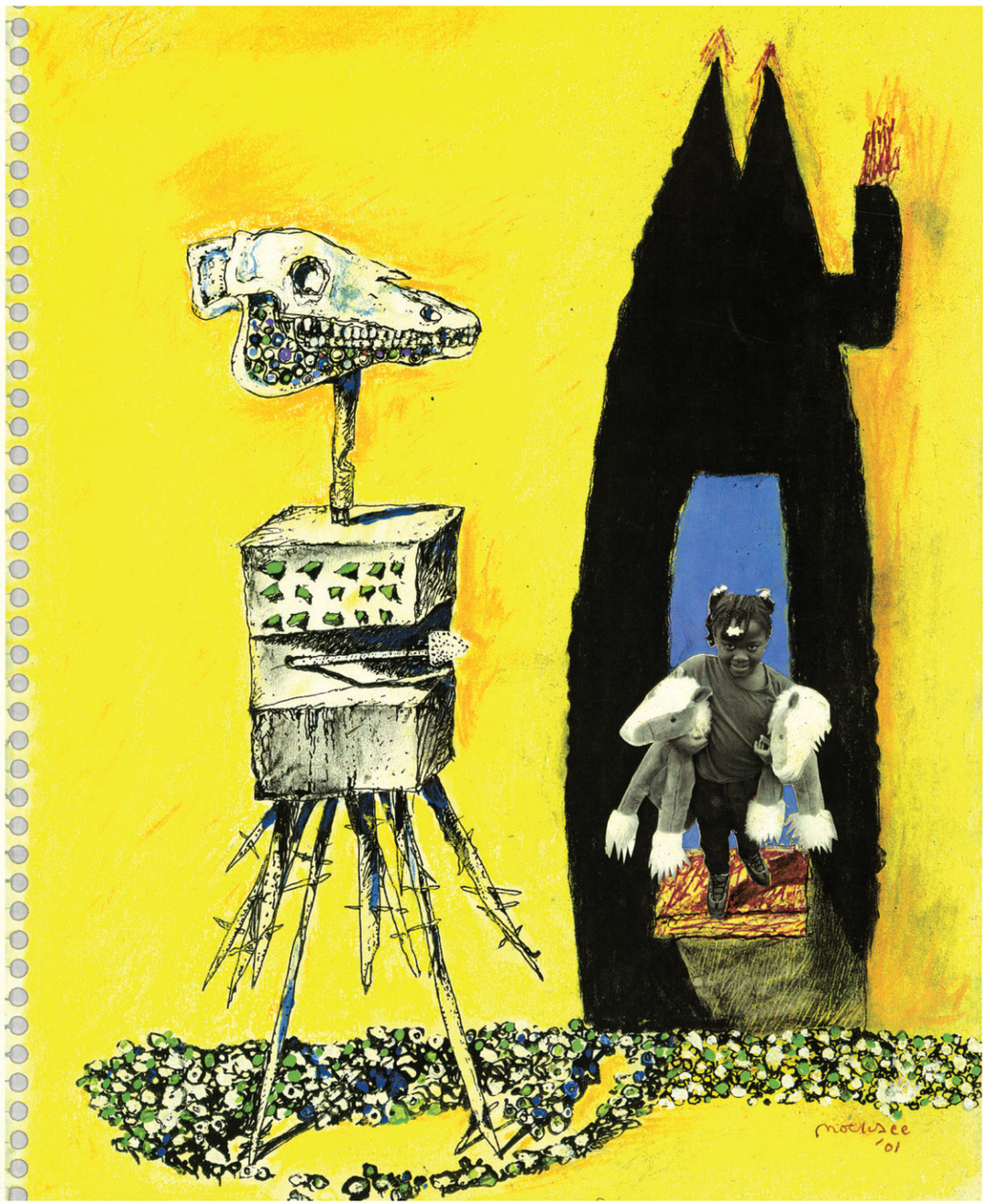


Samuel Mockbee, The Coronation Of The Virgin - 1730 And 2001, 2001. Courtesy of the Mockbee Estate.

ARCHITECTURAL SUBTERFUGE

James Tate

During his life and in the decade since his death, discussions of architect Samuel "Sambo" Mockbee have tended to foreground his desire to reinstate a social dimension within architecture. Many consider him a catalytic figure in motivating the current interest within design to serve constituencies that would typically not have access to such expertise. However, despite his renown, Mockbee remains one of architecture's most mysterious figures. He is an architect whose humanity too often subverts our ability to directly engage his body of work as architecture. Mockbee pursued a distinct line of investigation within American architecture during the last quarter of the 20th century, one whose idiosyncratic characteristics and value are deemed to lie outside disciplinary concerns. While on the surface Mockbee's built and drawn projects appear to have little formal or thematic similarity to his contemporaries or to historical precedents and exist without a written manifesto or explanation as to how one should interpret them in architectural terms, they are not indecipherable.

