



Rackstraw Downes: *Paintings & Drawings*

by Alfred Mac Adam

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“So I said to the person I was with, ‘You know I think I’d like to paint the whole world on a postcard,’ and in a funny way, though I never thought about that remark until years later, that was what I did, in a way.” Downes makes this remark in an interview with David Yezzi, and we see its consequences in these twenty-nine drawings and paintings made between 2009 and 2017. Postcards are, of course, double-sided: a picture on one side, a message on the other, but here the picture is the message.

Which is to say Downes engages in slight of hand (in all senses): he is certainly dexterous, paying minute attention to every brushstroke, but he is also deceptive. He would like us to believe he is a realist because his work is realistic, but in point of fact nothing here—the deserts, the studio spaces, the street scenes—is actually real, because what we see is not what Downes actually saw but how he translated what he saw into drawings and paintings. Just as the postcard may be a picture of something we’ve seen—a work of art, a place—Downes’s work is, ultimately, a metaphor of experience. These depopulated locales may in fact have an existence in the real world, but their interest is not intrinsic to them. They only have value because Downes has remade them. And this is exactly where Downes inserts himself in a tradition that sidesteps abstraction: for the nineteenth-century artist, anything could be art, from Van Gogh’s worn-out boots to Cézanne’s apples. The subject is not the issue; only the image matters.



Rackstraw Downes, *Skylit Loftspace, NYC (standing)*, 2015. Oil on canvas, 24 × 27 inches. Courtesy Betty Cunningham.

Take one of Downes’s more preposterous titles: *Under a U-Turn on the Ramp from the George Washington Bridge to Rte. 9A North* (2013). Accompanying this magnificent painting are no fewer than four graphite drawings, some stated to be a “section of clover leaf seen from Riverside Drive at 168th St.” or a view from “under the ramp from the George Washington Bridge to Route 9A North.” Do we really need to know the ultimate source for any of these images?

No, because the only real context is the painting itself. But the blue sky caught in the frame of the ramp, the winter-bare tree standing stark in the sunlight evoke in us a complex reaction: emotions related to winter, death, and the promise of spring resurrection; esthetic admiration for the way in which the artist has contrived a frame within a frame to organize his representation of objects in space, and, through the four drawings, the idea that nothing here is given freely, that the ultimate “postcard” is the result of arduous labor.

The oddest example of how Downes turns the ephemeral into the immortal is an anomalous, small-scale (29 × 12) oil on canvas: *Outdoor Passageway at 15 Rivington* (2016). Here he redefines the “site-specific” by squeezing himself out the back door of Betty Cunningham’s gallery and depicting the narrow space between her building and the one behind it. Before us, a closed metal door, the pavement leading to it virtually a parody of Downes’s own hyperbolic desert perspectives because there is no vista here, only the tiniest of alleys. Above, improvised supports for air conditioning units and a meager patch of sky. It’s a dead end, but even here where nature is reduced to a single weed, Downes finds a subject, a “postcard from the edge,” to be sure, but a reminder that where there’s death there’s art.



Rackstraw Downes, *Outdoor Passageway at 15 Rivington*, 2016. Oil on canvas, 29 × 12 inches. Courtesy Betty Cunningham.

To accompany the exhibition, Rima Yamazaki has made a forty minute film, *Rackstraw Downes: a Painter*. There is also a new collection of Downes’s writing on art, *Nature and Art are Physical: Writings on Art, 1967 – 2008*.

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