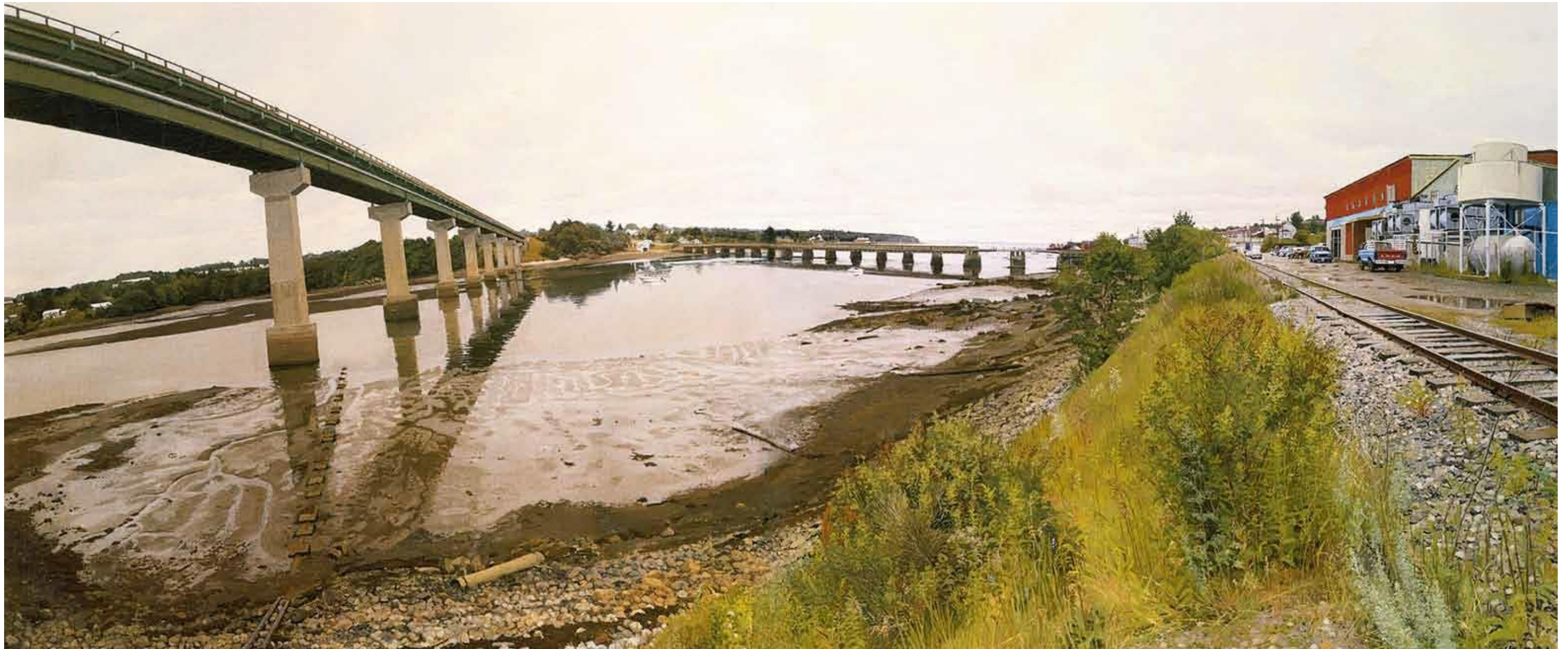


Rackstraw Downes Infrastructures



BY STEPHEN MAINE

Since taking up landscape painting in the early 1970s, Rackstraw Downes has devised and refined a quirky brand of realism in which close attention to visual fact vies with an idiosyncratic conception of pictorial space. Juggling fidelity to the ever-changing appearance of the world, truth to his own perception of those appearances, and loyalty to the formal exigencies of his paintings' design, the artist, over time, has moved in on his subjects, bringing himself and the viewer into

and underneath features of the industrialized American landscape, both urban and rural. English-born and now dividing his time between New York and Texas, Downes has segued from a pastoral mode of depiction to one that is narrative, reportorial, akin to documentation. Three recent exhibitions have provided a superb opportunity to come to grips with the scope of Downes's achievement, his working methods and the linear poetry of his self-described "empiricist's" vision.