While it would be absurd to suggest that architecture should abandon its social responsibilities, such engagement is only possible when we recognize that it emerges from an architectural project rather than merely being overlaid on top of it. We must address the set of architectural issues and provocations put forward. Despite the strong visual and physical presence of the work and the man himself, Mockbee rarely wrote or spoke publicly about his intentions or precedents. He was evasive about discussing the work aesthetically, theoretically, or ideologically. We must speculate on and speak to the qualities of the things produced – whether drawn on paper or built from global manufacturing refuse – and how the objects and the propositions put forward connect to, evolve, and momentarily exceed our expectations of spaces and places in the world. Such considerations begin to reveal and articulate the motivations that drove Mockbee's architecture and the latent references that hold it together internally.

Parallel to Mockbee's moral and ethical beliefs were a set of silent motivations that put forward an agenda connected to more traditional disciplinary concerns – formal, spatial, aesthetic, and intellectual. While these interests often overlap and reinforce the social ambitions, I want to approach them from architectural precedents and from within artistic and design practices. Lying in plain sight, these unattended curiosities are fragmentary clues that offer moments of articulation. Foregrounding Mockbee's built projects, representational work, context (regional and imaginary), and generational contemporaries, while obliquely acknowledging the moral ambitions and economic context, I am concerned with what he was aiming for as a disciplinary proposition and its location within architectural history.

Looking at the buildings and representational work, there are consistencies which suggest an underlying architectural agenda going far deeper than the social project as it is usually understood. One sees an architect obsessively drawing and redrawing, negotiating the formal and the informal, exploring dark themes and glimmers of hope, juxtaposing the heavy-weighted and the ephemeral, and experimenting with assemblies and transformations of legible geometries. This is an architect who worked iteratively to construct a place for his work, always looking to expand the potentialities of architecture.

This article focuses on *Coronation of the Virgin*, a drawing made only months before Mockbee's untimely death in 2001. The figure-ground ambiguity, saturated colors, child-like aesthetic, and unusual mythological content produce a type of representation that, by any traditional definition, is not architectural. Like many of the architect's paintings, *Coronation's* visceral, primal associations and thematic content resonate with, seduce, and implicate the viewer. Despite their engaging nature, Mockbee's paintings appear deeply personal, their underlying ideas locked away in the imagination of the architect.

While there are exceptions, architectural representation tends to fill one of two roles. In practical terms, it provides instructions for the realization of a building in the world. In conceptual terms, it serves as a common language among architects whose established rules provide a framework for communication that reinforces cohesion, order, and integrity in the discipline across scales and styles. In both scenarios, representation is *subservient*; it is preparatory to something else rather than a propositional object in and of itself.

Because of representation's disciplinary instrumentality as a tool for communication, departing from convention can have the effect of isolating an architect from others. Occasionally, however, such devant acts produce representational projects whose collateral effects are as productive as making buildings. Within this tradition, certain architects immediately come to mind. Mockbee, however, is not usually on the list. While Mockbee was clearly interested in building, we should not allow the "boots on the ground" mentality and moral ambitions to obscure other characteristics, including the possibility that an important dimension of the work included the production of stories on paper as a proper site for theorizing architecture through illustration.

Mockbee is part of a generation of architects whose strong personal agendas and alternative visions caused them to be labeled outsiders early in their careers. Those who began their independent practices in the late seventies and early eighties – Ambasz, Hadid, Koolhaas, Libeskind, Mayne, Scolari, and Tschumi, among others – were forced to contend with few opportunities to build, bleak commercialized practice, and an elite guard who kept architecture's intellectual property locked away in Tafuri's boudoir. Yet Mockbee's generation ventured out into unlikely frontiers, leveraging their situation as an opportunity to liberate and add a new chapter to the legacy of paper architecture. They challenged conventions of representation by incorporating other artistic media, aiming for a re-formation that would release representation from its institutionalized status and allow it to become a ground for experimentation. They celebrated making through an assertive tectonic sensibility that emphasized rawness, messiness, layering, and perverse assemblies. Narratives, drawings, and models began to hybridize as they searched for an inspiring and enjoyable site for architecture.

