

Painting with a photographer's eye

By Sebastian Smee

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PORTLAND, Maine — Rackstraw Downes, a celebrated painter of views, likes to define his approach to painting in opposition to photography. He paints en plein air — setting himself strenuous logistical challenges in the process — and boasts of not even owning a camera.

But of course, he knows photography — you can't live in this culture and not know it. And the basic characteristics of photography — mechanistic, light-dependent, indiscriminate — make themselves felt in his painting more than I suspect he would like.

Downes, born in England, has long lived in the United States. Now in his 70s, he is esteemed not only as a painter but as a writer. His art is the subject of a retrospective exhibition — his first ever — that has come to the Portland Museum of Art from the Parrish Art Museum in Southhampton, N.Y., where it was organized by Klaus Ottmann.

The show arrives as critics and curators have been adjusting their view of Downes's work, retrieving it from the conservative associations of a plodding, overly literal realism and aligning it instead with objectivity, process, and seriality, all values associated with minimalism.

In many ways, reassessing plein air painting in terms of minimalism (a big deal in the '70s, when Downes embarked on his mature style, and still today) seems a mental leap too far. I'm not sure what to make of it.

The Portland show includes 25 paintings, almost all of them remarkable in one way or another. Panoramic views of oilfields, landfill sites, bridges, street corners, and farm buildings, they reveal much about the fabric of this country. Standing before them you become embroiled in their teeming detail: The light, the shadows, the sense of expansion and grandeur are all there.

Looking away, however, it's easy to succumb to the sense that you have turned away from an embalmed corpse, a thing uncannily robbed of its aura.

In what sense are Downes's paintings photographic? Just as the camera notices things the glimpsing eye would never see, his panoramas are preternaturally detailed. To be sure, he uses his eyes to perceive this detail, "eyeballing" his subjects for days, weeks, and months at a time, always returning to the same spot at the same times of day. But the end result is similar: a kind of glut of noticing.

Good photographers know how to compose detail, which is forever in flux, into memorable form. Downes has this ability too. He started out as an abstract painter. And although he is opposed, in principle (if not always in reality), to fabricating what is in front of him, he chooses very carefully both his views and the stretched-out formats in which he presents them.

He also understands, as does the photographer, that a view needs only so much cajoling: Distance eventually resolves everything into legible form. Thus he favors distant views, but sometimes pays a price: Clarity comes at the expense of that proximate, breathing presence, that intimate touch, at which painting so excels.

No one can compete with the camera for empiricism, but Downes gives it a good shot. He is, in his admirably English way, ferociously plain-spoken. A glance at any one of his pictures, which are full of weeds, rubble, mud, telephone wires, piles of discarded material, straggly trees, and rumbling traffic, makes it thumpingly clear: He is against idealizations; he is for truth-telling.

Downes likes to insist on all the many ways in which his paintings are at odds with photography. He likes to emphasize, for instance, that his paintings are made over a long period of time — not instantaneously, like photographs. Also, that he is a “turning head”: In other words, his vantage point is not fixed like a camera on a tripod.

But to me, it's a case of too much protesting. He is like the twin brother who, desperate to bolster his own identity, inflates the differences between himself and his sibling and fails to acknowledge all they have in common.

What I'm getting at is that, for all their marvels, Downes's pictures are, in the end, too close to photography. They are bloodless. They represent the real world but without any of its humidity, its closeness, its poetry — its personalized, narrative complexity.

His sensitivity to light is at times stupendous. And his touch is good enough to convey the way light eats away at lines and edges, causing them to tremble and even at times to vanish. And yet Downes puts his virtuosity solely in service to optical fidelity. If touch and texture matter to him, it's only to the extent that they make themselves visible to the eye. He appears uninterested in the somatic associations that paint — in the hands of a Manet, a de Kooning, or a Freud — can trigger.

As a result, there is no juice, no astonishment, no animating doubt — only this evenhanded, rather monotonous confidence, and an invitation to marvel at a virtuosic recording of detail, or perhaps to analyze this detail, like one of those amateur urban historians who can make an otherwise pleasant walk in the city so tedious.

Despite these fundamental reservations, I am in awe of certain individual paintings by Downes. They are bravura performances. “Demolition and Excavation on the Site of the Equitable Life Assurance Society's New Tower at 7th Avenue and 52nd Street” was painted from a hotel room in a tall building that looks down onto the site. It's one of Downes's few square formatted paintings, and it's charged with an uncanny combination of grandeur and pathos. The rendering of the half-destroyed building itself — gravity pulling at the loosened materials as at the paint itself; a hodgepodge of cavities — is particularly good.

The massive “The Mouth of the Passagassawakeag at Belfast, ME, Seen From the Frozen Foods Plant” is another great performance. The light is relentlessly gray, bringing out the true character of the mudflats under the bridge. Another bridge in the distance and railway lines to the right endow the picture with linear rhythm and spatial complexity, and the disordered foreground of weeds and stones suggests the raucously indifferent flipside to the utilitarian geometries of the built environment.

“In the High Island Oil Field, February, After the Passage of a Cold Front” is perhaps a masterpiece — but it's a chillingly aloof one. Only 16 inches high and 120 long, it shows an oppressive expanse of rubble-strewn, slightly elevated land fanning out to lower flats on either side. The composition is like a flattened pyramid. All lines meet in the center. You want to run — but there's nowhere to go.

The four works called “Four Spots Along a Razor-Wire Fence, August-November (ASOTSPRIE)” are an example of Downes's developing interest in painting serially. Related efforts show barns and other buildings in the Texan desert (including at Donald Judd's Chinati Foundation at Marfa, where Downes was a resident artist) from different angles. I find most of these arbitrary and uninteresting. They water down the specificity and conviction implied in the act of making a painting to no apparent purpose.

By the end of the show, the painting I wanted to go back to was a 1975 work called “Softball Practice, Skowhegan.” It was the only picture that seemed to suggest a meaningful social life, a human intimacy, and, above all, a natural sensuality in its treatment of a campus playing field in gilded, late afternoon light. Looking at it, I could imagine myself in a John Updike story. All the

figures were properly weighted and believably individual, and the cars, too — even at a considerable distance — were identifiable by make.

Best of all, I felt, this picture alluded to something unknown, something tender and vulnerable to change. Perhaps all Downes's pictures try to get at this; but they go about the task with too much method. Like a camera primed for the photographer's click, they never seem capable of veering away from their original premise.

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