The Hudson Review

# At the Galleries

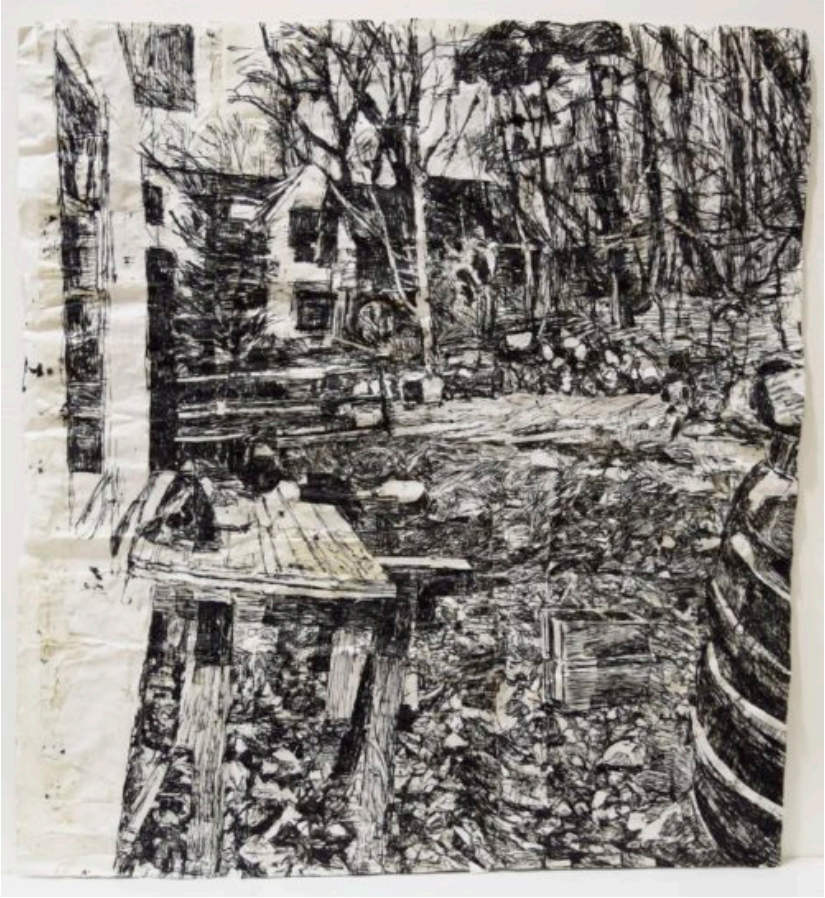
by Karen Wilkin

Those of us dismayed by an art world where monetary worth increasingly outweighs aesthetic value were comforted by last season's cornucopia of exhibitions affirming that there's still interest in talented artists who make wide-ranging, ambitious work untainted by trend or a quest for novelty. It was doubly reassuring that these shows were in established galleries—that is, in the context of what I suppose we must call "a larger discourse"—rather than being part of the open studio events that emerging artists resort to in response to an unhelpful gallery scene. (This is not to denigrate self-generated exhibitions: the Impressionists organized their own shows in the 1870s.)

At Betty Cuningham Gallery, on the Lower East Side, the always astonishing Rackstraw Downes showed drawings and paintings of New York cityscapes, studio interiors, and the unpromising features of the Texas border town where he spends most winters. As usual, the work was enthralling for its apparently guileless fidelity to perception—which is not the same as "accurate" naturalism—and its simultaneous strangeness. The strangeness results from the way Downes's meticulous, exquisitely refined records of his experience are subtly inflected by the shifts in perception that occur as we try to make sense of the complexities of our surroundings, both natural and man-made. He is fond of unexpected views of places and structures that the rest of us try to ignore: "BOB," for example, an enormous, rather featureless but sinister building housing "the battery on the border," a monster designed to ensure that power never fails for the border patrol along the Rio Grande.