While the architect-writer is a well-established model for those who depart from established forms of practice, Mockbee did not work in this manner. One might assume from this lack of words that that he operated without an intellectual basis, choosing instead willful expression motivated by a set of intentions outside the discourses of art and architecture. *Coronation of the Virgin*, however, suggests otherwise. In the absence of a written manifesto, Mockbee's mysterious paintings carry the intellectual weight of his ideas. Collectively, they should be seen as an integral part of an unrealized visual treatise on his architectural project – the making of architecture in rural settings – and how such a proposition relates to other historical and contemporary architectural and artistic investigations. Mockbee spoke in words about the human aspirations of his work to those outside of architecture; he spoke to architects about the work through drawings and paintings. The work can be appreciated, experienced, and inhabited by a broader audience, but the visual language and objects created possess architectural autonomy in their use of references directed toward those who are most aware of and connected to the production of architecture. Each of his paintings is a meditation on architecture itself, synthesizing and condensing a set of ideas. While the image in the story is frozen, it is replete with narrative possibilities.

Whether or not the drawing being discussed here was to be developed further is unknown, but other sketches suggest that this piece was intended to evolve into something substantial. Many of Mockbee's representational projects went through a number of iterations before becoming paintings on large canvases that take on an architectural presence. The viewer-participant is intended to engage the piece in a non-institutional space, often as a nomadic object temporarily propped up on a plinth made of cinder or wood blocks as the landscape of the Deep South flows beneath, perhaps a playful nod to Mies' Farnsworth House and manufactured trailer houses. If not sheltered by a makeshift tarp tent, rudimentary hut, or tree canopy, the paintings' inhabitants – humans, animals, and imaginary creatures – are left exposed to the elements. Characteristic of the paintings is the use of monolithic silhouette figures haunted by deep shadows, three-dimensional appendages made of found objects, lustful androgynous creatures, and void-passageways to other places. There is an immediacy and looseness to these projects, mute narratives whose characters invite misreadings.

The *Coronation of the Virgin* has been a recurring subject in art for more than eight centuries. It is the fifth Glorious Mystery of the Rosary (Garden of Roses), one of fifteen meditations that recall the life of Christ, and the final episode in the Life of the Virgin narrative. Traditionally, the work portrays Christ lifting his right hand to crown Mary as she enters heaven. Over the years, various artists have taken liberties with the theme, evolving it through the incorporation of additional characters and elements of their own choosing. In many renditions, Christ and the Virgin are flanked by God the Father or an angel, the celestial legion, who assists the Virgin into position. Occasionally, the Holy Spirit as a dove or the whole Trinity bears witness to the ceremony. Raphael's depiction of the scene incorporates an empty coffin, and others include the dead being called to attend.

While Mockbee's drawing has strong associations and a similar compositional logic to the *Coronation*, particularly early depictions, the three dominant figures in Mockbee's drawing have no precedent in traditional paintings. This suggests that, while Mockbee's drawing is influenced by precedents, it is presented outside of the established Christian context. However, the reappropriation of such a well-established subject and its associations leads one to assume these are important references for Mockbee and demands a closer reading.

There are three primary figures in the drawing: a skeletal object that assumes the position of Christ, a black figure in the role of the angel, and a child carrying two ponies as the Virgin. The child, the most realistic inhabitant of the drawing, is the daughter of Lucy Harris, Rural Studio client and Mockbee's proclaimed matriarch of Mason's Bend, Alabama. The other two dominant figures in the illustration have an uncanny resemblance to two late avant-garde architecture projects. On the left is a figure assembled out of skeleton parts reminiscent of Aldo Rossi's *Cemetery of San Cataldo, Modena* (1971). On the right, the dark bloated figure references the theater of angelic creatures in John Hejduk's *Vladivostok* (1989). Initially, these architects may seem like unlikely heroes and out of place in this imaginary conception of Mason's Bend. However, each embodies a set of ideas that can be seen as influential precedents for Mockbee in the construction of a southern school of architectural thought.

Mockbee did not merely cater to the context of the Deep South; he leveraged it and produced it, giving definition and presence to the rural built environment in ways that no previous architect had. He imagined the territory as a propositional space, attempting to liberate it from reality by designing places where the familiar and the foreign could conspire. This context served as a platform for architecture that could speak to multiple audiences and ontologies as well as to the spirits of place and time. This drawing should be seen as a hypothetical context, but one that begins with the real and begins to push it into the realm of the imaginary. In Mockbee's conception of the world, the Deep South was an alternative paradise to imagine and build architecture, but one whose enduring scars denied the possibility of utopia. After the Civil War but prior to Mockbee, the Deep South went largely unconsidered by architects. It is a place with no substantial memory of a modern project or the so-called postmodern activities that followed, but it can also be imagined as a sleeping giant, a place awaiting transformation after a long period of stasis.

