

Designing Women

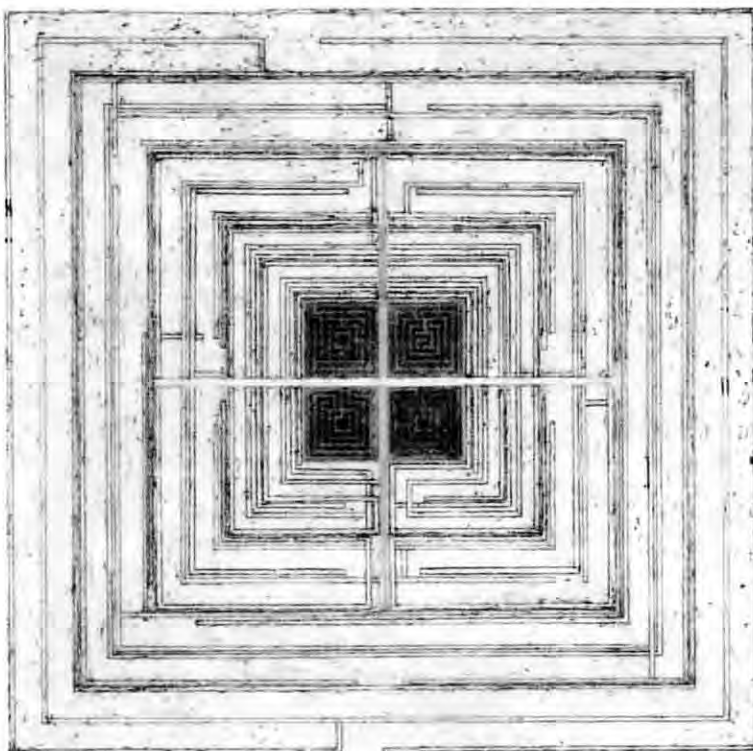
For a new suite of paintings executed in encaustic and resin, Cheryl Goldsleger found inspiration in the often unheralded work of women architects.

BY JERRY CULLUM

Cheryl Goldsleger's recent exhibition at Atlanta's Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia (MOCA GA) was titled "utopia." Though the name refers to the ideal communities projected by some of the women architects whom she celebrates, it might be an appropriate title for Goldsleger's own work. As is well known, the word derives from the Greek for "no place," and Goldsleger's drawings and paintings have always depicted sites or spaces that are at once logically compelling and physically impossible.

Two decades ago, she first won recognition for renderings of vertiginous architecture, structures overlaid with diagrammatic crisscrossing lines that seem intended to clarify the relationships among the parts but, paradoxically, serve to complicate and obscure them. This was succeeded by a purer geometry of concentric circles and interlocking rectangles, once again visually logical but more reminiscent of the labyrinth Daedalus built for the Minotaur than of the diagrams of Euclid. Indeed, the classical labyrinth (more symmetrical than truly "labyrinthine") appears in more recent works such as *Intersection* (2001), which was seen in a concurrent show of Goldsleger's art from 1996 to 2002 at Kidder Smith Gallery in Boston.

Those basic geometric forms recur in the 11 new encaustic paintings made in 2002-03 at MOCA GA, but now the incised, creamy wax surfaces represent plans and diagrams for realizable structures, many of which were actually built in Chandigarh, San Francisco, Dover, Mass., and elsewhere. The works in



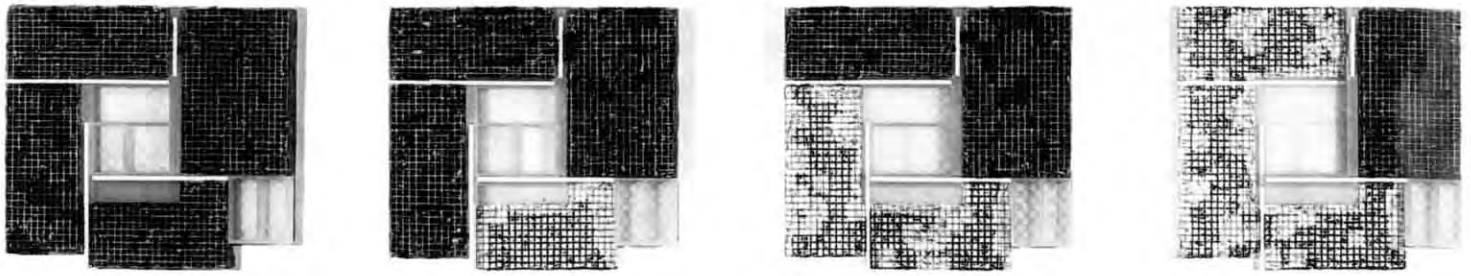
Intersection, 2001, wax, oil, pigment, wood, resin, 41 by 41 by 2 inches.

