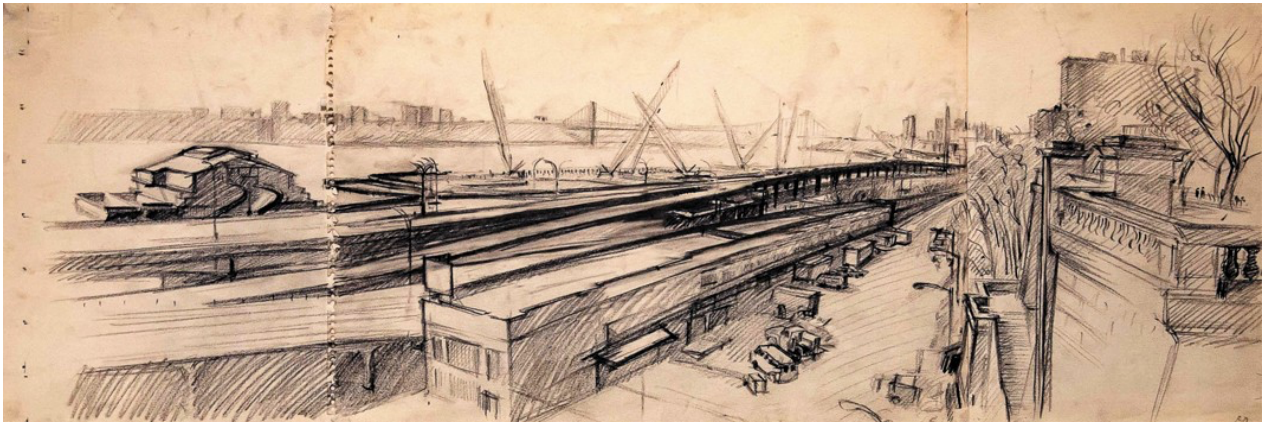


SLANT

A LANDSCAPE WE ALL HELP TO MAKE

Barry Schwabsky on Rackstraw Downes



Rackstraw Downes, *Hudson River Sewage Treatment Plant Under Construction*, 1996, graphite on paper, 12 × 35".

WHATEVER YOU THINK *realism* means, Rackstraw Downes is certainly some kind of realist—and, moreover, one whose elective subject matter is landscape. That in itself suggests a quixotic temperament in an artist born in 1939 whose immediate contemporaries include any number of abstract, Conceptual, and performance artists but few realists—at least of his stature.

And even among painters pursuing realism in his generation, Downes looks like an outsider. Despite the fact that he edited a valuable collection of Fairfield Porter's writings, there's nothing in his work of the intimism and subjectivity of the artists who followed Porter's lead in updating what Downes identified as "the almost accidental unpretentious domestic situations in Vuillard." Nor—though his landscapes might seem, at first, to have been seen through a fish-eye lens—did Downes take his cues from the camera, as the photorealists did. A relevant precursor might be found in the cool empiricism of Philip Pearlstein, but Pearlstein used the studio as a closed-off visual laboratory, whereas Downes, until recently, was an odd sort of "post-studio" artist.

Strangely enough, Downes's fascination with land—urban or otherwise—as a site of conflict and contradiction shows more affinity with the ideas of Robert Smithson than with any of his fellow painters. Downes's urge has been to move out into the world, to let himself be surrounded by its visual chaos, to soak up the particulars as well as the general structures both of dense urban sites and of those less-seen places that, as Smithson once put it, "exist without a

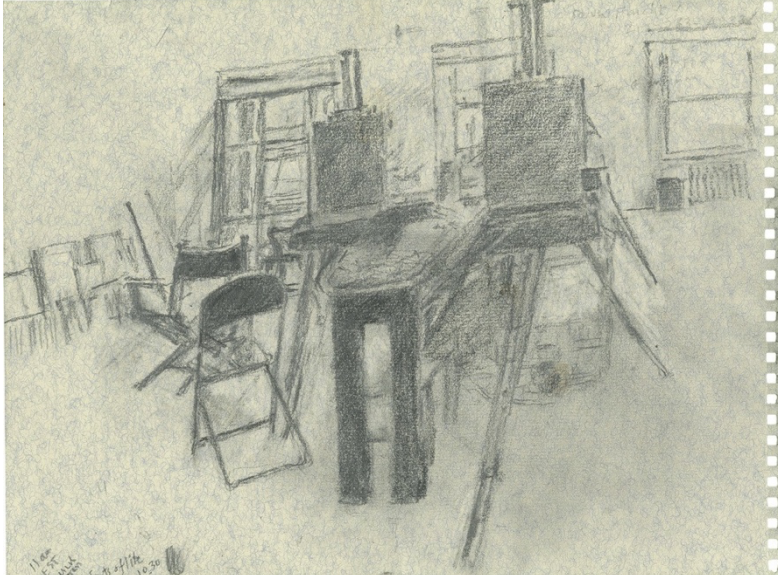
rational past and without the ‘big events’ of history”—where the “landscape was no landscape . . . a kind of self-destroying postcard world of failed immortality and oppressive grandeur.” Without explicitly addressing Smithson’s striking notion of “ruins in reverse,” Downes expresses much the same thing in observing, “Garbage and sewage and industrial effluent are characteristics of a landscape we all help to make. Structures rusting in the New Jersey Meadowlands”—one of his recurrent painting sites— “are to US industrial might as the tombs and aqueducts of the Campagna were to the Roman Empire.”

