

HYPERALLERGIC

Art Reviews

Alone in the Dying of the Light

One thing that comes across in the drawings of Rackstraw Downes is the austere, almost monastic life he has lived in order to make art.



by John Yau



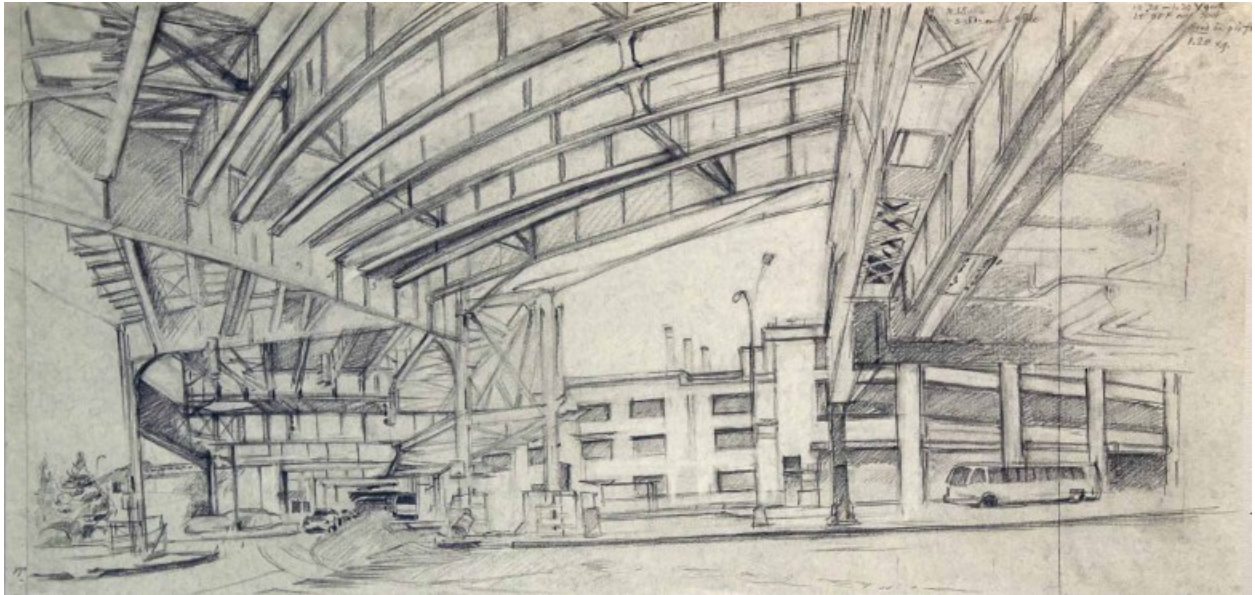
Rackstraw Downes, "Looking Down from the Window of a Friend's on the Upper West Side" (c. 1975), graphite on manilla paper, 24 x 30 7/8 inches (all images courtesy Betty Cunningham Gallery)

Rackstraw Downes is a plein air painter of the highest order. His fidelity to painting the environment he inhabits, to meticulously registering matter, light, color, and air, however drab and unpicturesque their appearance may be, is one of the great achievements in postwar painting. Downes is known for his panoramic views of New York City, rural Maine, and various parts of Texas, both along the coast and in and around Marfa. His paintings merge his seeing and the view in unexpected, thought-provoking ways, such as when he bends the horizon or uses the architecture of an overpass or a wide urban avenue to pull us into a deep space at once rhythmic and cacophonous. His ability to register minute details and vast spaces elevates his work to a singular place.

Rackstraw Downes: Drawings at Betty Cuninghams Gallery (January 27-March 19, 2022) shows a lesser-known side of this artist's work, his drawings. But that hardly encompasses what is going on in these profoundly moving testimonies to seeing, which Downes drew between 1975 and 2020, the majority done recently. Devoted to registering the particulars of the habitat he occupies, whether it is standing in a Texas desert near a mining site or on a corner in Manhattan, surrounded by cookie-cutter office buildings, his views have contracted for reasons he makes evident in the drawings.

In drawings such as "Looking Down from the Window of a Friend's on the Upper West Side" (c. 1975) and "Presidio Cell Tower" (2005), Downes was looking at the world before him. The lines could be dark and sturdy or thick and delicate. It felt like the connection between the eye seeing and the hand drawing was perfectly calibrated. What made this connection all the more powerful is that Downes never showed off, never drew more that

he had to, and seemingly had no signature line. The directness of these and other earlier drawings remains astonishing.