That vision is inextricably linked to vantage point, as was demonstrated in "Rackstraw Downes: Onsite paintings, 1972-2008," recently at the Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, N.Y. In his graphite drawings, oil sketches and finished paintings, Downes works exclusively in the presence of his subject (whether *en plein air* or indoors), endeavoring to render reality in a manner true to how he observes it as he scans the scene. In his essay "Turning the Head in Empirical Space," Downes avers that, particularly in the landscape, observa-

Rackstraw Downes: *The Mouth of the Passagassawaukeag at Belfast, ME, Seen from the Frozen Foods Plant*, 1989, oil on two-part canvas, 36 3/8 by 84 1/4 inches. Private collection. Courtesy Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, N.Y.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

"Rackstraw Downes: Under the Westside Highway" at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, Conn., through Jan. 2, 2011.

Downes is uninterested in the renaissance tradition of perspective, that construct for creating an orderly space predicated on a stationary vantage point.

tion inevitably entails a horizontal scan.¹ as early as 1974, for example in *The Dam at Fairfield* (12½ by 46½ inches), downes made canvases that are three or four times as wide as they are high. in that painting, roughly cleft in half by the titular structure, the right side looks upstream, the left downstream. Space is warped: there exists no such view. downes is uninterested in traditional perspective, that Renaissance construct for creating an orderly space predicated on a stationary vantage point. He embraces disorder and messiness, and would rather include all relevant details than exclude any. in his works from the '70s, those details are frequently social or economic in significance. *The Dam at Fairfield*, a deceptively sunny painting, represents a site of conflicting claims on natural resources: a river jammed by logs being sent down-

stream to a pulp mill, and the recreational fishermen and boaters the papermaking industry threatened to displace.

downes eschews photography as an aid to painting, scorn- ing what he regards as the camera's simplification of color, generalization of form and perpetuation of one-point perspective. Yet his method seems to exaggerate the curvature of the earth and the distance between near and far, begetting distortions similar to those of a "fish-eye" or wide-angle lens. the artist's detractors seize on the apparent conflict between his insistence on the unimpeachability of direct observation and what they see as a mannered, pseudo-photographic result that is not true to how we perceive things and is thus not truly realist.² downes sees himself as departing radically from convention, painting the world as it appears rather than as it appears in other artists' paintings. His case is substan- tially supported by his sheer technical ability, through which details of color, light and movement are utterly convincing.

a tour de force of this descriptive technique, *The Mouth of the Passagassawaukeag at Belfast, ME, Seen from the Frozen Foods Plant* (36 ¾ by 84¼ inches, 1989) depicts low tide from a weedy perch on the riverbank. With a narrow range of grays, downes renders a silty expanse of rippling mud that reflects the highway

overpass above. Rivulets formed by the receding water echo the overcast sky, which is covered with heavy clouds in an even finer range of grays. in this dreary, shadowless view of the industrial side of town, effluent emerges from a drain pipe exiting the plant into the water, presumably unseen by the occupants of the sailboats moored in the distance.

in Recent YeaRS, downes's interest in the formal aspects of painting has begun to equal, though not eclipse, his attraction to the hidden narrative of human endeavor. *Snug Harbor, Metal Ductwork in G Attic* (16 by 168 inches over- all, 2001) offers four slightly differing views of snaking air- handling equipment that has been efficiently tucked into a cramped space; downes was clearly struck by the work- men's ingenuity. in the attic's half-light, the shiny aluminum surfaces recall those of an aging Minimalist sculpture; with wan tans, grayish blues, off-whites, pinkish grays and dulled violets, downes marries a closely observed palette with an analytical approach to rendering space and surfaces.

the crown jewel of the parrish exhibition is a trio of canvases from 2008 collectively titled "Farm Buildings near the Rio grande" that incorporate the painter's vantage point as

part of their subject. two of the paintings are 24 by 90 inches; the smallest is 24 by 62 inches. each contains a different view of the same corrugated-metal shed, its prominent overhanging roof providing an oasis of shadow in the blazing sun. the space depicted in each panel includes the points where downes stood while painting the other two. as a group, the canvases suggest a swirling movement; the effect is slightly hallucinatory and even rhapsodic in a dusty, deadpan way.

in contrast to most landscape artists, downes often moves the objects of greatest physical mass from the bottom of the support to the top: "One of the things about landscape is that the weight is usually on the ground So it interests me to reverse this situation and put the weight at the top. One good way to do that is to stand under a bridge."³ the exhibition "Rackstraw downes: under the Westside Highway" currently at the aldrich contemporary art Museum centers on a three-panel painting of a scene near the Hudson River in upper Manhat- tan. it is thoroughly panoramic in scope, the painter having captured a full 360-degree experience, and the works are hung side by side, separated by only a few inches. painted first was *Under the Westside Highway at 145th Street: The Bike Path, No. 2* (2008), punctuated by towering, ashen pairs of concrete



Left, *Snug Harbor, Metal Ductwork in G Attic*, 2001, oil on canvas, four panels, 16 by 168 inches overall. Iannan Foundation, Santa Fe.