"utopia" are based on blueprints and renderings by women of varying degrees of renown, beginning with the first published drawing (1878) by a woman architect, Margaret Hicks, and concluding with late 20th-century designs by Gae Aulenti and Margreet Duinker. Though Goldsleger transforms the source material into often breathtaking art, each painting is based on considerable historical study.

For most of the works, she also utilized a Rapid Prototype Machine (RPM), a tool of contemporary industrial design that generates three-dimensional models from computer drawings. Goldsleger used the device at the Georgia Institute of Technology to form

shallowly modeled stairways and other elements in a translucent resin that harmonizes exquisitely with the bas-relief of the more traditional pigmented wax. The work based on Hicks's 1878 design for a workman's cottage, for example, renders the rather romanticized project as a grid of nine straight-on front elevations laid over a single large perspectival rendering. It takes a long moment to realize that the entryways of the cramped structures are recessed into the wood panel and each furnished with its own dollhouse steps. The outcome is encaustic painting delicately transmuted into sculpture. But Goldsleger remains firmly anchored in the basic rectangular panel; her forays into the third dimension come as elegant interruptions of an otherwise two-dimensional pictorial conception.

The sweetness of miniaturization in *Workman's Cottage* is an unusually intimate instance in paintings that strive to capture the vision and ambition of the architects with compositions that are emotionally reserved if nonetheless affecting. In the two examples of housing conceived to connect multiple dwellings to communal kitchens—*Kitchenless House, Llano del Rio, California* (based on a 1914 project by Alice Constance Austin) and *Kitchenless House for Pacific Colony, Block Design* (inspired by Marie Stevens Howland's work of 1885)—Goldsleger honors the proposal of efficient alternative family organizations far removed from cozy domesticity. Sometimes, as in 30-36



30-36 Wagenaar Street, Amsterdam, Holland (based on the architectural work of Margreet Duinker, late 20th century), 2003, wax, oil, pigment, wood, resin, five panels, each 15½ by 16½ by 2¼ inches.