Rackstraw Downes, "Alabama Ave. Stop on the J Line, 2" (2006), graphite on paper with blue threads, 15 x 31 inches

Juxtaposed with the recent drawings, collectively titled *In the Artist's Studio*, each numbered and dated 2020, the larger, earlier drawings are of subjects and viewpoints we have come to associate with Downes, just as we connect the American flag and targets with Jasper Johns.

As conscious of the materials he uses as he is of the world he depicts, the series of drawings dated 2020 are done on spiral-bound notebook paper measuring around 9 1/2 by 12 1/2 inches. The paper, which is yellow-tan, blue-gray, or cream with blue threads, has an uneven, nubbed surface. As in his earlier works, he draws with graphite. The difference is that in the earlier drawings Downes primarily made contour lines, translating the jumble of what he was seeing into a rhythmic order, as in

“Alabama Ave. Stop on the J Line, 2” (2006), which measures 15 by 31 inches and was done onsite.

The place where Downes has chosen to stand and look in all directions is telling. Descending down from the paper’s top edge, the girders of the elevated subway line overhead — the dominant form in the drawing — guide our gaze down the sheet of paper and to the left, where the subway runs directly above the street extending into deep space. On the drawing’s right side, the girders extend down and span the street that passes before the artist. Beyond the columns supporting these girders we see a nondescript three-story building. Here is where Downes’s genius comes through. From where he is standing and drawing, the architecture of the girders and buildings frame an irregular trapezoid of sky above the center of the picture plane. That open space is crucial to the drawing, and rings true to my urban experience (which is surely not unique) of not wanting to feel hemmed in or overwhelmed by everything around me. At the same time, the curve of the girders overhead registers Downes’s gaze, which follows them as they move through and shape the space in front of him.



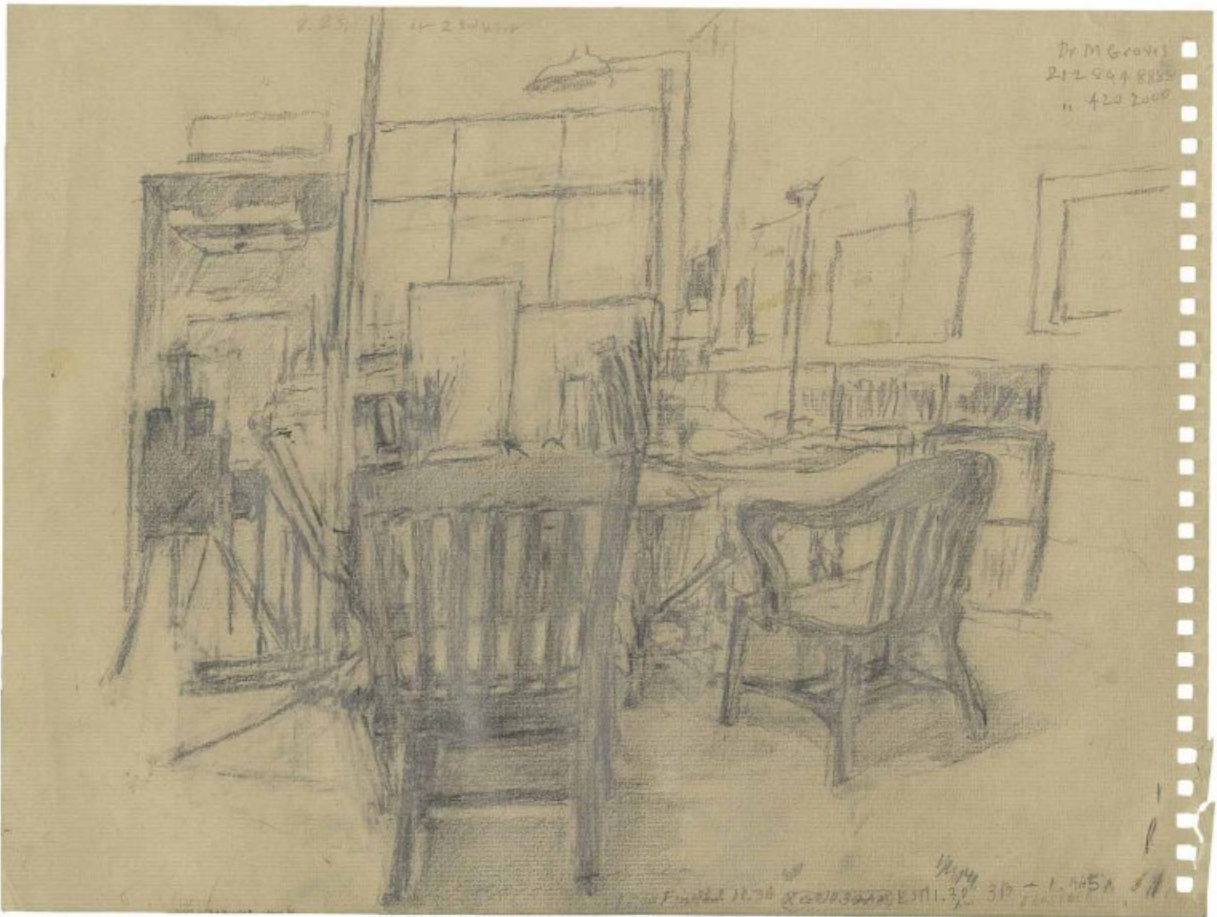
Rackstraw Downes, "In the Artist's Studio XV" (2020), graphite on cream paper with blue threads, 9.5 x 12.625 inches

