

Lucy Williams “Radiant City”

8 December 2026 | By DeWitt Cheng



Radiant City #1, 2025, Paper, Perspex (Plexiglas), Engineered wood, Cotton embroidery thread, Cotton crochet thread and Acrylic paint on Birch plywood panel, 43 3/4 x 89 3/8 inches.
All images courtesy of Berggruen Gallery.

In 1981, the journalist and novelist Tom Wolfe published *From Bauhaus to Our House*, a satirical attack on the prevailing International Style of architecture, the source of innumerable starkly austere, glass boxes and “boxes that refrigerators came in.” Wolfe skillfully mocked modernist aesthetic snobbery and art-fashion groupthink just as postmodernism was returning decoration to architecture. Nothing remains the same in art and aesthetics, however, and Modernist design (which never really went away) is back. So is nostalgia and even reverence for the Bauhaus visionaries who a century ago imagined a bright, democratic future to be achieved through intelligent, rational form, exemplified by today’s taste for mid-century design.

British artist Lucy Williams makes a convincing case for the Modernist style of Mies van den Rohe, Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, and others with her hybrid collages/bas-reliefs based on photographs of mid-century architecture combined with research into the furnishings that might now accompany them if restored. She depicts the buildings as new and pristine, untouched by neglect or the wrecker’s ball.

An Oxford native born in 1972 to working-class parents, Williams first learned about art while working at the MOMA Oxford Bookstore as a teenager. She attended tuition-free art schools in Glasgow and London, and enjoyed art-world success almost immediately, when David McKee (Philip Guston’s New York dealer) happened upon her work in a Royal Academy School of Art student show in 2003. McKee later introduced the artist to John Berggruen, with whom she has shown for about a decade. A large, informative, and well-illustrated catalogue has been published for the show.

The title of this exhibition, “Radiant City,” derives from LeCorbusier’s 1924 syndicalist/socialist utopia, which, though never built, was partially realized in several proto-Brutalist Unité d’Habitation apartment blocks in Marseille. Featuring then unusual amenities for apartment dwellers — east-west views for all units, built-in furniture, efficient kitchens, modular movable designs, rooftop gardens — the cast-concrete buildings were forward-thinking and influential. They were also exciting. Walter Gropius, the architect who founded the Bauhaus

in 1919, declared, at the 1953 opening of the brightly colored Marseille Unité, “Any architect who does not find this building beautiful had better lay down his pencil.” Williams found the idea of reconstructing these “communities in the sky ... these high-rise or semi-high-rise blocks that have everything people need to live” both commemorative and recuperative.

While there is a sociopolitical subtext to the “Radiant City” theme, it is the aesthetic aspects that predominate. Williams’ fearless and obsessive craftsmanship will be what you most take away from among the thirty-two constructions on display (all from 2024 and 2025 excepting *Mosaic Pool #2* from 2021). Williams, an inveterate collector of images, begins each piece by choosing a facade photograph found in books and magazines or on the internet and making a large, precise pencil drawing. This elevation sketch becomes the template from which hundreds to thousands of collage elements — paper, engineered wood, Plexiglas, birch plywood, wooden dowel, wool embroidery, piano wire, colored thread — are cut, usually by hand, with a scalpel. This is then painted and fixed in place, simulating walls, sidewalks, trees, lamps, curtains, books, Brancusian sculptures, vases, the reflective mirrors of swimming pools. Notable examples of such evocative imagery include *Indoor Pool (with tiled mosaic #2)*, *Indoor Pool (with tiled mosaic) #3*, *The Collector’s House #1* and *The Collector’s House #2* are miniature versions of her own abstract modernist artwork.

Having worked out the number of layers that will eventually be sandwiched in registration from foreground to background, Williams works from back to front, one layer at a time, on a flat worktable. The results are miniature worlds, building facades with every architectural detail simulated for us to peer into tiny, perfectly appointed proscenium stage sets.

The charm of these doll-house interiors is continually undercut by their artifice. The images have almost no depth; they’re flattened, as if pressed in a book. All are obsessively crafted simulacra of now-historic buildings, some no longer extant, that proclaim their artificiality and invulnerability to what has been called “the scrapes and scuffs of human life” that tarnish real, physical buildings.

A new series of untitled gouaches of repeated triangles or diamonds is derived from Williams’ study of Frank Lloyd Wright’s 1955 Taliesin wallpaper designs. “Abstract Assemblage” and “Threaded Assemblage” pieces incorporate parallel strands of colored cotton embroidery thread to establish or imply planes analogous to the Plexiglas windows of the architectural pieces, and composed of the materials used to simulate textured concrete. The quartered diamonds, aside from their abstract qualities, suggest building facades struck by bright, glancing sunlight, so Williams’s abstractions and facades marry nicely. LeCorbusier, it should be added, was active between 1918 and 1925 as a Purist painter, advocating a calmer, more classical version of Cubism. Some of Williams’s still-life objects fit right into that Purist aesthetic.



The Collector’s House #1, 2025,
Paper, Perspex (Plexiglas), Engineered wood,
Cotton embroidery thread, Piano wire
and Acrylic paint on Birch plywood panel,
29 1/2 x 48 1/2 inches.



Abstract Assemblage, 2025,
Paper, Perspex (Plexiglas), Engineered wood,
Cotton embroidery thread and Acrylic paint on panel,
14 3/4 x 10 3/8 inches.