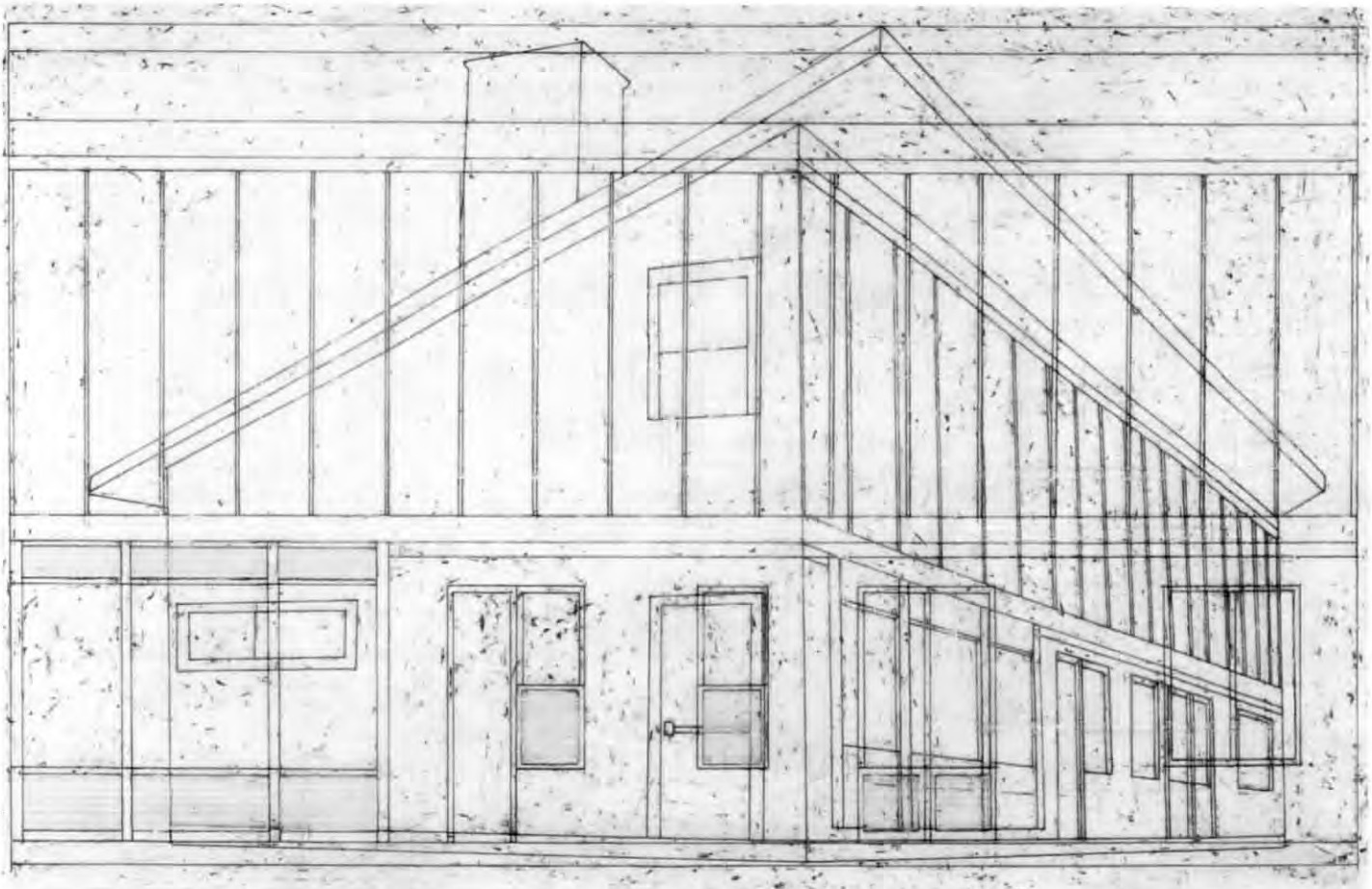
Wagenaar Street, Amsterdam, Holland, a five-panel work based on Duinker's designs for housing with adjustable walls, the pragmatically arranged floor plans reflect a modular geometry as pure as any in Goldsleger's less representational work. In *Solar House, Dover, Massachusetts* (based on a design by Eleanor Raymond that was constructed in 1948) and *Woman's Building from the World's Columbian Exposition, 1893,*

Chicago, Illinois (after a design by Sophia Hayden), the results recall Goldsleger's earlier architectural inventions in the curiously haunting quality of their spare lines and the selectivity with which she has chosen to overlay and transform the originals.

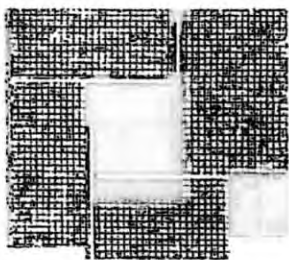
That personal transformation of the sources is what makes these works vivid homages to the largely underrecognized women architects, and not mere reiterations

of their achievements. Notwithstanding the series's more overt documentary and feminist aspects, Goldsleger's concern with the conceptual space of architecture remains as intense as ever; it's just that the space is no longer placeless. She is, in other words, suddenly grounded in the specifics of history, and this fact is a distinct departure for her.

But not entirely. The geometry to which her prior works refer is also grounded in his-

