

One-Two Punch: Stanley Lewis at Betty Cuningham

by [David Carbone](#)

Stanley Lewis at Betty Cuningham Gallery
September 7 to October 25, 2014
15 Rivington Street (between Bowery and Chrystie)
New York City, 212 242 2772



Stanley Lewis, *Boat on the Beach, Late Chautauqua*, 2013. Oil on canvas, 37 1/4 x 47 3/4 inches. Courtesy of Betty Cuningham Gallery

Stanley Lewis's work is the obverse of what one might think of as a downtown aesthetic. His paintings and drawings, now on view at Betty Cuningham's new Lower East Side home, carry a real one-two punch. Here are deliberately banal subjects — backyards, suburban scenes, calendar views of Lake Chautauqua — transformed by a brilliant but tortured way of realizing a painterly image that can yield work of rare satisfaction and ambition.

The fascination he arouses comes partially from an almost irreconcilable tension between working directly from observation, with exacting attention to small

forms, and a very contemporary, almost sculptural painting process that builds a work with obsessively dense materiality. Cloth and paint are built up by cutting and repositioning pieces of worked canvas that will be reconnected, at least partially, with a loaded brush, painting wet into wet, layer upon layer. This often leaves bare staples, gaps, and deep scars that resist integration with the image.

In his larger works, Lewis is often seen trying to correct initial estimates of how much surface is needed to chart the movement of the eye from near to far, so that the space of the picture can make sense as a world. As he focuses on a specific area, it expands to fill his field of vision,

fragmenting a sense of the whole. If Lewis wanted to cover the tracks of his labors he easily could, but the point of his work, evidently, is not a view of nature alone, nor is it just a correspondence between built up paint and the presence of things. Instead, we are invited to move back and forth from the world depicted to the traces of his process. Ultimately, Lewis's sucker punch is to shift our attention from quotidian views to his inner experience of looking and making, to the meditative adventure of what painting can be.

As I was looking back and forth between three terrific works in the gallery's back space, Lewis's distinct quality of light on partly cloudy days became evident. In *Boat on the Beach, Lake Chautauqua* (2013) and even more so in *Backyard Jekyll Island, GA* (2014), a subtle pink tone suffuses the air, transforming the everyday into a glimpse of reality enchanted. This surprisingly recalled Jess's magical *Translation* paintings, which also share with Lewis a charmed light and an irrational play between image and a lapidary surface of thickly applied paint, erupting here and there into incongruous lumps. The third painting, *Winslow Park, Westport* (2010-2014), and the most recent work at the gallery's entrance, *Matt Farnham's Farm with Truck* (2014), share a cooler blue-green quality no less captivating than the others.



Stanley Lewis, Hemlock Trees Seen from Upstairs Window in the Snow, 2007-2014. Pencil on print paper, 59 3/4 x 68 3/4 inches. Courtesy of Betty Cuningham Gallery.

Structural ideas vary from picture to picture: a traditional *repoussoir* of dark trees frames the central vortex of space in *Farm with Truck*; in *Winslow Park*, a tree masked by a telephone pole serves as a pictorial axis using wires above and the gated fence below to extend their reach backward and forward into space. A network of silhouettes and shadows orchestrates *Jekyll Island* and diagonal paths of thickly worked rivulets of grasses and clouds open the space against the horizon in *Boats on a Beach*.

Perhaps the most unusual and surprising structure is featured in the show's largest work, an elaborate paper bas-relief, *Hemlock Trees Seen from Upstairs Window in the Snow* (2007-2014), made with pencil on layers of cut and carved print paper. This irregularly-shaped snowbound landscape is partially modulated through the physical modeling of the paper, allowing the dominant central tree to float, as if we were watching a slow motion explosion of limbs moving outward in all directions. This is the show's knockout punch. His master work captures the eerie grey light of a soft snow fall that carries an unmistakable air of fatality.

Thinking about this and other fine drawings on view, it is hard to miss correspondences between Lewis's work and School of London artists like Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff. Closer to home and recent innovation are the drawn mappings of Dawn Clements and recent tree photographs of Mike and Doug Starn. All these artists share with Lewis an interest in the reinvention of realism by piecing together literal fragments of paper that re-synthesize the image. Lewis's crazy-quilt painting process stands for the dignity of his unique experience. This is the source of what is so disconcerting, so irritating and so crucial in his work.