

## ONLY SEE

*The work of Rackstraw Downes and Malcolm Morley.*

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

*Downes favors woebegone subjects, such as industrial zones and highway structures.*

His “passion for facts, his desire for exactitude, makes for a sort of urgent dryness, an excruciatingly low-keyed, almost insensible skin-of-the-teeth element of poetry in his painting.” That’s from a lecture by the English-born, radically realist American painter—and fine critic—Rackstraw Downes, who has a show of new landscapes, cityscapes, and interiors at the Betty Cuninghams Gallery. He was discussing the seventeenth-century Dutch master Pieter Jansz. Saenredam and his paintings of church interiors, which can appear starchy and bland at a glance but, with contemplation, secrete an uncanny intensity.

Downes’s own meticulously descriptive pictures of the woebegone subjects that he favors—industrial zones, Texas deserts, highway structures, the New Jersey Meadowlands—do that, too, with a deadpan restraint that has kept his fan base small but ardent throughout the half century of his career. I’m a member. We cherish Downes’s evidence that painting can be truer than photography to the ways that our eyes process

the world: reaping patches of tone and color which our brains combine very rapidly, but not instantly, into seamless wholes. He renders everything in his specialty of long, low panoramas, often encompassing more than a hundred and eighty degrees, which he always paints—on-site, over many sessions—head on, without either perspectival organization or fish-eye distortion. His avoidance of charm in his subjects and suppression of expressiveness in his touch serve the dumbfounded wonderment you can feel when—perhaps rarely enough, in this frantic era—you stop somewhere, look around, forget yourself, and only see. Downes’s is a puritanical passion, burning cold rather than hot but no less fiercely for that.

Born in Pembury, Kent, in 1939, Downes first came to the United States as a high-school exchange student. After earning a degree in English at Cambridge, he returned and enrolled at the Yale School of Art, where, while painting abstractly, he was nudged toward naturalism by teachers and charis-

matic elders including Neil Welliver and Alex Katz—the “School of Maine,” as they and such related contemporaries as Yvonne Jaquette might be called, owing to the locale of their homes or summer retreats. Downes took to painting landscapes, his prominent brushstrokes becoming progressively smaller as a commitment to sheer perception grew. (Look closely: each tiny stroke is as considered as any by Cézanne.) Such art could seem conservative in the mid-nineteen-sixties—the peak moment of Minimalism and the last dance of modernist abstraction—but, really, Downes was of his time. His astringency acknowledged a skepticism, rampant then, about the survival of painting as an important art. Painting had to prove that it could do new things.

Brice Marden, Downes’s contemporary at Yale, infused minimalistic slabs of encaustic paint with smoldering emotion. Downes rhymed the old medium’s physical identity, as oily stuff spread flat, with the givenness of whatever in the world we can’t help but see. One painting in the show finds leafless trees in a grassy lot flanked by an empty street and distant buildings and almost encircled overhead by a highway ramp. The ramp’s geometry feels bizarre, but lots of things might when attentively beheld. (Noticing such appearances can be a lonely kick, as when you tell someone, “Look at that!,” and they don’t or won’t register what you mean.) Downes’s preference for unpromising subjects incidentally anticipated a trend in photography, which came on strong in the seventies, to explore American places whose ordinariness, exposed after hiding in plain sight, could trigger rushes of sublimity.

Now seventy-eight years old and in ill health, Downes may not be able to add to his signature feats of months-long, open-air endurance at his easel, where he came to know specific rocks, bricks, weeds, and stretches of asphalt as one would the nape of a lover’s neck. (Saenredam, too, conveyed that sense of knowledge so thorough and profound that it possessed him and, by means of painting, comes to possess us.) Indoor scenes compensate. A lovely rendering of Downes’s Greene Street studio, in SoHo, caressed by daylight from large windows, is a pocket panorama. When you look at it, note the span from cab-

inets on the right to bookshelves on the left—an impossible sweep for a camera lens. (We should remember to be grateful to clever nature for giving us heads that can turn.) The picture has time in it, the residue of innumerable side-to-side shifts of scrutiny. You can't imagine walking into that space, but only because you are already in it and have been, vicariously, for a sizable stretch of your existence. The initial effect may be slightly repugnant—an "urgent dryness," indeed, like a concentrated essence of boredom. So be warned. But for some of us there's a gradual rapture.

Malcolm Morley, another British-American renegade from abstraction in the nineteen-sixties, died this year, at eighty-six, after a turbulent career of eccentric masteries and forthright weirdnesses that bounced into and out of fashion and critical esteem. He was a great painter off and on. A current show at Sperone Westwater of some of his last works, with a few early gems thrown in, won't exalt his reputation, but its antic perversity—with flatly painted, surreal tableaux, wizardly in composition, of toy medieval knights on fabric-armored horses—is well worth witnessing. It extends a category of regressions to boyhood fantasy that have included painted and sculpted flotillas and flocks of First World War-era warships and fighter planes. Morley had an eventful early life. During the Blitz, a V-1 buzz bomb damaged his family's home and obliterated a balsa-wood model that he had made, and which he treasured, of the battleship H.M.S. Nelson: a poignant memory that he recovered, he said, in psychoanalysis. As a teen-age runaway, he served spells in reform schools and then two years in prison for burglary and theft—petty crimes short of his dreams of big-time heists, he said, but "I always got caught"—during which he studied art by correspondence course. He then attended proper art schools, was excited by a show of American Abstract Expressionism, and emigrated in 1958. Leading New York artists including Barnett Newman welcomed and encouraged him.

In the mid-sixties, Morley uncorked a novel style—painstakingly copying banal postcard, travel-brochure, and calendar images of ships and vacation spots

or of reproduced paintings, most notably Vermeer's "The Art of Painting"—which art historians generally credit as the starting gun for Photo-Realism, a movement that engaged scores of painters in diffident imitations of the camera's Cyclopean eye. But Morley's pictures (among them, unforgettably, a Kodachrome-lurid scene of a quite insanely happy family at a beach) were gamier. As ideas for art, they may be said to qualify as proto-postmodern, to the extent that that means anything, for their tension between the Duchampian readymade (with white borders signalling thingness) and self-abnegating obsession. Selfhood soon resurfaced in such masterpieces as paintings that fretted precise images of the Los Angeles Yellow Pages with seething painterly incident. The results, beginning in 1969, are like violent collisions of persnickety objectivity and mad abandon. They were also gorgeous. (That yellow!) Morley then jettisoned realism and joined the initiation of another world-changing movement, neo-expressionism. His jungle landscapes of the early eighties felt as though they were bent on fighting through the peskily insistent presence of plants and animals to reach a reborn Abstract Expressionism. What was, say, some tiger up to? Morley as much as implied no responsibility for it.

If ever an œuvre cried out for a retrospective exhibition, it's Morley's. In 1984, the Brooklyn Museum imported a show from London's Whitechapel Gallery that had won the artist the first annual Turner Prize. He has had only a single retrospective in this country since, in Miami. I fancy one that would focus on the onsets of Morley's stylistic convulsions, including several that I haven't mentioned here, to emphasize the demonic restlessness of his sensibility, which could hardly be farther from that of, say, Saenredam. It would help to explain his personal appeal to other artists of many kinds. (Richard Serra wrote a gnomic catalogue preface for one of his shows.) He had a sense of vocation akin to falling off a cliff and hitting all manner of surprising things on the way down. He was fun though somewhat alarming company, by the way. To touch on his work is, in the way of Walt Whitman, to touch the man, an experience none too gentle, but plenty invigorating. ♦



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