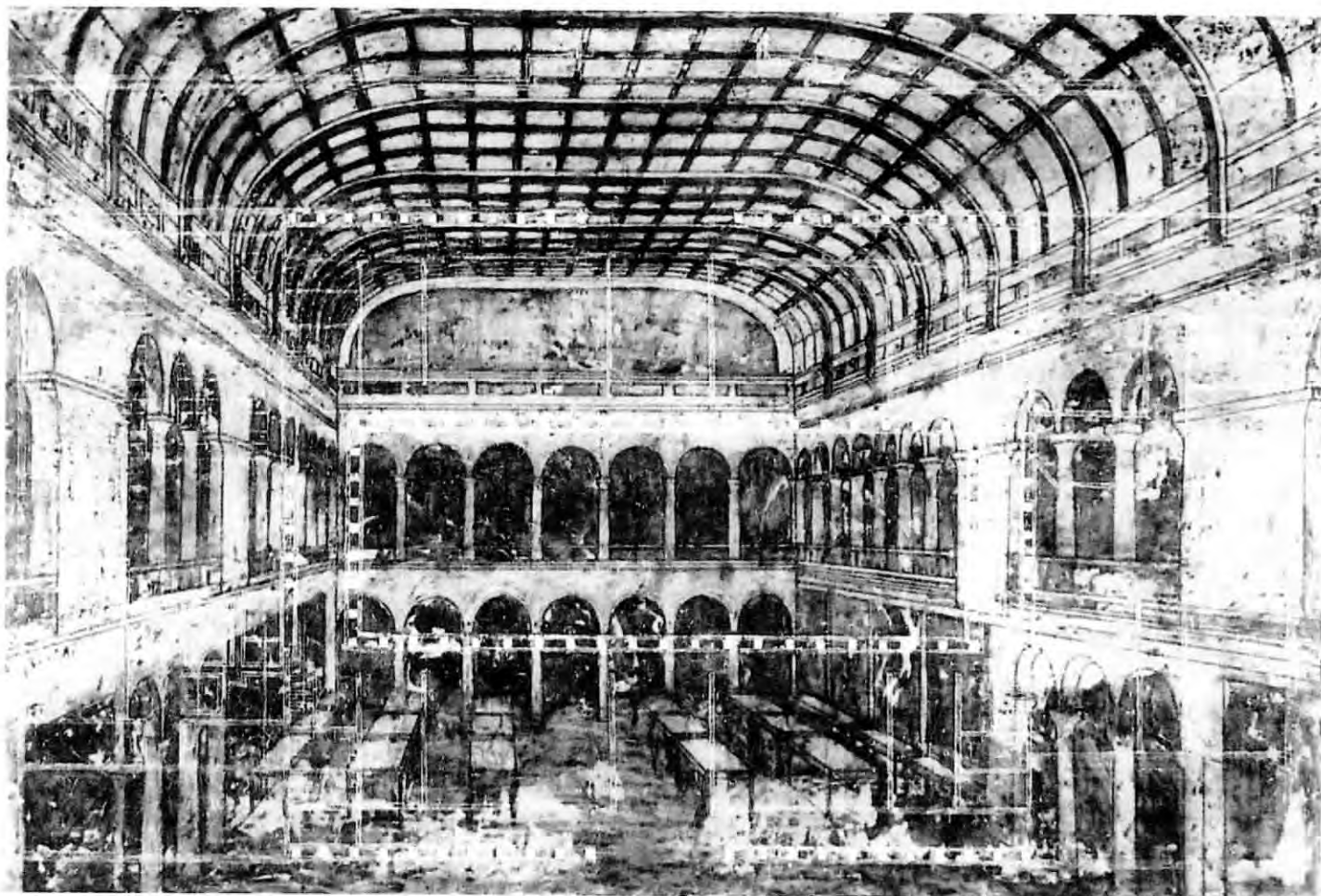


Solar House, Dover, Massachusetts (based on the architectural work of Eleanor Raymond, mid-20th century), 2003, wax, oil, pigment, wood, resin, 40 by 60 by 2 inches.



architects which she gathered in this exhibition is factually determined and yet a revelation. The paragraphs on the walls and in the catalogue tell the stories of real people who set particular goals and strove to meet them; despite the obvious challenges of gender, this is not a tale of frustrated ambition. At another level, though, this is Goldsleger's own utopian community. United by her sensibility and pictorial strategies, the women's designs for churches and cottages and kitchenless houses are acknowledged and

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Woman's Building from the World's Columbia Exposition, 1893, Chicago, Illinois (based on the architectural work of Sophia Hayden), 2003, wax, oil, pigment, wood, resin, linen, 54 by 80 by 1 1/4 inches.

