

ArtSeen

On-Site: Major Paintings by Rackstraw Downes & Stanley Lewis

By [Alfred Mac Adam](#)



Stanley Lewis, *Houses on Jekyll Island*, 2017. Acrylic on canvas, 23 x 34 inches. Courtesy Betty Cuninghame Gallery.

In a bygone age of college football, Doc Blanchard “Mr. Inside,” and Glenn Davis “Mr. Outside” made headlines for the West Point Military Academy team winning several championships with their backfield game, running the ball on the inside and carrying it on the outside. They’ve now been replaced by a couple of landscape painters: Stanley Lewis on the inside and Rackstraw Downes on the outside. Both are *plein-air* artists; together, they take the landscape tradition in a new direction. Unlike the Hudson River School painters, they are not consecrating a virginal New World landscape, nor are they following the lead of Corot, creating beautifully rendered but imaginary places. They do not seek the picturesque, or endeavor to subjugate wild nature to artistic will. These two find places—or perhaps the places find them—in nature overtaken by human beings, devoid of the picturesque, and that no one, most certainly, would ever call virginal.

There may be some subconscious link between artist and site, but the artists themselves probably can't explain why *this* place rather than *that one* demands to be turned into art. By the standards of traditional landscape art, the places portrayed in these fourteen paintings created between 1986 and 2023 are unworthy of depiction, and that defines the relationship between Downes and Lewis to the world outside the studio. Both artists depict real places in their landscapes, but their approaches are totally different. Lewis limits his scope to concentrated areas, while Downes specializes in wide open spaces. Taken as a didactic visual essay on landscape painting, the show reveals how each artist translates what he sees into his own idiosyncratic kind of art, viewing the unfolding world before them and translating that process into paintings that refuse ever to declare themselves finished.



Rackstraw Downes, *BASEBALL FIELD IN RED HOOK PARK FROM CAMPO UNO, NO. 4*, 2002. Oil on canvas, 15 x 39 1/4 inches. Courtesy Betty Cunningham Gallery.

In its characterization of the vacation resort off the coast of Georgia, a modestly sized (23 by 34 inches) acrylic on canvas, *Houses on Jekyll Island* (2017), exemplifies the modus operandi of Mr. Inside, Stanley Lewis. The first thing we notice is the frame of the painting: Lewis makes his own frames, which have a rough-and-ready aspect and are intrinsic to the work. The frame separates the art from the natural world, isolates it, and at the same time alludes to Lewis's process. The lower, ragged edge of the canvas casts an irregular shadow, calling attention to the idea that, yes, Lewis has cropped his canvas here, but he could add to it if he chose.

Then we focus on the composition itself. Where an eighteenth-century painter would place trees, or other *repoussoirs*, on either side of a painted street to direct the viewer's gaze, Lewis lets the street go its own way, skewing perspective in a Cézannesque manner. Our eye may follow the street, but it's going to have to backtrack to take in the green wall and palm tree on the right side of the painting. That view takes us diagonally across the street toward other structures and trees. There are bricks along the painting's lower edge, continuations of Lewis's handmade frame within the painting. Then we notice the surface: Lewis has made cuts in the canvas, adding extra strips of the material to widen it, modifying in order to accommodate everything in his peripheral vision. Thick paint reinforces that idea of a perpetual work-in-progress, as do the violent slashes in the upper right of the canvas. The pink plywood peeking out from beneath the ragged canvas is also part of his aesthetic of the unfinished. In a rejoinder to Beckett's "You must go on. I can't go on," Lewis seems to say "I'm done here but I'm never going to be done here."

Downes, the Mr. Outside to Lewis's Mr. Inside, paints expansively. *A Fence at the Periphery of a Jersey City Scrap Metal Yard* (1993) tells us what we need to know about Downes's aesthetic of infinite space. First, the painting's bizarre dimensions, 15 by 116 inches, make us realize we're going to have to move back and forth to comprehend it. Up close, peripheral vision fails because we cannot see the painting in its totality, so we must backpedal until we can. But when we do, we realize that is the point, that Downes has assigned himself a task he cannot finish: the process he sees unfolding before him, decides he must paint, but knows he cannot catch in its entirety.

A junkyard is simply not the stuff of idealized landscapes. We are, presumably, standing on the west side of the place at sunrise with Manhattan (including the Twin Towers) off in the distance. So, the rising sun is our light source; we have a road our gaze follows until it dead ends at a fence. The modulated blue of the sky, dark at upper left and right extremes and fading into paler sunlight at the center gives us a geometric point of view, which is then negated by our desperate attempt to grasp the totality. It isn't possible. Downes is explaining his dilemma—he wants to capture this scene as the light inexorably changes, but paint dries, and the process stops. So he gives up, a defeat that is simultaneously a triumph. Landscape painting has a future, writ large in the work of these masters.

Contributor

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