



Michelle JaJa Chang, Gloucester House, 2023.

# Forest for the Trees

Michelle JaJa Chang's Gloucester House stands in a clearing somewhere between the realms of painting and photography. If this were a photograph, you might admire how the intricate foliage of a forest has been flash-frozen by the camera's icy stare. If this were a painting, you might note the delicate play of color, how the trees cast wine-dark shadows on the pale salmon-hued ground. But this is an architectural drawing, and we would have said nothing of the building that occupies its center.

Chang takes ambiguity seriously. Her work redeploys architectural protocols to elicit effects that designers often avoid, such as vagueness, uncertainty, and doubt. In "Scoring, Building," a 2020 installation in Los Angeles, Chang harnessed the messiness of construction to create a pavilion by erecting a series of rooms, one inside the other, each reacting to the imperfection of the one that preceded it. (See "One to One" in *Log* 50.)

In Gloucester House, too, Chang engages in the stagecraft of ambiguity. The image collides a painterly interest in color with the regimented mechanics of an axonometric drawing. The combination of the imprecise and evocative with the exact and explicit recalls artistic traditions like Japanese *ukiyo-e* (pictures of the floating world). Stan Allen dubbed drawings in this vein "Degree Zero" axonometrics, after John Hejduk's 90-degree projections. Unlike early modern engineers who found utility in the axonometric's precise maintenance of measurements and formal relationships, Hejduk was enamored with its pictorial effects. Like a Hejduk drawing, Gloucester House is presented frontally, but the projection obscures the three other elevations, and the geometry of the roof is uncertain. The house remains an enigmatic object.

The drawing seems to be about form, but in resisting the conventions of the axonometric, it evades critical attention. Form is rendered centrifugal, located at the center, but hardly the focus. The environmental conditions of architecture, often treated as peripheral, are elevated. The ground of the site is the picture plane of the drawing. The atmosphere is evoked in soft colors that spill over the walls and roof of the house. The hierarchy of figure and ground is inverted. The polemic spoken at the volume of a whisper: Peripheral does not mean marginal.

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