A recent exhibition of Downes’s drawings at New York’s Betty Cuninghame Gallery offered a striking opportunity to reconsider his art and to witness its late-life entry into a new and even more profound phase. Far from informal sketches, Downes’s landscape drawings can be elaborate—surprisingly so, given his insistence that he has never painted from them, that they have never served as later reference material for a studio practice. He paints as he draws on the spot—a big painting can take up to one hundred plein air sessions. “I draw,” he has said, “not to establish anything but to gain acquaintance with a place. A drawing, for me, is like a first acquaintance with a person.” Downes’s earnest quest is to know his subject as deeply as possible. He likes to quote John Constable: “We see nothing truly till we understand it.”

How much time does it take to understand a place? I got to wondering how many windows could be seen in the buildings depicted in one of the earliest drawings at Cuninghame, *Looking Down from the Window of a Friend’s on the Upper West Side*, ca. 1975, but stopped trying to count after about a hundred. I started to think drawing those windows must have been a kind of meditation that allowed the artist to stick to one spot without getting distracted. But it goes beyond that. The piece makes you think about the mass of anonymous humanity inhabiting New York’s apartment buildings more than it makes you think about one man doggedly limning rectangles within rectangles.

Other cityscapes aren’t quite so insistent on the details; they’re still there, but in a subtler way. *Hudson River Sewage Treatment Plant Under Construction*, 1996, hits you with its sweeping diagonals, which seem to lead you at speed across its nearly three stretchy feet of surface—the long, low building of the title; the elevated Henry Hudson Parkway behind it; and then, more faintly, the New Jersey Palisades and the George Washington Bridge in the background. And yet there are funny particulars that draw you in, like the row of vasselike balusters along the overlook in the lower right—loosely indicated but legible enough—or the little dots of people under the tree in the distance farther up the right edge. What those particulars tell you is that what this drawing presents is not, as it might first appear, a single scene but a multitude of scenes stitched together. The eyes that observed the overlook did not do so while noting the shapes of the buildings across the river—these things could not have been seen simultaneously.

As with most of Downes’s work, it is clear that what we see in this drawing has been synthesized from a multiplicity of viewpoints, a synthesis achieved first of all through a kind of cinematic panning—a pivoting from a fixed position—but also through a shifting depth of focus. And in the drawings, unlike in the paintings, this multiplication of perspectives is made patent at a physical level through the additive construction of the paper support. *Hudson River Sewage Treatment Plant Under Construction*, for instance, is drawn on three sheets, of which the wider central one retains the torn holes that show it to have come from a wire-bound sketchbook. So the artist started the drawing with a more narrowly horizontal view in mind



Rackstraw Downes, *In the Artist's Studio XIX*, 2020, graphite on paper, 9 1/2 x 12 5/8".

be slightly angled or, more often, arched. Indeed, the way everything curves toward and away from the viewer is another clue, maybe the most blatant, indicating the shiftings of viewpoint that go into making these drawings. The effect is disorienting, pleurably so, because it gives you the feeling of having tapped into an expanded sensorium, of being able to see far more than you have ever been able. But the pleasure doesn't efface the disquiet. At first, I found it hard to put my finger on why, but then I thought of something I had read long ago, a remark by Maurice Merleau-Ponty that seemed to define the difference between looking at a picture and being in the world: The reason is, quite simply, that "the world is all around me, not in front of me." By contrast, the world that appears in these drawings does not fold itself around me but veers away. Its grandeur does not embrace me.

