

Interview with RACKSTRAW DOWNES

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BY JOEL SILVERSTEIN

Rackstraw Downes is one of our premier realists noted for landscapes of almost Flemish-like clarity. This artist is not content to merely replicate the formulas of the Old Masters. He tackles subject matter as diverse as the urban landscape, toxic wastedumps and rural Texas. His paintings confront the edge of where technology infiltrates nature.

The last show which took place at Marlborough Gallery consisted only of drawings executed in charcoal and pencil. They related closely to his paintings and displayed his characteristic mode of composition. One drawing was transversed by a grid of red thread.

I see the pieces of thread over there. Is it a traditional Renaissance grid?

Yes. I use it to solve scale and proportion. You see that many drawings are made on several pieces of paper taped together. That's because as I work I need more room. The drawing grows. Scale is determined not by a predetermined format but by growth from the middle. It's organic. You end up with the periphery being the last thing to be decided. When the periphery is set and I like the drawing, I proceed to square it up with red thread. That means that I don't draw grey lines on the drawing to spoil it. When I like the drawing for what it is, then you've got it clean. It's very flexible. I want the process to be super flexible for changing positions of things.

I was looking at these drawings and they are so perspectival. It's really interesting to me because this is the age when observation and nature have been thrown out the window. Perspective was seen as a natural process, while now it's mainly held as a cultural belief. How do you feel about that?

If you mean by perspective, a mathematical projection of the external world on to a flat surface is to me to be entirely arbitrary and full of interior contradictions and it has nothing to do with how I observe the world. In the first place it's based on a pinhole space and the pinhole is static. Our eyes and our heads move. We have two eyes. So actually there is no peripheral vision, but there is an eternally wandering vanishing point. David Hockney's composite photographs are somewhat involved with a space like mine. Also some 19th century photographers who made panoramas out of many exposures. This first occurred to me in the early seventies. I was standing on a hill behind a farm in upstate New York. I noticed the horizon is not straight. It curved. I thought this is going into a Ionesco world, so I didn't draw it. But by bits and bits without even knowing it, curvature came into my space. Just as the foreground rises, the edges curve down; you get an almond like shape in the paintings. Because the perspective mode to me is not true, then the idea that somehow observational painting is out of date is madness. It's all got to be redone.

The subjects that you pick have a kind of modern monumentality. It might not be something that you would look at in ordinary life. Is that the artist's role to call attention to it?

To turn your back on the functional forms that make life possible... the Holland Tunnel without ventilation for example (points to drawing of Holland Tunnel ventilation station).

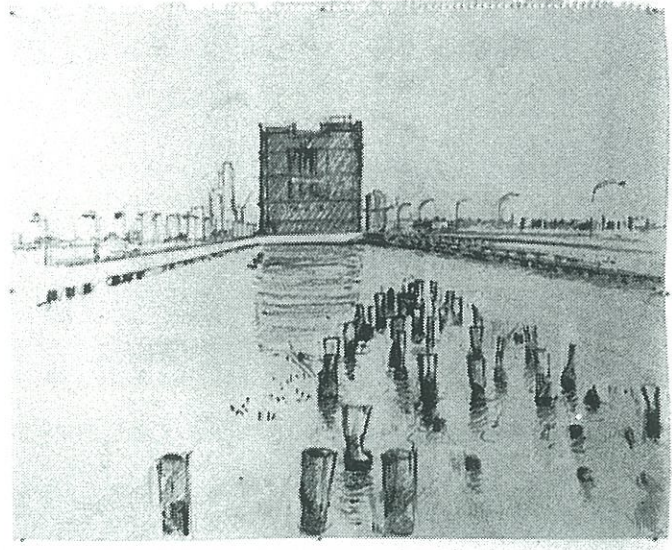
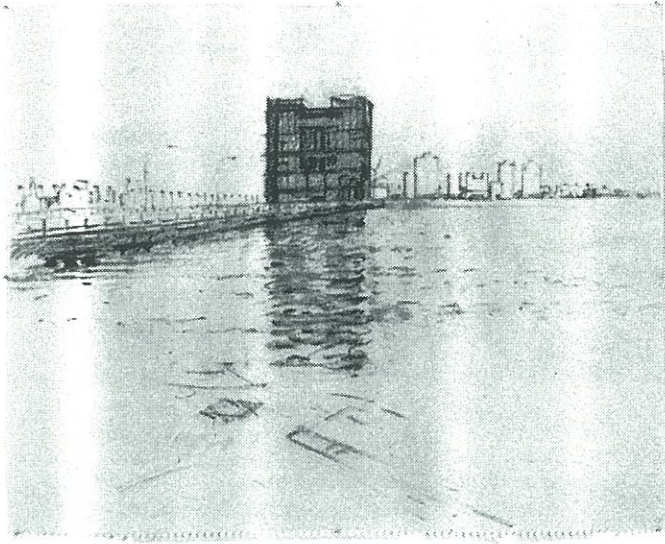
Joggers would come by as I worked and ask: "Is that a new condo out there?" You know their heads were obviously limited by the immediate concerns of an upwardly mobile society. They have no idea what they're treading on. That's madness to me. The type of green nature that people talked about in the 19th century [Romanticism] is actually a structural part of our lives, which could possibly save us from our own mistakes. We are no different than beavers building a dam. We are in a Darwinian situation making experiments; some of which work and some of which do not, so we can decide how to behave properly.

Is there an emotional or psychological component to your work?

