painterly aesthetic content into the untouchable realm of pixels and plastic. Similarly, Koehn's surfaces teeter back and forth between the sheer, Wayne Thiebaud-like tastiness of a highly sensuous oil technique, and an illusionistic resemblance to other materials both natural and artificial. Slats depicted in one work were executed employing a faux woodgrain technique, and there is a vinyl-like aspect to many passages. Such diverse tactile qualities intersect in carefully considered layers, evolving in the course of Koehn's long working process. Eventually this lively materiality unfolds in long, shallow linear perspectives, where proto-furniture and generic interior architectural features evoke ideals of clean design and usefulness, ultimately derived from Bauhaus conceptions. But there is a contradiction: although parts of these works are very flat—so flat as to feel all but pressed up against the viewer's vision—every edge is deepened by shadow, suggesting lost or compressed dimensions. There is literally more in these paintings than meets the eye.

Koehn uses pointedly affectless visual and cultural references, influenced by source material that includes post-WWII magazine conceptions of domestic elegance and comfort, to explore a dimension of psycho-social isolation. If you think about it, the phrase “Self Storage” might imply a dislocation of the relationship between the self and the significance of places and things. To the extent that we are what we buy, and become what we own, self storage facilities are, then, limbo-like prisons where crucial personal fulfillment is held in abeyance. Part of the interest of a painting like Koehn's *Pod*, which nearly fills the picture plane with a frontal view of an über-secure looking self storage door, is the thought that “secure” locations are both the armor and the jail cells of the ideal. The vaguely ominous *Pod* is both a crèche, gestating impediments to the self, and one face of a form that used to be a cube in more innocent days, monstrously corrupted by desire and refusal. Other transitional spaces also interest Koehn, as in the small work titled *Garage Bay*, where lapis lazuli-colored horizontal louvers are set in a maze-like white tile corridor. In *Room 202* and *Room 101* he formulates haunted empty classrooms, and in the richly colored fantasia *Twin Lanes*, Koehn imagines a sublimated bowling alley, sparking at the end of the mind.



Untitled Wash Closet (1939),
2009–10
oil on canvas, 42 x 30 in.

Before and after attaining a Post-Baccalaureate Certificate in 2008 at the Lyme Academy College of Fine Art (a Connecticut base for forward-looking figurative art and solid technical training) Koehn looked hard at the West Coast paintings of half a century ago by artists like Wayne Thiebaud and Richard Diebenkorn. He learned even more from the anomie-ridden concerns and subject matter of currently active artists ranging from the New Leipzig School's Matthias Weischer, to Dana Schutz and her meta-expressive experiments. A work like *Untitled Wash Closet (1939)* both is, and is not, a representation of familiar domestic appointments (a cabinet, a window, a toilet, a sink), because in the end it evades such particularity. *Wash Closet* has something analytical, almost scientific about it, like a blueprint or diagram, or perhaps an X-ray. In temper it's very close to the spirit of some contemporary abstraction, which attempts to balance meditative working methods with a taste for visual excitement. Just when color and shape begin to resolve themselves into something familiar, the image veers away, leaving behind questions about real versus psychological objects. In this painting, as in



the *Classroom* paintings and *Garage Bay*, Koehn's ambiguous spaces serve as backdrop for an interrogative, winnowing process: at what point does a bed, or a table, or a chair, become formal, rather than useful? It's a very old idea: real things are purged of their contingency as they approach the threshold of pure form. But Koehn's take on this is practical, workmanlike—what might such an ontological balancing point really look like?

Many of Koehn's recent works are stagey, bringing the viewer into a realistic but artificial interior area. The slightly bent vertical blinds shown in *Room 101* remind us to ask whether there is, in fact, a view from this empty room, and to wonder who or what pushed these slats aside. In the same way the heroically proportioned *Window Shopper*, which presents a severely geometric depiction of blinds covering a large window, invites the viewer to imagine what is beyond the sterile foreground space. There is darkness in the gaps between the vertical blinds, with a couple of patches of white, but is it night time? Is this even a real place? Is it a motel interior, or could it be a show room demo? And considering the title, is this window for sale?

Koehn is also interested in the role of facades, which decorate and deceive everywhere, and he considers his window treatments and flexible barriers also in that light: in part, these are masks, behind which experience and reactivity are concealed.

Inner and outer worlds intersect, collide, or spin apart, and art imagines for a moment that the chaos can actually be solved through an equation of metaphors. Painting's specific technique is to transmute qualities and phenomena into sheer substance, and the success of Koehn's richly evocative paintings is mainly located just where the hand would find it—on and in his surfaces. The working painter travels and guides the viewer through tiny variations in viscosity and texture, amid the long bloom and decay of color and the chattering dialectic of line, and in the end any interpretation will miss the mark.

Many imponderable things end up stuck to the canvas, among them the passage of time itself, and expressions of individual response that operate beneath the radar of cultural recognition. Aaron Koehn's paintings give an account of much time-bound, bodily information, recorded, almost cast, as if in analogue fashion, echoing the compressions and transmutations of selfhood.

—Douglas Max Utter

Twin Lanes, 2010–11
oil on canvas, 42 x 72 in.

Aaron Koehn

Born 1983, Cleveland, OH
Lives in Cleveland, OH

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Education

- 2006–08 Lyme Academy College of Fine Art, Old Lyme, CT
Post Baccalaureate Certificate in Painting
- 2005 University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN
Architecture
- 2003–06 BA, Augsburg College, Minneapolis, MN
Major in Studio Art, Minor in Architecture with a concentration in Art History
- 2001–02 Indiana University, Bloomington, IN

Exhibitions

- 2011 *Self Storage*, William Busta Gallery, Cleveland, OH
- 2011 *Monster Drawing Rally*, SPACES, Cleveland, OH
- 2011 *Spacelift (some memories get better with time)*, curated by Kristin Bly, Wall Eye Gallery, Cleveland, OH
- 2010 *Skulls & Revolution*, Wall Eye Gallery, Cleveland, OH
- 2010 *Cleveland Emerging Artists*, Union Club, Cleveland, OH
- 2010 *Threshold* [two-person show], Proximity, Cleveland, OH
- 2010 *Artsyism*, Le Bateau Lavoir, Cleveland, OH
- 2010 *Homey Show*, Ohio City Home Tour, Cleveland, OH
- 2009 *Artsyism*, Le Bateau Lavoir, Cleveland, OH