

Julian Louie

2006

Benjamin Menschel Fellow

***Scars and Veils:
An Urban Reading***

Photographs

Drawings

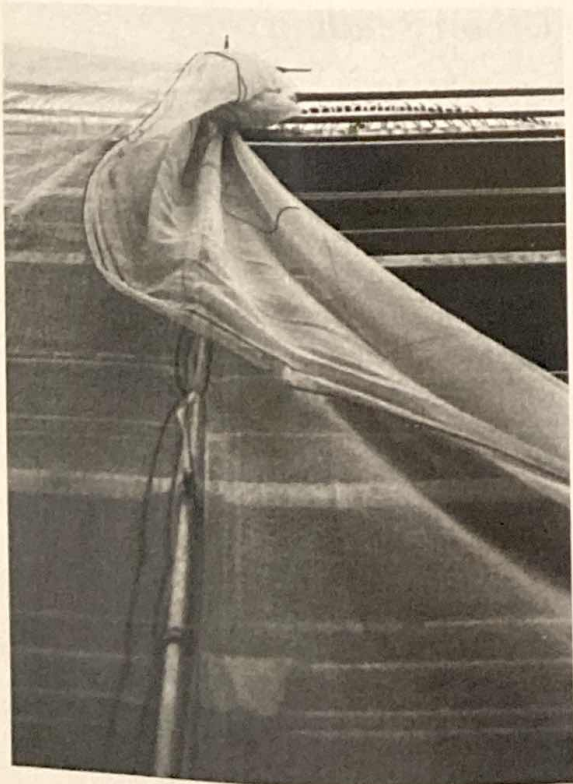
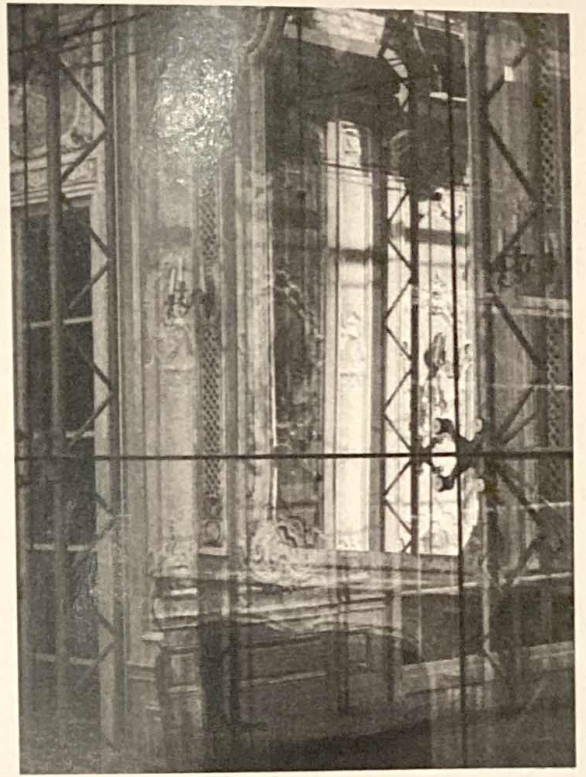
and

