

Art in Review

Rackstraw Downes

Betty Cunningham Gallery
541 West 25th Street
Chelsea
Through Saturday

Rackstraw Downes excels at painting marginal, sometimes desolate landscapes — whether urban or rural — with tremendous sympathy and slightly distorted spatial effects, which render them absorbing and oddly majestic. He paints looking at his subjects — en plein-air, as the

French say. For the most part the paintings in this show, his 17th solo gallery exhibition in New York since 1972, depict the under-structures of bridges and highways around Manhattan or abandoned sites in the high desert of southwest Texas, around Presidio or nearby Marfa.

The Texas paintings especially have a palette of sunny tans and browns and dark greens that evoke Corot's paintings of Italy, but without the bucolic subjects or the surface creaminess. Mr. Downes's deft paint-handling is textured but dry, devoid of flourishes. His works are modest rectangles quite a bit wider than they are high: he determines the extent of a scene by including everything he can see, rotating his eyes side to side from a fixed position. This gives his images a wide-angled curve of space that is visually exciting and even grand. This spatial curve is usually echoed by curving elements within the paintings, whether the concrete rings of a crumbling military cemetery or the tracks of all-terrain vehicles in Texas or the spans of the George Washington or Henry Hudson Bridges in New York.

In keeping with Mr. Downes's unromantic brushwork and subject matter, when he decides that a given scene needs to be larger he simply staples strips to the

sides, tops or bottoms of his canvases (which are mounted on board), and keeps on working. The visible staples become just one more set of facts among others. The primary ones pertain to the patient recording of the environment and create an ethical content of the kind often found in Robert Adams's landscape photographs. Interests in light and space notwithstanding, Mr. Downes is also documenting the structures, both eroding and robust, with which man presumes to mark the earth.

ROBERTA SMITH



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, BETTY CUNNINGHAM GALLERY, NEW YORK

Rackstraw Downes's 2009 painting of a dance floor in Presidio, Tex., at Betty Cunningham.