

What The Architecture Of U.S. Embassies Tells Us About America

Artist Enoc Perez's paintings of U.S. embassies show a changing world echoed in the buildings' design.

1/7 Installation view [Photo: courtesy artist and UTA Artist Space, Los Angeles]

BY MEG MILLER

2 MINUTE READ

During the election season, while everyone else's gaze was fixed worriedly on the White House, Brooklyn artist Enoc Perez was exploring government architecture farther afield. His new painting series, *Embassies*, arose from a sudden interest he had in our foreign outposts, just when politics closer to home felt ominous. His guiding question for the series: Can examining U.S. embassies around the world give an image of who we think we are as a country?

The paintings in *Embassies*, now showing at the [UTA Artist Space](#) in Los Angeles, render some of the grandest and most spectacular embassy buildings in a style that looks like a cross between an oil painting and a blueprint. Perez plans to paint all 294 U.S. embassies and consulates, but at this point he's done 10. They range from the [midcentury London embassy](#) designed by modernist architect Eero Saarinen to the [sleek glass-glad Beijing embassy](#) designed by Skidmore Owings & Merrill in 2008. And while each of the buildings conveys a sense of power and national identity, as a sovereign U.S. presence on foreign soil, Perez's series highlights a discrepancy between the older modernist buildings and the ones that are newly built—while the former portray a sense of hope and optimism, the latter seem mostly concerned with fortification and security.





Installation view [Photo: courtesy artist and UTA Artist Space, Los Angeles]

Interestingly, this dichotomy can also be glimpsed in just one of the embassies that Perez painted for his series. The Baghdad embassy was built by Catalan-Spanish architect Josep Lluís Sert in the 1950s, at the height of the postwar building program that saw many famous architects enjoy State Department patronage. The building was abandoned when the U.S. left Iraq in the early 1970s. The new building, designed by Kansas City-based Berger Devine Yaeger has a different feel: The walled compound, which cost \$736 million to build, contains 21 buildings, including offices, residences, and support facilities. “The old embassy looks like an oasis, and the new one looks like a fortress,” says Perez.

ADVERTISING





Enoc Perez, *U.S. Embassy Baghdad*, 2017. [Photo: courtesy artist and UTA Artist Space, Los Angeles]

Even for Baghdad, where the new embassy is a totally different building than the original one, Perez paints each of the embassies in their first iteration. He chooses to work off of photos taken immediately after the buildings are constructed so that he is presenting the version that is as close to the original design as possible. His process for creating the paintings involves layering the paint on the back of a piece of paper, then printing the drawing of the building directly on the canvas. When he lays the canvas on the paper, the colors seep through.

Perez says he understands why the design language of the embassies has changed over the course of several decades—since 9/11, as terrorist activities have been rising in the West, the U.S. has prized security more than it used to. Still, he likes to think of his paintings as optimistic, even if the some of the buildings themselves don't give off the same sense of faith in the future. "I found myself finding hope after doing these embassies because many of them give you the feeling of possibility," he says. "I hadn't realized this, but a friend [at the show's opening last weekend] commented that the skies in all of the paintings were blue. So I must be an optimist."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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