Constructions of

Berlin's Façades

November 7–17, 2006

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2006



*"The eternal is...
far more the
ruffle on a dress
than some idea."*

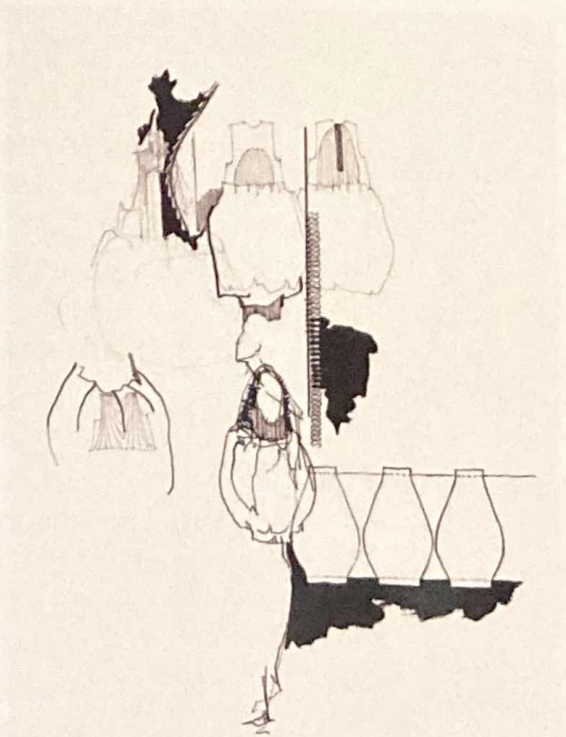
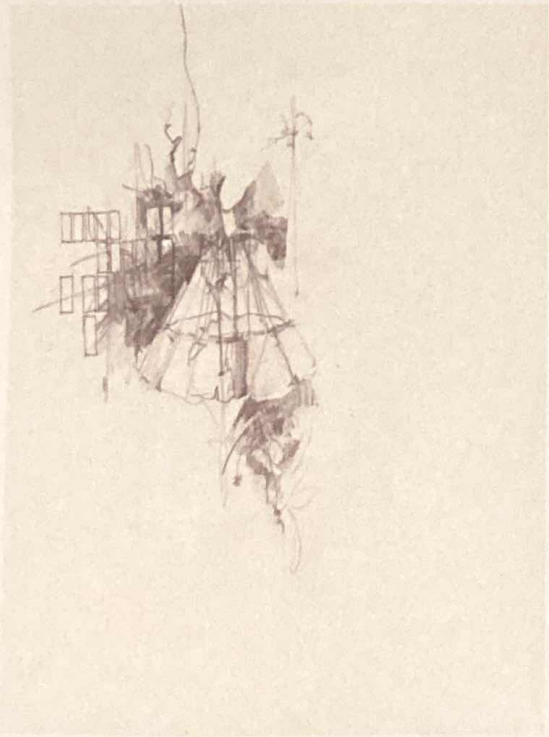
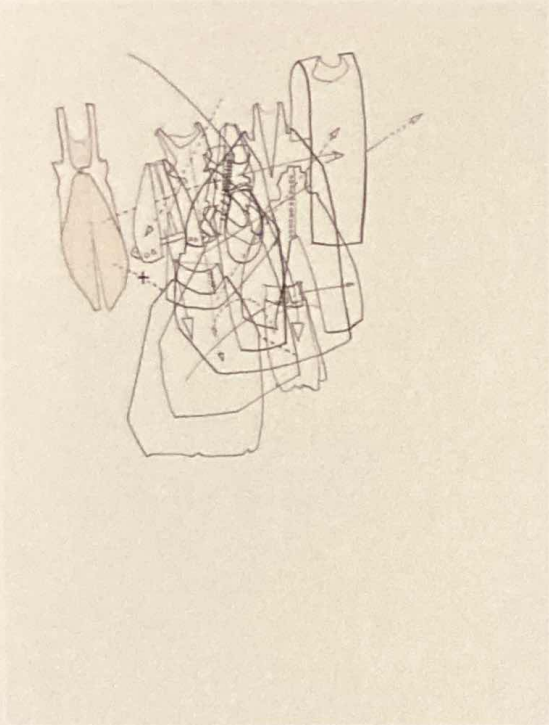
— Walter Benjamin
The Arcades Project