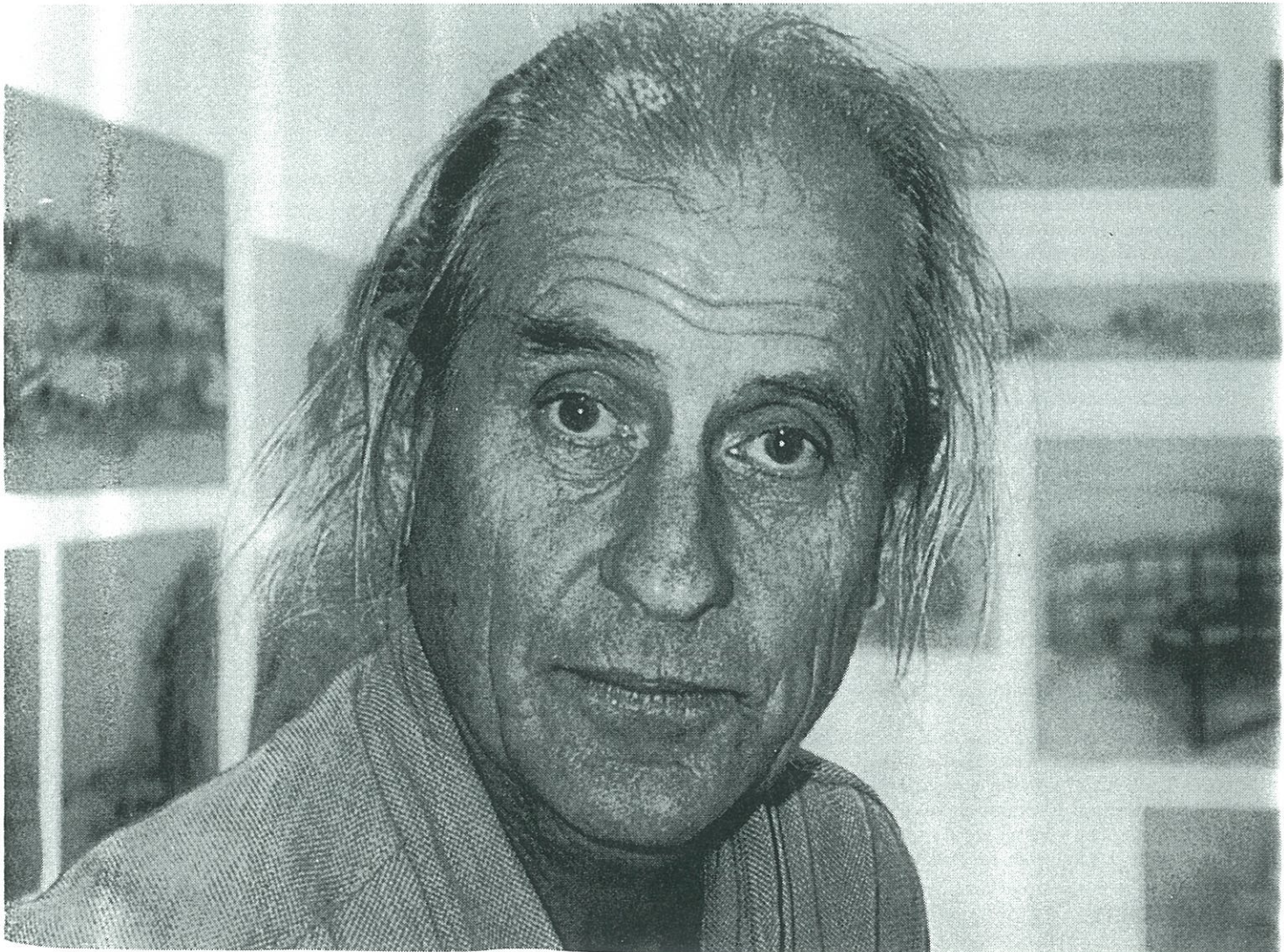
Sometimes yes. I mean one of the great paintings in my experience is Bruegel's "Tower of Babel." I saw the small version in Rotterdam. It's an image of hubris; preposterous ambition. I think sometimes the World Trade Center built on a landfill are also kind of hubristic. When I painted them I concocted them with the extreme tallness, (against) the lowness of the Palisades. You can clearly see what was outrageous and what was quite beautiful. Our perception, or evaluation, of those things change, you see. There's a lovely cartoon in a French magazine I once saw. Two guys with loin clothes, clubs in their hands, a little trail in the mountains. There's a Roman viaduct somewhere. Way over there. The guys are saying 'Look at those Romans, ruining the landscape.' laugher.

There goes the neighborhood.

Exactly. To Corot those ruins typified everything grand and beautiful. A lost ideal, yearning for the past. These meanings are shifting from year to year; for the artifact and for the culture. It's art's job to explore those meanings. I used to dislike Donald Judd because he was such a furious campaigner against representational painting. How could we really be amicable? Last year, I had a marvelous time at Chinati (his home and studio in Texas). I was enormously impressed. I thought no artist ever chose so well how to house his own work. I was inspired by his idealism even though I am an anti-idealist. For me Stendhal was the art critic who arrived at the truest way of discussing art. In his "Promenades in Rome" he has a group of people each with a differing temperament. And they all react to each great monument in quite different ways which is true. He derived a great method of describing art by having these different characters arguing about it in a realistic manner. You know, "Where you are coming from?" is the question. So I think that those absolutists like Ruskin or Frye are all on the wrong track. I think that absolutism needs to be constantly revised. We're not interested in lyrical painting any more. You see it's a tautological situation. The way we humanly experience things can't be brought into the discussion any longer. And this discussion is a critical factor for all of us, for our lives and for making art.



You know their heads were obviously limited by the immediate concerns of an upwardly mobile society.



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