

# THE HUDSON REVIEW

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- An Excerpt From-

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## At the Galleries

At Betty Cuninghame Gallery, in another part of the Lower East Side, “Stanley Lewis: Paintings and Works on Paper” allowed us to savor some of this marvelously obsessive artist’s efforts to translate his hypersensitive scrutiny of his surroundings into marks on a surface. Many of the works, made between 2018 and 2022, were of the immediate surroundings of Lewis’ Massachusetts home, painted or drawn on the spot, usually over a long time. The subject matter seems straightforward, often things Lewis sees when he steps out of the house and has seen consistently over the years, at different times of day, in different seasons and weather. (The show also included works made in places where Lewis has spent extended periods, such as Lake Chataqua, where he has often taught.) I’m stressing the artist’s close connection with his subjects because the duration of his observation informs his work. He often repeats motifs, returning to the same seemingly happenstance gathering of utilitarian objects on his property—a weathered table, a folding chair, a cinderblock, a length of snow fence—things not placed, but simply there. Lewis strives to be absolutely faithful to perception, trying to find painterly equivalents for all the incidents in his yard or the incredible multiplicity of midsummer New England vegetation, while also acknowledging the moments before burgeoning leaves blocked what he saw, and, at the same time, accounting for the alterations in his observations

caused by turning his head, his small movements, or wind. Lewis' best paintings, like the exhibition's *View of the Garden with Orange Fence II* (2020) and *Backyard with a Wagon, Table and Chair* (2022) bear witness to endless campaigns of work, with loaded surfaces and the traces of countless shifts and adjustments, some as radical as adding to the canvas or layering on patches to allow for modifications. Lewis' color, while never literal, is intensely evocative. Somehow, he conjures up a palpable sense of place or cool spring light or summer afternoon sunshine with his crusty accumulations of paint. The tension between the paintings' brute physicality, and their seemingly effortlessly discovered subject matter, keeps us closely engaged, even when we've recently seen other versions of the same motif. (The same is true of his similarly labor-intensive drawings.) It's as if Lewis were rehearsing the entire history of perceptual painting and embodying the passage of time, while we watch. But we have to look long and hard. When we do, those apparently unpretentious views of his back yard, his garden, or the side of his house prove to be uncompromising and deep mysterious. The mystery never fully disappears, but we can sense both Lewis' pleasure in putting paint on canvas and the ferocity of his gaze.