Below, "Farm Buildings Near the Rio Grande," all 2008, oil on canvas. Left to right: *South Side of the Barn, A.M.*, 24 by 90 inches; *West End of the Barn, P.M.*, 24 by 62 inches; *Under the Barn Roof, A.M.*, 24 by 90¼ inches.



"under the westside Highway at 145th Street," all oil on canvas. Left to right: *The North River Pollution Control Plant*, 2008, 19 by 45¼ inches; *The Bike Path, No. 1*, 2009, 19 by 65½ inches; *The Bike Path, No. 2*, 2008, 19 by 48¼ inches.

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columns among the foliage and the rusty iron. The elevated thoroughfare's unlovely underside gleams darkly across the top of the canvas. Next to be painted was *The North River Water Pollution Control Plant* (2008), in which that same underside zooms into the distance, to the left of the somewhat spectral main structure. This panel has the "branching" composition Downes often settles on, with vistas opening up to the left and right of the ostensible subject. *The Bike Path, No. 1* (2009) was painted last, and it hangs in the center, closing the spatial gap between the other two. Behind a chain-link fence, under the highway (seen heading north in this view) cyclists and runners move along a ribbon of tarmac. Because each panel accounts for slightly more than 120 degrees, features and objects recur at the left and right extremities. The vista across the Hudson River to New Jersey at the right of the second panel, for example, is reiterated at the left edge of the third.

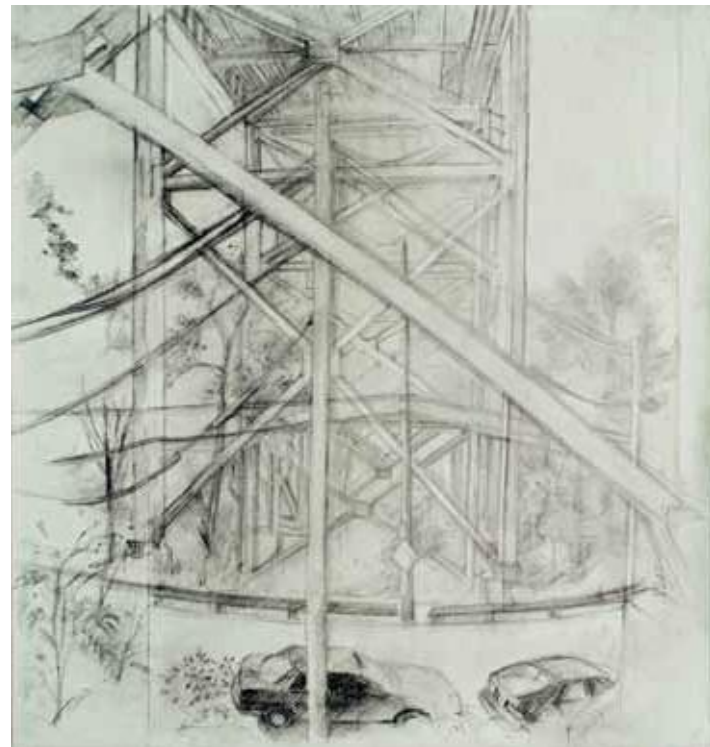
After studying English literature at Cambridge, Downes attended the Yale School of Art from 1961 to 1964, earning an MFA. After working briefly in the hard edge/color field mode, he broke with abstraction in the late '60s, Alex Katz and Fairfield Porter having provided models of how to shuffle the sometimes contradictory imperatives of observation and composition. Downes spent most summers from 1964 to 1989 among farmers and homesteaders in rural Montville, Me., appropriately enough for this native of Britain who professes no "new World sense of the antithesis between unspoiled nature and human culture; a landscape to me is a place where people live and work."⁴

Inspired by 19th-century artist Eugène Fromentin's book *The Masters of Past Time*, Downes traveled through Belgium and Holland in 1972 and '73. While in Rotterdam, he was wowed by the density of narrative detail and the overarching abstraction of Bruegel's *Tower of Babel*. (The Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen owns a small version of the painting that hangs in Vienna.) In a lecture delivered shortly after he returned from Holland, Downes cites "Bruegel's alert curiosity and relish for the whole observable world, in which the minute is the natural component, not enemy, of the grand."⁵ The coexistence of the minute and the grand in Downes's own work sometimes prompts comparison to the painters of the Hudson River School, but Downes denies any influence. Cole, Church and their contemporaries painted from drawings and oil sketches rather than from direct observation. They were master studio technicians, but for Downes, "technique is a skill you can learn so you don't have to respond to what you are looking at, so you don't have to be inquisitive about it."⁶