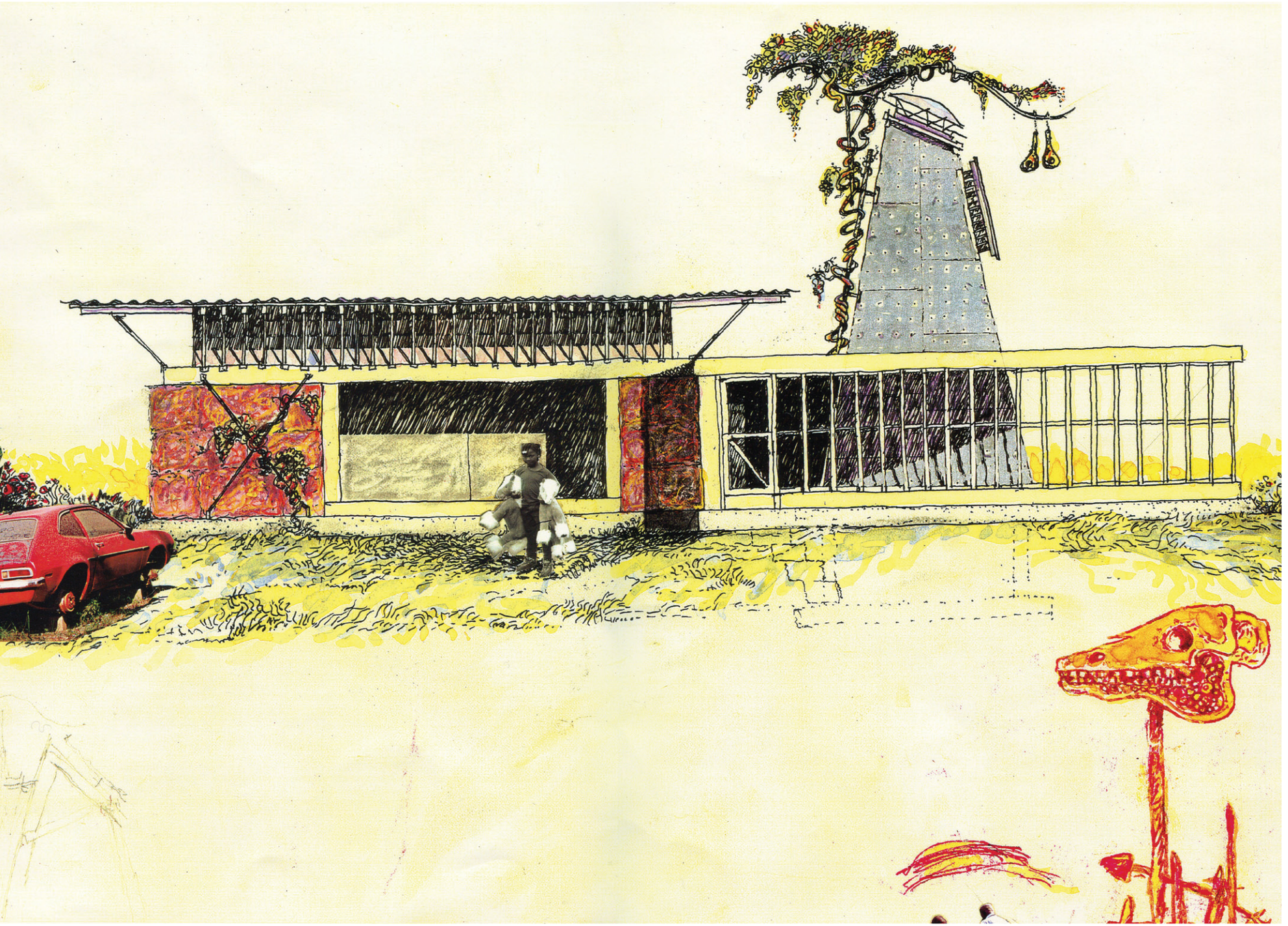
Acknowledging Rossi and Hejduk as latent references reveals much about the previously un-articulated intentions of Mockbee's architecture. One can understand Mockbee working with a similar set of ideas in order to produce a rural category of architecture. While I believe other precedents also informed his thinking, Rossi's obsession with typology and Hejduk's attention to characterization are constantly rehearsed in Mockbee's architecture. All three developed an idiosyncratic architectural vocabulary that produced a distinct body of work based on assembling and evolving vernacular and platonic elements; the authorial mystique of these geometries is given new resonance by the identifiable hand of each architect. They were obsessed with what gave an object and a place its individual qualities and its shared "whatness," its *haecceity* and *quiditty*. Each considered the "artistic" attributes of their drawings, poetry, and paintings as part of the process of structuring and making architecture to be essential and equivalent in value. Rossi's theory of typological artifacts for the city is reflected in Mockbee's attempt to imagine a complimentary set of rural artifacts. Rossi and Mockbee were also both obsessed with the spatial concept of *passageways*. As for Hejduk, his photographs of Lockhart, Texas and the *small architecture* manifesto cannot be dismissed, nor can the fact that both he and Mockbee drew heavily on mythology and literature. Both emphasized background tectonics, absorbing those characteristics, making them propositional, and producing a branch of formalism where geometry is driven by *traits* rather than mathematics.