In the drawings collectively titled *In the Artist's Studio*, it is evident that Downes can no longer stand outside on a busy street for hours to work on a drawing, or return to the same place day after day to make a painting. And yet, true to seeing and the joy it brings him, he focuses on his physical circumstances and the things before him: his bed, walker, closet, easel, brushes, books, chairs, radiator, work table, windows at one end of the room, and a wall of drawings.

Although this was likely not Downes's intention, one thing that comes across in these drawings is the austere, almost monastic life he has lived in order to make art. Another is that there is no

division between his art and his life; he works where he lives and lives where he works, especially now that his mobility is restricted. More importantly, there is not an ounce of self-pity or any attempt to elicit the viewer's sympathy. He does not present his situation as special.

The use of a porous line and the slight shading in forms, such as the back of a wooden chair, has replaced the firm, sinuously cadenced contours of Downes's plein air drawings. What comes through are feelings of fullness and bareness, an acute sense of contradiction inflected by an awareness that one day he will become these disposable things, which are likely to outlive him.



Rackstraw Downes, "In the Artist's Studio XVI" (2020), graphite on yellow-tan paper, 9.5 x 12.625 inches

We live in a world where the aversion to looking at what we are has become as commonplace as breathing. If we can look elsewhere, we do. The art world is littered with gaudy baubles and high-priced distractions, much of which is celebrated as good auction house bets. Mortality and time passing are not fashionable subjects.

Downes doesn't look away from what he knows is inescapable. "In the Artist's Studio XV" (2020) is a meditation on mortality, at once powerful and contemporary. Everything in the drawing is at eye level, which suggests that we are seated in a chair looking at an empty bed, a walker, cane, ladder, the inside of a clothes closet with sliding doors, something framed on the wall, the edge of a dresser. The bottom left side of this cream paper with blue threads is missing. Two stains are visible: one in the bottom middle and the other, made of two marks, in the lower right corner. Time has already encroached on the drawing.

The fact that Downes's drawing is completely secular should be noted. There are no signs or symbols we associate with transcendence or a life after this one. This, the drawing tells us, is it: a bed, things to help us remain mobile, clothes, and a place to sit. The sliding ladder at the far right of the closet will probably not be used by Downes again. Whatever is stored above the closet is closed off. One thing this humble drawing does is expose how crass we have become as a culture, standing beside our latest favorite works of art and posting selfies on social media.



Rackstraw Downes, "In the Artist's Studio XVII" (2020), graphite on cream paper, 9.5 x 12.625 inches

Downes's drawing is the record of someone who did not join that crowd. The light lines and tender, gentle markings that evoke the rows of clothes, their empty volumes, as well as the sensitive interaction with the paper's rough surface, result in something rare in today's art world: a great, honest, unflinching view of a humdrum life, which, if we are lucky, we will one day live long enough to experience.

These numbered drawings are the chronicle of a person who knows he is leaving the world. Contrary to Dylan Thomas's macho call, "Do not go gently into that good night," Downes does not rage "against the dying of the light." That he has never had a

comprehensive museum show in the city he has lived in and lovingly painted and drawn for most of his life is a cultural disgrace.