

Noble Dystopia

by Dennis Kardon



[Lido Nob](#)
[1999-2000](#)

Paul Noble, Feb. 12-Mar. 11, 2000, at Gorney Bravin + Lee, 534 W. 26th St., New York, N.Y. 10001.

Flip to dystopia in your dictionary and you will find the perfect description of Paul Noble's large graphite drawings of metaphorical cities, four of which were recently on view at Gorney Bravin + Lee in New York's Chelsea art district. Since 1996 Noble has been constructing images of an imaginary, empty metropolis, called "Nobson Newton," that vaguely resembles Soviet bloc housing.

At 36, Noble is a veteran of the London art scene. In 1989 he and four other artists set up City Racing, a gallery behind a betting shop. In '96 he devised and publicized a board game about life on the dole called "Doley," which he showed at Interim Art.

Nobson Newton arose from Noble's invention of a cityscape whose buildings double as an orthogonally projected typeface. The result is a semi-legible architext. The rows of structures spell out the name of the town, which is the title of the work. The overall result is like Swiftian parodies of municipal planning done by a sadistic autocracy. "Town planning as self-portraiture" is how the artist explains the total lack of inhabitants; he being the only citizen.

Although drawn in a plain, illustrative manner, visual inventions abound. It is the tiny, assiduous details that give the viewer pause. From a distance, one large drawing, titled *Nobspital* appears as a modern hospital-like building topped with a helipad, with the white, antiseptic syllable letters NOB, SPIT and AL forming different floors and wings of the building. Nose to paper, however, there's nothing really healing about it.

In fact, in the O wing, the only tools on an operating gurney appear to be a scalpel, a hacksaw, wirecutters, a kitchen knife and a large tube of KY jelly. The B wing seems to be a gallows and viewing room, each modern chair lovingly drawn. The central entrance is fronted by hanging plastic strips reminiscent of the meat market. Usually containing some intricately rendered foliage, each work puts a little spin on nature as culture.

Another drawing titled *Nobson Central* looks like a cross between Chechnya, Kosovo and other bombed out cities we see on CNN. *Nobson Central* is actually a giant unreadable Wallace Stevens quote; each word made from a partially destroyed building. Every concrete shard, broken window, cracked wall and bomb crater is industriously limned. The effect is as if R. Crumb rendered one of Joseph Kosuth's deleted texts.

In the end, the drawings are cheery in a particularly morbid British way. Noble seems to posit the artist as a perverse godhead, and suggests that excessive control invariably leads to fascism, torture and death.

His book *Nobson, Newtown* (Salon Verlag, 1998), a kind of history of his eponymous town and a parody of various genres of guidebook, uses his drawings as illustrations. Presenting literature as archeological slum is clearly Noble's most intriguing conceptual invention.

Paul Noble, "Nobson New Town," Feb. 12-Mar. 11, 2000, at Gorney Bravin + Lee, 534 West 26th Street, New York, N.Y. 10001.

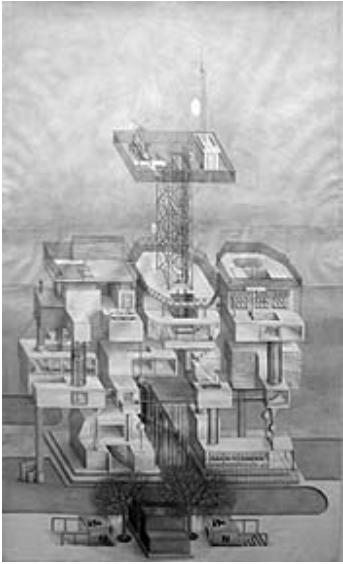
DENNIS KARDON is a New York artist.



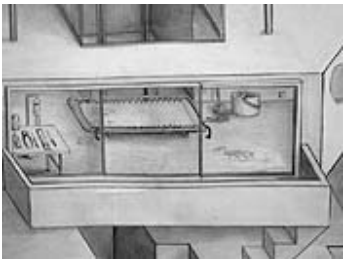
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