

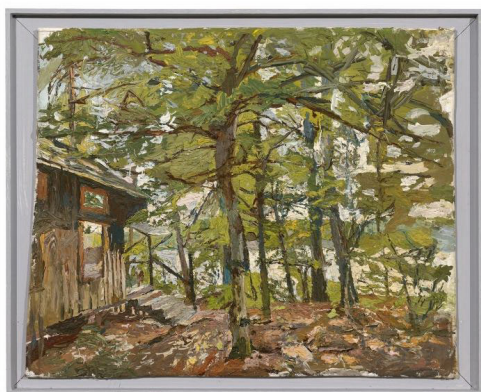
HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

The Painter of Everyday Life

Stanley Lewis finds a way to step aside and let the world become paint.

John Yau 3 days ago



Stanley Lewis, "Cabin at Lovell Lake" (2017), oil on canvas, 16 x 20 inches (all images courtesy Betty Cuningham Gallery)

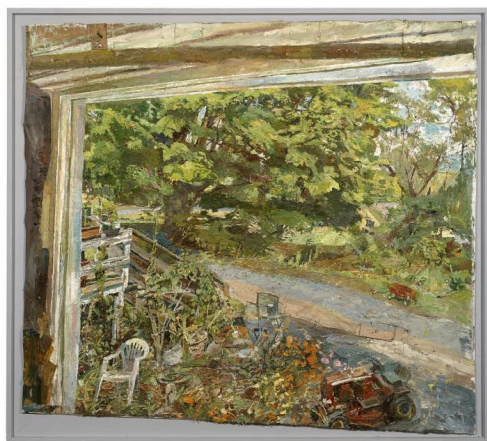
The unruliness of Stanley's Lewis's approach to painting and drawing matches the disorder of the world he depicts. His scarred, textured paintings and layered drawings exist somewhere between the stitched-together body of Frankenstein's monster and Piet Mondrian's precisely sectioned, asymmetrically divided squares. Lewis, who works from direct observation, is devoted to details as well as to establishing a believable space for everything he sees. He eschews

painterly shorthand of any kind, preferring the particular to the general.

This means that Lewis will cut apart a painting that he is working on and reposition the pieces, inserting a strip of canvas in the space between two sections or adding a new layer. The surface of one of his paintings is likely to be marked by staples and seams. And yet, despite all that these works have endured, they are tightly composed views — Chaim Soutine meets Nicholas Poussin in a backyard of rural Massachusetts.

If you stand close to a Lewis painting, which I strongly recommend you do in his current exhibition, *Stanley Lewis*, at Betty Cuningham (October 19–November 25, 2018), you might think that you are looking at a much used, raised-relief map of

hills and fields that has been cut apart, fitted back together, and stapled to a solid surface. At some point, as you slowly back away from the painting's rough, uneven surface, the view of an ordinary rural street, overgrown backyard, or cabin in the country — replete with myriad details — snaps into place.



Stanley Lewis, "View from New Studio Window" (2012–2017), oil on canvas, 65 x 63 inches

The transition from abstract brushstrokes to specific details is magical — I can think of no other word that quite describes what happens when an image emerges with such startling clarity from a welter of what seem like haphazard brushstrokes. The largest painting in the exhibition, "View from New Studio Window" (2012–2017), measures 65 by 63 inches; it is nearly square. It is a view of the artist's backyard framed by the large, empty studio window, complete with a red driving lawnmower in the lower right-hand corner and a white plastic garden chair in the opposite

corner. A folding chair sitting on the far edge of the foliage between them forms a triangle.

Beyond the two chairs and across the driveway, we notice a red wagon in the grass; together these three objects form a line leading our eye back into the painting. Meanwhile, the diagonal driveway enters from the lower right and rises slowly upward, past a large tree, until it reaches the horizontal band of the road.

The window frame, with part of the interior visible, locates where you are standing and looking. The driveway divides the painting into two unequal areas, with the lower section full of smaller details, and the upper part full of leaves with a patch of blue sky and white clouds visible in the distance. The diagonal driveway, the slant of the weathered white deck jutting in from the left, and the tilt of the two chairs convey the boisterous wildness of the world in full bloom, while the location of the objects suggests an underlying order; the world is somehow both structured and unfettered, and all the better for it.

In many of the paintings, Lewis's viewpoint includes an element dividing the painting vertically into two more or less equal halves, such as the tree that appears in the painting "Cabin at Lovell Lake" (2017) and in the pen and ink drawing, "Looking at Our House" (2016). All around it swarms a helter-skelter world of grass, leaves, branches, wires, houses, shadows, and sky. One gets the



Stanley Lewis, "View from the Back Door of My Studio" (2017), ink on paper, 24 x 22 inches

sense that Lewis uses the abstract axes of the things he sees as a means of measuring the world with remarkable precision as they find their place in the painting or drawing. The angle of sight changes as our attention wanders over the surface. We are looking down; we are looking to the left and to the right. We are looking up. Our attention is restless; we see disorder and order merge as Lewis lifts a banal scene into a highly concentrated domain of particulars, all while painting wet into wet. The light is so specific that you are convinced you can feel the exact temperature and humidity of the day.

For "Family Group" (2014–2018), which is unlike any other painting in this remarkable exhibition, Lewis cut up a family photograph of what appears to be his children and grandchildren, arranged the pieces, and then transformed what he saw into a painting, cutting and arranging the sections of the canvas to mimic the collage. The shift from the standing girl in the pink floral print dress near the composition's vertical axis to the two adults seated in the adjacent section is startling. Framed by an uneven white border, the painting takes what could easily be a sentimental subject — a photograph of different generations — and turns it into scene in which the fitted-together parts suggest the kind of separateness and unity, fissures and bonds, found in every family. It is a reading that comes out of Lewis's formal arrangement of the parts.



Stanley Lewis, "Family Group" (2014-2018), acrylic on canvas, 34 x 41 inches

What comes across in all of his work — the paintings and drawings — is Lewis's passion for attending to what he calls "the little things." In a world obsessed with big statements, grand gestures, expensive fabrication, and signature production — the celebration of capitalism — Lewis's reverence for the humdrum world where things lie scattered in an overgrown yard is truly radical. Rather than imposing his personality on the world, Lewis finds a way to step aside and let the world become paint.

In his essay, “Nature” (1836), in which he first formulated the metaphor of the transparent eyeball, Ralph Waldo Emerson declared: “I am nothing; I see all.” Lewis embraces the world as he finds it. The views he picks are easily overlooked and forgettable until he paints or draws them. He is not interested in making work that is entertaining or distracting. Everything he does is about the attention he summons up in himself. Shunning all signs of fashion and trendiness, Lewis’s fervor for the quotidian is one of the great accomplishments in contemporary painting.

[Stanley Lewis](#) continues at Betty Cuninghame Gallery (15 Rivington Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through November 25.

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