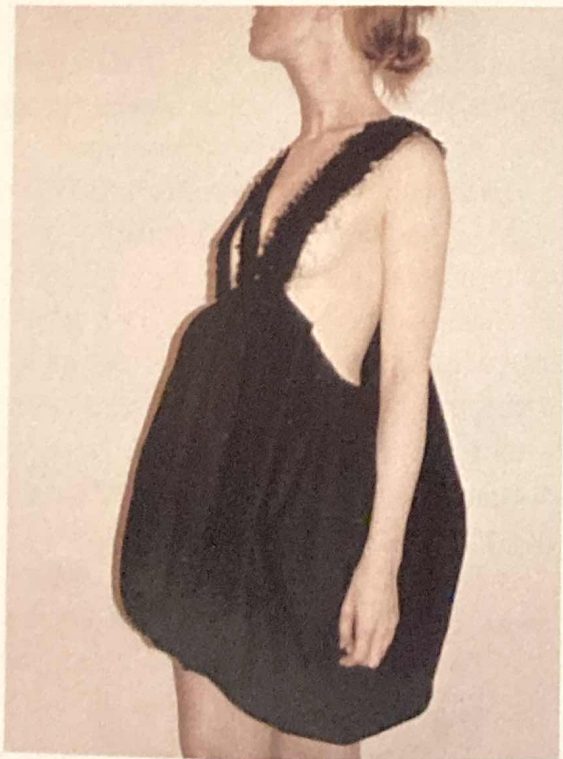
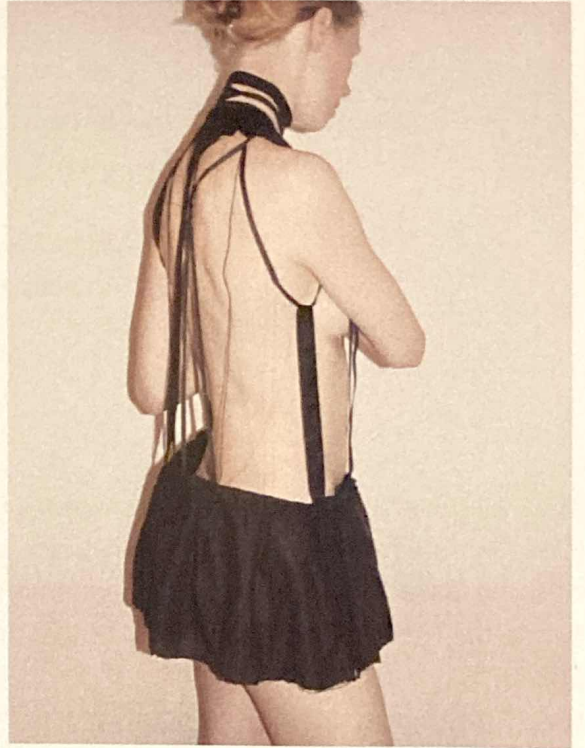
In his elliptical and unfinished *The Arcades Project* (*Das Passagen-Werk*), Walter Benjamin locates clothing as part of the material ephemera that define the metropolis: a garment is both a physical object that holds within its threads the traces of time's passage (clothing as memory and history) and a potent visual signifier (clothing as identity). For Benjamin, the urban experience is not sequential or rational; rather, it is defined in terms of montage, juxtaposition, and contingency. Drawing on Surrealist notions of narrative, Benjamin constructs a reading of the urban environment that involves a compression of past and present, a city whose imagery—façades, scaffolding, signage—displays this temporal simultaneity. Today, Berlin is such a city. Over the past century the city has undergone a series of transformations and reinventions which have resulted in an urban environment defined by image. The surfaces of Berlin's buildings and streets become performative elements—the city's clothing—and thus define the same dialectical space that Benjamin first identified in the Paris arcades: a landscape saturated in temporal signifiers. In Berlin, the historical and the contemporary are visually legible: a piece of an old façade sheathed in a new one, the endless building of monuments. When Benjamin writes of time as cloth, there is an element of the metaphorical in his words; yet, in Berlin, this has become intensely explicit. In every cracking seam, every collaged

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façade of crumbling brick and plaster and graffiti, every juxtaposition of meticulous restoration and abandoned decay, the site's history is displayed. Berlin wears its memories.

This project is an investigation of two related scales, the scale of the city and the scale of the body, and utilizes three parallel modes of research, photographs, drawings, and garments/constructions. With Benjamin's methods of urban analysis as a conceptual framework, the photographic recording of Berlin's surfaces illuminates an architectural landscape that is both construction site and ruin, and generates a reading of the city that focuses on the specifics, nuances, and minutia of urban imagery. The drawings become a translational medium by which to negotiate between the urban and the corporeal, an exploration of the potential for reading Berlin's facades at a scale other than the architectural. The garments exist as constructions generated from the photographs and drawings, incorporating and transforming both physical features and formal concepts found in the facades into new, body-scaled spatial configurations. These constructions collapse a specific urban condition onto the human form; the temporal traces of the city become inhabited on an individual scale. In this way, Benjamin's dress moves from the theoretical to the material. The tectonics of the garments are generated from the scars, textures, and veils of Berlin's façades.





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