The specific projects chosen to invoke Rossi and Hejduk are clearly intentional. Neither project is sited in the city proper; Hejduk's *Vladivostok* characters are nomads roaming in the urban wilderness and Rossi's house for the dead is imagined as city unto itself northwest of Modena, Italy. Rossi's city is one whose inhabitants have lost their spirit, but find their human remains permanently bound to the cemetery – a cultural object whose form is the artifact that secures the history and memory of the transitory lives of people. One can find the skull of a dead horse and references to fragmentary bones in several of Rossi's drawings for the project. The ossuary cube is a commentary on the modern social housing block: Rossi renders its failed promise of a collective as an evacuated central void. In Mockbee's drawing, the central block is made from a solid chunk of wood, out of which an oblique cut is carved and a right arm made from an arrow points to the other figures.

Those familiar with Hejduk will be aware of his fascination with angels and the Cult of the Virgin. Mockbee's drawing was made shortly after Hejduk's death. While Rossi speaks to the collective memory of death, Hejduk's *Vladivostok* gives us a story of angels. As objects, the nomads are siteless, but in their collective grouping they construct a context and place. The deviant sexual behavior of two angels has the effect of collapsing them into a single black figure. Once distinct, they have been rendered swollen and immobile, their differences erased as they become one. Their wings no longer provide the means to fly, and now appear to be a sign of excessive ornamentation, a disguise for the androgynous creature. Its matte-black finish renders it a two-dimensional void, an empty shell on the page. The silhouette of the creature produces a second layer, a point of entry within the mass-shape that bears a child who represents the Virgin. The child is born from a beast who shelters and nourishes it unconditionally under a roof made from the frozen wings of angels.

The exchange between Rossi's cemetery and Hejduk's angelic theater speaks to the preference for archaic and medieval fables over modern utopias. This narrative is used to construct an alternative superstructure – unscientific, illogical, and unquantifiable in its justification – for making architecture. The combination of the two projects and each architect's oeuvre reflects a temporal dimension. Architecture is continuously negotiating internal dynamics and conflicting demands: desire and death, cycles of beginnings and endings, successes and failures, as well as the ambition to produce something born out of its place and time. We are left to believe that Mockbee is constructing himself as the keeper of lost souls in architecture; he welcomes them into his world and restates their ideas while transforming them in the rural context of the American Deep South. As a result, each idea exists outside of the authors' worldly conception of themselves, and acts as a means of producing something *other*.

This case study of *Coronation* is only beginning to position Mockbee and his contribution to architecture in a more complete way. The medieval alchemy portrayed in Mockbee's drawing reveals an architect much more embedded in architectural discourse – historical and contemporary – than previously discussed or imagined. It is one of a series of drawings and paintings that have been previously thought of as independent from the built work, but must now be seen as an invaluable way of communicating the late architect's thinking and intentions. In this, they are not dissimilar from early projects by his contemporaries: Bernard Tschumi in his *Manhattan Transcripts*, Zaha Hadid's dynamic fragmentary paintings, or Thom Mayne's layered mechanical parts drawings. They can be seen as giving theoretical preference to the susceptibility and productive ambiguity of visual narratives over verbal explanations and written manifestos in their use of representation to collapse the speculative and the pragmatic. Mockbee's drawings, paintings, and three-dimensional constructions are an unexpected point of entry into an idiosyncratic body of work, and form of an ideological position through an archaic language.



Samuel Mockbee, Drawing of the Lucy House. Courtesy of the Mockbee Estate.