Like most of Downes's work until fairly recently, seven of the nine large on-site drawings in the show were of exterior scenes. Just two of the most recent, from 2006, showed interiors—one of a fellow artist's studio, the other of a barn in Marfa, Texas. An intelligent bit of hanging placed the latter next to a third work from the same year, a scene in Brooklyn, *Alabama Ave. Stop on the J Line*, 2. The rhyme of the arching girders supporting the elevated tracks with the similarly curving roof beams of the barn serves as a reminder that this artist does not see outdoor and indoor space so differently—in fact, in part through the way he lets the lower portion of the barn interior fade into mere wisps of graphite lines so that the walls lack definition, the barn seems as capacious as the great outdoors, despite its occurring in one of Downes's rare vertical works.

Also in the show were twenty-two drawings dated 2020. They're all smaller than the earlier pieces, and they all depict the same place: Downes's studio in Manhattan. Seeing them, I at first wondered why he ever maintained a studio, given that his paintings and drawings had previously all been made elsewhere. But no matter. It's lucky that, when the Covid lockdowns came along, he had a roomy place to retreat to and much to look at. When one notices that a recurring presence in the recent drawings is a walker, one realizes that, for this artist in his eighties, the pandemic was not the only limitation on his mobility.

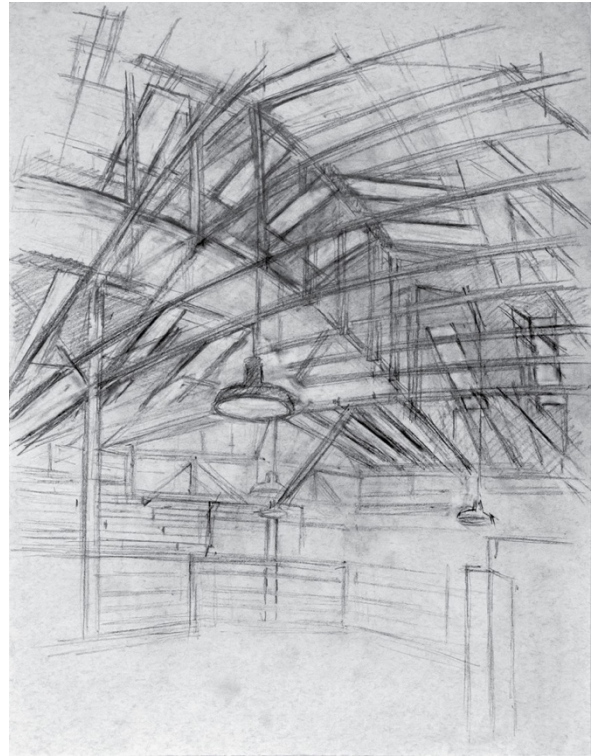
and then added sheets on the left and the right to arrive at the thirty-five-inch-wide work. And the two side panels have been drawn with a notably softer, looser touch, the marks less densely massed, than the center panel, as if to demonstrate that the fluctuating vision cannot, after all, see everything at equal resolution.

Another oddity: Other than the top and bottom edges of the paper itself, there are hardly any horizontals. Lines that approximate the horizontal always turn out to

Yet in no sense does one feel that confinement to the studio represented a diminishment of scope for Downes. Far from it. The world inside these walls is as vast as Texas, as wide as the lordly Hudson, containing all the space necessary for Downes's art. Like those side panels in the 1996 rendering of the sewage-treatment plant, the new drawings rely on a softer mark than is typical of his big landscape drawings. In comparison with the earlier work, these possess a slightly blurrier or mistier quality. Yet within their smaller compass, they are just as carefully observed, though the artist's attentiveness is less evenly distributed: The blurring-out of the image toward the bottom of the page in several of the drawings (e.g., *In the Artist's Studio II, V, and VIII*) conveys a sense that space has become harder to measure. Where does the observer stand? In others, where chairs or easels occupy the foreground (*In the Artist's Studio XVI or XIX*), one's own position feels more securely anchored. Yet even when the paraphernalia of life and art seem most uncertain of access, the very sight of them affords comfort.

These studio drawings are suffused with a very different feeling-tone from that of the landscapes: one that is more loving, more imbued with gratitude. Going out to observe the scene in the Meadowlands decades earlier, Downes had declared, "I looked, and did not think of things as good or bad, but as *present*." Well! Even God, as I recall from Genesis, was prepared to find that what he saw was good. Maybe Downes considers such judgment a divine perquisite. But to me, the world of Downes's recent drawings looks like a world of good. And it doesn't swerve past in a whoosh that the eye can follow with admiration; it comes close, offers itself to the hand, exudes warmth, extends a reassuring embrace.

Barry Schwabsky is a coeditor of international reviews for Artforum. His recent books include Gillian Carnegie (*Lund Humphries, 2020*) and a collection of poetry, *Feelings of And* (*Black Square Editions, 2022*).



Rackstraw Downes, *Bull Barn Interior, Marfa*, 2006, graphite on paper, 26 × 20".