"Rackstraw Downes: A Selection of Drawings: 1980-2010" at Betty Cunningham Gallery underscored the inquisitiveness—the sensuality and aliveness—behind Downes's precise touch. A few recent works attest to his ongoing engagement with panoramic views of the industrialized landscape, such as *Presidio—Beehives near a Canyon*,

on *Camino del Rio* (9 5/8 by 44 1/2 inches; 2004) in which an orderly array of boxlike beehives contrasts with a distant (and distinctly Cézanne-esque) mountain. But steadily, spaces have become less expansive, more contained: not so much Brueghel as Piranesi. With its receding series of enormous Xs, *Henry Hudson Bridge, A.M.* (25 by 23 5/8 inches; 2004) finds visual drama in pure engineering. A rare vertical composition, *Stairway in Building E* (41 by 12 inches; 1999) pits a serpentine railing's roller-coaster curves against dozens of stabilizing horizontal steps. The artist's impish humor is in full effect in *Cast Hall (Lawrence & Josephine C. Wilkinson Hall) N.Y. Academy of Art* (20 by 20 1/4 inches; 2009) in which the casts themselves are summarily indicated, and the expansive hall's forest of columns, ceiling beams and waxed floor receive his focused attention.

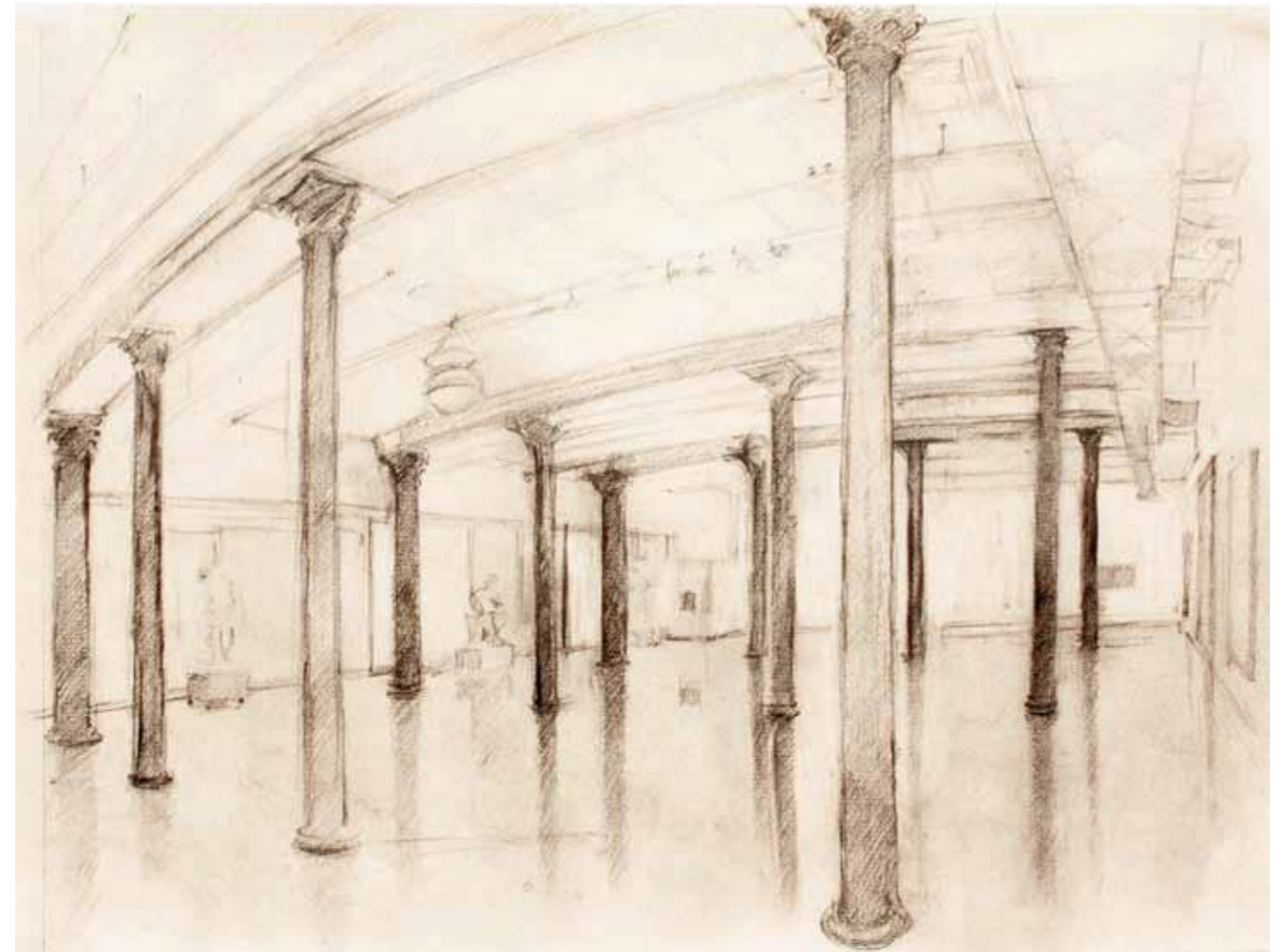
Downes's distinctive process involves drawing on-site, transferring the drawings to canvas in the studio, then transporting the canvases back to the site, where he completes them. In his exploratory fieldwork, Downes often conjoins sheets of paper to include those features of the view that he decides are integral. Louis Finkelstein (1923-2000), a visiting professor at Yale during Downes's time there, introduced the young artist to the technique. "At the time," Downes told me, "it was quite innovative. Louis's wife, Gretna Campbell, was doing it. No one else."⁷ In retrospect, it is unsurprising that a painter who finds space so elastic would adopt a readily mutable format in which to represent it.



