

# STATION

**Esther Stewart**  
**Zip, Step, Site**

By Amelia Winata

Between 1933 and 1936, the American businessman and housing specialist Albert Farwell Bemis published *The Evolving House*, a three-part series of books that introduced the module as a standard for cheaper and more efficient housing production. Bemis's modular concept was based around the four-inch cube, a standard that he arrived at simply because, "a larger module would restrict flexibility in design, a smaller module would require a greater number of units of different dimensions to meet all conditions".<sup>i</sup> In 1946, following Bemis's premature death in 1936, the American Standards Association published *The A62 Guide for Modular Coordination*: a collection of suggested standards for various building industries, including clay, masonry and concrete units—all of which were based around the Bemis logic of modularity as a means of streamlining the building process.

There are two reasons why I mention Bemis in relationship to Esther Stewart's present exhibition *Zip, Step, Site*. The first is to establish that modularity is synonymous with modernity, proven in part by the fact that Bemis developed his theory at the beginning of the twentieth century. Secondly, the example of Bemis demonstrates the way in which, during modernity, modularity became synonymous with the amelioration of living conditions. As such, modern modularity was utopian in its outlook. The question, then, is what happens when we translate this very utopian and historically specific framework to the present day? This is one of the questions that Stewart asks when developing and presenting her modular paintings. After the utopian promise of modernity has ceased to exist, how do we live with modularity and its counterparts?

Architecture is the ideal analogy for the schism that exists between an imagined future and the eventual (often less than ideal) outcome. And it is, therefore, no accident that Stewart uses many architectural references and techniques in her practice to demonstrate a kind of off-modernism: that is, a model that is seemingly utopic in its outlook but which, in its execution, reveals several inconsistencies. There is, for example, a limit to the perfection of the design prior to the body being inserted into it. However, faults will only be realised when the inhabitant or user inserts their body into the space. These "errors" are analogised in Stewart's work. In fact, her works come to fruition through an extended process of translation and miscalculation due to more than one person working to bring them to life. After initially planning her paintings using Photoshop, Stewart's collaborator Murray Barker transfers these images to an architectural drafting program. Next, Stewart's studio assistant Marlee McMahon marks up the images before both Stewart and McMahon paint the works. It is no mistake that this process is so similar to the process of building design and construction, where several individuals and parties will work on one project over a period of time.

Each of Stewart's sizeable painting installations is composed of many smaller panels that have been framed and then fit together to make the larger work. But the smaller works also operate as their own, discrete entities, able to be hung without the other panels of which they were once a collective. Thus, if each large work is, in effect, a modular system, these works embody the reversal of modularity's traditional purpose: rather than acting accumulatively, they will eventually decumulate. What Stewart presents us with is a convincing semblance of systems—derived from modernity's insistence upon efficacy and standardisation—that has been tweaked to represent the contradictory logic of the present moment. It leads us to ask: was modernity ever as equalising as it claimed to be? Stewart would say no. It only seemed that way because it was built on exclusion. Those practitioners who "defined" the period belonged largely to a homogenous group, one with heteronormativity, male centricity and Eurocentricity at its core.

## STATION

From the vantage point of the present day, Stewart revises the fallacy of modularity's perfection—and she does this using subtle disruptions. If the utopian logic of modernism was considered through the lens of the total world—the Bauhaus school, the Constructivist lifestyle, the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*—then Stewart's fragmentation of images to create her paintings suggests a kind of off-modernism that negates many of the movement's key cornerstones. As her starting point, Stewart looked to ceramic tile advertisements from the 1970s and 1980s. In these advertisements, the tiles are represented as single isolated objects rather than situated within a broader architectural context. Given that these advertisements were produced within postmodernism, it is little surprise that they represent a sensibility of isolation. All in all, Stewart's paintings communicate a tension between the image of the modernist whole and post-modern singularity.

Indeed, this tension is exacerbated by Stewart's use of the computer modelling program to design her paintings: the digital "filter" acts as a catalyst for a complex tension between model and outcome in her work. Even if the program is a theoretically precise model for creating plans, the process of applying these plans to the aluminium support reveals the shortcomings of projection alone. While painting, Stewart often encounters glitches that were not previously apparent on the computer screen. For example, a pattern intended to follow an ABAB formula will reveal itself as ABAA. This, of course, is how architectural processes work. Often it is only during the physical execution of a project that any faults become apparent. Far from being undesired aspects of Stewart's work, these glitches are instrumental in revealing the kind of schism between image and experience—a metaphor for the experience of modernity. In addition to realising these visual glitches, the painting process also reveals a kind of fragmentation, insofar as the painter cannot attend to the entire image at once; the whole painting is too large for Stewart to physically work on or see clearly, thus necessitating the need to break it up into the smaller paintings, which she works on one at a time and in collaboration with her studio assistant.

If, in the 1930s, Albert Farwell Bemis presented a theoretically perfect model for modularity as a means of improving the standards of living, Stewart is now scrutinising this model—revealing imperfections that, in turn, expose the flawed nature of the modernist project itself. In mimicking the aesthetic logic of modernism, Stewart reminds us that even into the present day, we continue to laud a system that is more an image than it ever was a reality.

---

<sup>i</sup> Bemis quoted in Andrew L. Russell, 'Modularity: An Interdisciplinary History of an Ordering Concept', *Information & Culture* 47, no. 3 (2012): 265.