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ART

Painter Rackstraw Downes's Methodical Vision to Extract Poetry from the Mundane

As many artists develop visual ideas through fits of revision and reworking, the consistency in the evolution of paintings in Rackstraw Downes's current exhibition is remarkable.

Peter Malone 22 hours ago



Rackstraw Downes, "Under a U-Turn on the Ramp from the George Washington Bridge to Rte. 9A North" (2013), oil on canvas, 23 1/2 x 37 in. (59.69 x 93.98 cm) (all images courtesy of Betty Cunningham Gallery)

One of the more engaging features of Betty Cunningham's gallery season opener, *Rackstraw Downes: Paintings and Drawings*, is its function as a standard gallery show. Considering Downes's longevity and the consequent temptation to offer a mini-retrospective, the gallery's recognition that his work remains an ongoing venture sets just the right tone, with one notable adjustment.

Along with a dozen canvases completed in the past six years, visitors get a bonus of 16 preparatory studies, mostly drawings, that hang beside the final painting. The most comprehensive of these pairings is the display of "Under a U-Turn on the Ramp from the George Washington Bridge to Rte. 9A North" (2013) a two by three-foot canvas accompanied by what seems to be a full record of its development. To its immediate right hang five pencil drawings arranged sequentially. They increase in complexity as the project advances, each building on the information gathered in the preceding sheet. With margin notes tracking the date and time, the drawings illustrate how Downes

methodically nurtures the seminal vision that brought him to this characteristically odd site, a shady roadside under curving bridge ramps in upper Manhattan.



Rackstraw Downes, "Section of Clover Leaf Seen from Riverside Drive at 168th St (I)" (2009), graphite on yellow paper with blue threads, 9 3/8 x 12 1/2 in. (23.81 x 31.75 cm)

The progress of his pencil as it travels from one page and one workday to the next reveals levels of observation in steadily advancing steps, with no signs of reduction or radical adjustments. It bespeaks a patient realization of the sweeping peripheral space that is the hallmark of his work.

As many artists develop visual ideas through fits of revision and reworking, the consistency in the evolution of this and other paintings in the show is remarkable. That each session builds with little editing from the first sketch

to the final canvas suggests that Downes commits the image and its many subdivisions to memory at a very early stage.



(seated)" (2015, oil on linen, 24 x 38 in. (60.96 x 96.52 cm)

For example, in the earliest drawing in the series leading to "Under a U-Turn," titled, "Section of Clover Leaf Seen from Riverside Drive at 168th St (I)" (2009), the structural essence is already evident and remains intact from one study to the next. The ellipse that forms the dramatic, grotto-like framing in the final painting is not yet closed in this first sketch but is clearly implied. Thus, its reiterations register with unusual precision.

The drawings that follow gently elaborate toward its outer edges but change nothing in the proportional distribution of its interior.

Because each stage of a Downes painting takes place *en plein air*, his canvases tend to be a manageable size. That they compress weeks, if not months, of careful study and execution within the average two-by-three-foot frame may account for some of the painting's jewel-like intensity. Yet his apparent enthusiasm for bold color is unmistakable. A preference for robust contrasts, particularly in rendering light and shadow, adds to the brilliance of "Duarte Square" (2009), a visually

dramatic picture of an ordinary NYC playground. The stark difference between the central tree's violet shadow and the warm brick-red pavement surrounding it is reminiscent of Corot's *plein-air* canvases of the 1830s.



Rackstraw Downes, "Sodium – Sulfur 4 Megawatt Battery System, Presidio, TX" (2013), oil on linen 26 1/4 x 72 in. (66.68 x 182.88 cm)

"Skylit Loftspace NYC (seated)" (2015), a view of the artist's studio, of which there are several in the exhibition, is less dramatic, though Downes manages to extract a full spectrum, ranging from middle-tone blues to milky washes that confess to the ochre ground beneath.

A few canvases, notably a six-foot-long industrial Texas landscape titled "Sodium - Sulfur 4 Megawatt Battery System, Presidio, TX" (2013) — which would likely seem starkly barren to urban dwellers — speak to the artist's willingness to challenge his dependence on striking vistas. A meticulous rendering of a power plant's back end, it's not the most appealing of scenes, though its gradient blue sky, slashed by crisscrossing power lines, makes for an acerbic commentary on the American landscape and our abuse of it for the convenience of devices like the laptop I'm typing on. At a small social gathering I once attended, Lois Dodd suggested the presence of a political undertone in reference to a Downes painting that featured a line of garbage trucks at the Staten Island landfill. She thought it could be a demure commentary on environmental issues. Perhaps someone may one day examine the possibility that Downes's work is sparked, here and there, by a low-voltage political current.

There is certainly enough evidence that he's willing to step outside his comfort zone. Witness the eccentric and uncharacteristically vertical canvas "Outdoor Passageway at 15 Rivington Street" (2016), apparently the product of many hours spent in the cramped and typically disheveled Lower East Side ally that sits astride the gallery. Like fellow traveler Dodd, who is known to paint the backs of flowers, or Antonio Lopez-Garcia, who finds inspiration in an open refrigerator, Rackstraw Downes's métier is to entice poetry from the mundane.

[Rackstraw Downes: Paintings and Drawings](https://hyperallergic.com/462264/rackstraw-downes-paintings-and-drawings-betty-cunningham-gallery/) *continues at Betty Cunningham Gallery (15 Rivington Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through October 14.*



Rackstraw Downes, "Outdoor Passageway at 15 Rivington" (2016), oil on canvas, 29 x 12 in. (73.66 x 30.48 cm)

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