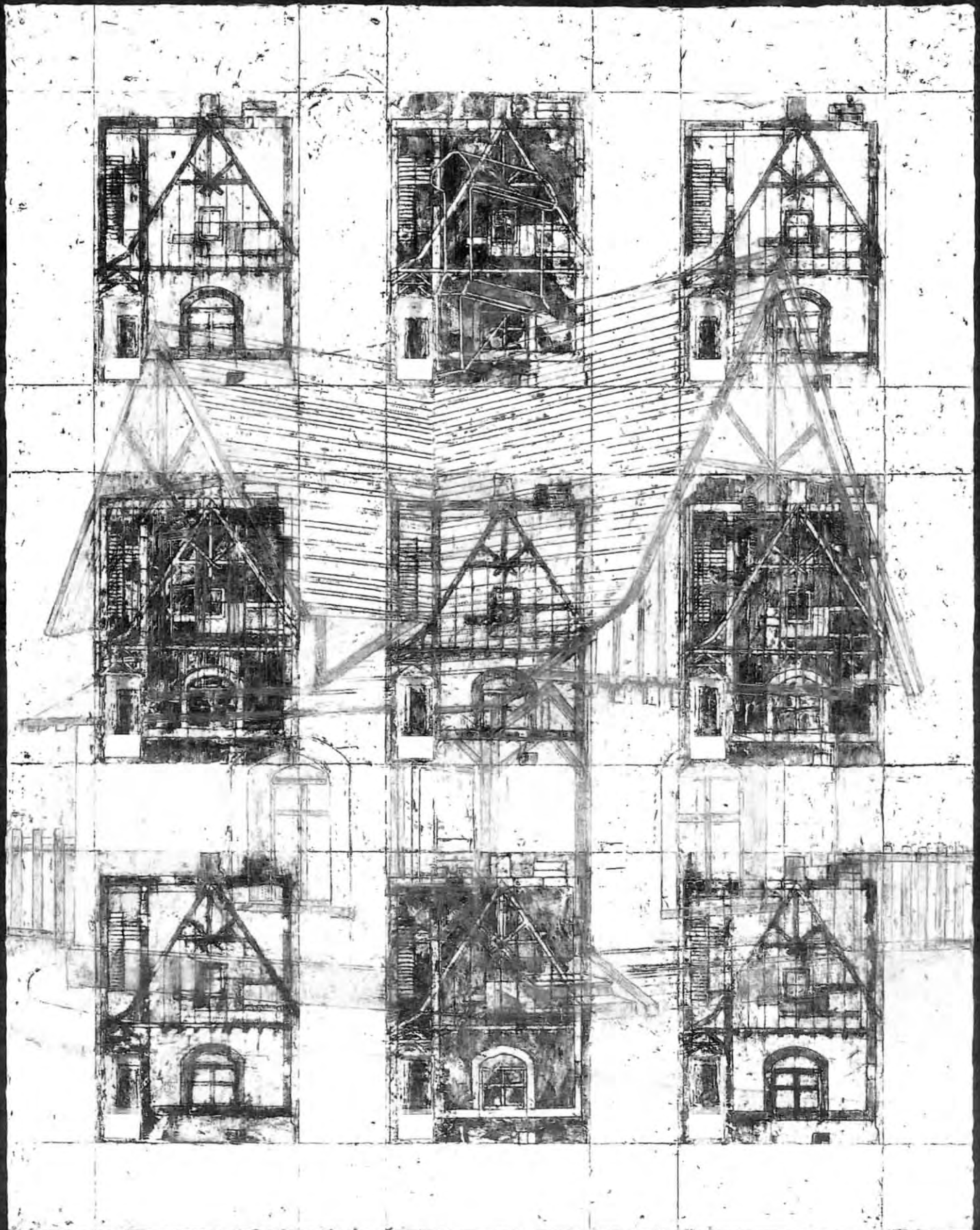
tory, but it is the history of fantastic, ideal, ruined and mythic design. The relationship between the earlier work and its sources is less direct, as she channeled the structural energies of architectural history rather than delving into its catalogue of forms. For this reason, her oeuvre overall looks both familiar and utterly strange.

In similar fashion, the assembly of women

reconstituted by a singular act of the imagination. Expanding the range of her imagery, Goldsleger deepens our comprehension of what women have proposed and accomplished in architecture. But she does so on her own terms, revealing new possibilities for the rigorous yet dreamlike geometry that has distinguished her work from the beginning. □

An exhibition of recent paintings and drawings by Cheryl Goldsleger, titled "utopia," appeared in Atlanta at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia, Atlanta [Sept. 6-Nov. 1]. Works by Goldsleger dating from 1996 to 2002 were exhibited at Kidder Smith Gallery, Boston [Sept. 30-Nov. 1]. A new show will go on view in New York at Rosenberg & Kauffman Fine Art next fall.

Author: Jerry Cullum is a writer, editor and curator living in Atlanta.



Cheryl Goldsleger: Workman's Cottage (based on the architectural work of Margaret Hicks, late 19th century), 2003, wax, oil, pigment, wood, resin, 42 by 33 by 2 inches. Photos this article courtesy the artist.