Above, *Henry Hudson Bridge, A.M.*, 2004, graphite on paper, 25 by 23 5/8 inches.

Opposite, *Cast Hall (Lawrence & Josephine C. Wilkinson Hall) N.Y. Academy of Art*, 2009, graphite on paper, 20 by 20 1/4 inches.

All photos in this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Betty Cunningham Gallery, New York.



As the Cunningham exhibition made plain, perhaps unintentionally, what is most distinctive about Downes is his dynamic drawing, where his idiosyncratic empiricism cuts loose, rather than his color, which, though keenly observed, is naturalistic and unadventurous; it is convincing in its accuracy, not its invention. The compositional joyride of *Under the Off-ramp from the George Washington Bridge* (17 by 37 inches; 2009) provides, at the extreme left, a sight line up the rocky grade and into the sorry shadows under the roadbed; at the right, a glimpse of light through the trees lining a walkway giving onto a view of the Hudson. Clogging the drawing's center, advancing rather than receding in space, a battalion of huge columns buttresses the ribbon of concrete overhead; you can't see the traffic, but you can almost hear it roar.

In order to capture the effects of a specific light at a particular time of day, Downes routinely makes dozens of trips to a given site, often over months or years, since the light changes with the seasons. The apparently momentary view captured in each painting is in fact a record of his cumulative response to the subject over long durations. These richly detailed canvases, in which perception itself is the ultimate subject, ask from the viewer the same focused looking that went into their making. That scrutiny, the painter's labor, becomes the viewer's pleasure.

1 Originally delivered as a lecture at the Chinati Foundation, Marfa, Tex., on Oct. 9, 1999, "turning the Head in empirical Space" is reprinted in Sanford Schwartz, Robert Storr and Rackstraw Downes, *Rackstraw Downes*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 2005, pp. 129-167. 2 For example, at an Artcritical review panel on Oct. 1, 2004, critic Jerry Saltz said of the pronounced curvature of the horizon in the Downes paintings then on exhibit at Betty Cunningham, "I don't believe it. It's become a wee bit of a tic." The discussion is archived at artcritical.com. 3 *Rackstraw Downes*, New York, Betty Cunningham Gallery, 2008, unpaginated. 4 "The Tenses of Landscape," reprinted in *In Relation to the Whole: Three Essays From Three Decades—1973, 1981, 1996*, New York and Paris, Edgewise Press, 2000, p. 53. 5 "What the Sixties Meant to Me," reprinted in *In Relation to the Whole*, p. 30. 6 "What Realism Means to Me," reprinted in *In Relation to the Whole*, p. 48. 7 In conversation with the author, Aug. 15, 2010.

"Rackstraw Downes: A Selection of Drawings" was at Betty Cunningham Gallery, New York, June 3-Aug. 5, 2010. "Rackstraw Downes: Onsite Paintings, 1972-2008," curated by Klaus Ottmann, was on view at the Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, N.Y., June 20-Aug. 8, 2010. "Rackstraw Downes: Under the Westside Highway," curated by Harry Philbrick, opened at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, Conn., on June 27, 2010, and continues through Jan. 2, 2011.

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