Rackstraw Downes: *Skylit Loftspace, NYC (seated)*, 2015. Oil on linen, 24 x 38 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Betty Cuningham Gallery

The curve of a highway off-ramp, embracing a view of trees and buildings, the spare accoutrements of his home and studio, the faceted geometry of a salt-storage building all fascinate Downes and, because of this, fascinate us. The exhibition included searching drawings testing the effects of different times of day and changing qualities of light on his chosen subjects or bearing witness to subtle alterations of viewpoint. Downes is a sort of vernacular, modern-day Vermeer—a master of the inconsequential who, through the intensity of his attention, makes us believe in its unignorable significance and visual importance. Yet, unlike Vermeer, Downes also makes us conscious of the instability of perception. That's part of what makes his work so timely and timeless.



Stanley Lewis (American, born 1941). *View from the Back Door of My Studio*, 2017. Ink on paper, 24 x 22 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Betty Cuningham Gallery.

Stanley Lewis, whose exhibition followed Downes's at Betty Cuningham, is no less concerned with the specifics of the quotidian, but his world is mainly the unremarkable New England suburb where he lives and works. Anything seen—back steps, plastic chairs, a barbeque covered with a tarp—is acknowledged and accounted for, like the nineteenth-century factory chimneys beginning to sprout along the Seine that punctuate otherwise idyllic Impressionist paintings. Lewis strives to account for everything that enters his vision, translating it into urgent, repetitive marks of the brush or the drawing tool, crusty layers of paint, blurred edges, tipped space, and signs of struggle. Sheets of paper are added onto and layers are imposed on the canvas, so that the finished work bears

vivid witness to the passage of time, to concentration, and to energy expended, as the work evolved. The tension between Lewis' deceptively unassuming subject matter—familiar yards and rural streets leading to distant woods, porches and lawn furniture—and the evidence of passionate effort are part of what makes these paintings and drawings so compelling. Lewis is something of a cult figure, beloved by artists and discerning collectors. He's hard to pin down. His images suggest, at first, John Updike's world of simmering emotion disguised as White Anglo-Saxon privilege, but the longer we spend with Lewis' work, the more we start thinking about the discomfiting territory colonized by Raymond Carver. Lewis' work remains intensely evocative, elusive, mysterious, and wonderful.

Katherine Bradford: *All of Us*, 2018. Image courtesy of CANADA and the artist; photo by Joe DeNardo.

A little further uptown, Katherine Bradford and Kyle Staver moved us away from the everyday toward narrative, the fantastic, and the mythological—sort of. At CANADA, "Katherine Bradford: Friends and Strangers" surrounded us with a dazzling group of (mostly) brilliantly colored paintings of confrontational groups of figures, seated men and women, a gang at what seemed to be a raucous meal, a round dance, and the occasional bather, one of them, unlike Bradford's earlier swimmers, wearing underwear and reclining beside his bathtub. The inventive *Lunch Painting*—the meal—engaged us with its marvelous play of four-square forms, outlines, and opacities. At first, the picture seemed wholly dependent on emphatic red-pink lines and scribbled planes that describe simplified bodies, minimally indicated clothing, a fish casually flung on the table, clunky chairs defining the space of the setting, and more. But we soon became aware of bleeds and hints of zones of color underneath, a suggestion of previous states that made *Lunch Painting* more materially present while disembodying the vigorously drawn participants and their meal, turning them into pure painting incidents. Bradford's figures are immediately recognizable, a little cartoon-like in their economy and their defiance of gravity and, sometimes, of logic, but they also insist on being taken very seriously. In the near-monumental *All of Us*, a long horizontal nude woman, wearing only high heels, floats face down, like an inverted *Olympia*, surrounded by a lively but indifferent crowd. She hovers above a row of spiky triangles, like an advanced Yoga adept. Or perhaps she's supported on steam jets. Or maybe that's a fence behind her. We're compelled and a little puzzled by the composition, but what really holds our attention is the color: mouth-watering pinks, oranges, lilacs, and purples, sparked with black and white. Bradford's bold, unpredictable pictures keep us off balance, attracting our attention with their ambiguous characters and wonky drawing, and then seducing us with their full-throttle hues. Concentrate to the way Bradford builds figures with blocks of color, and the paintings turn into brash, no-holds-barred abstractions. "Friends and Strangers" included some of Bradford's oddest and most satisfying pictures to

date. I can't wait to see what she does next.

Kyle Staver. *Untitled*, 2017-18. Ink and pencil on paper, 11 x 8.5 in. Image courtesy of Zürcher Gallery, New York/Paris

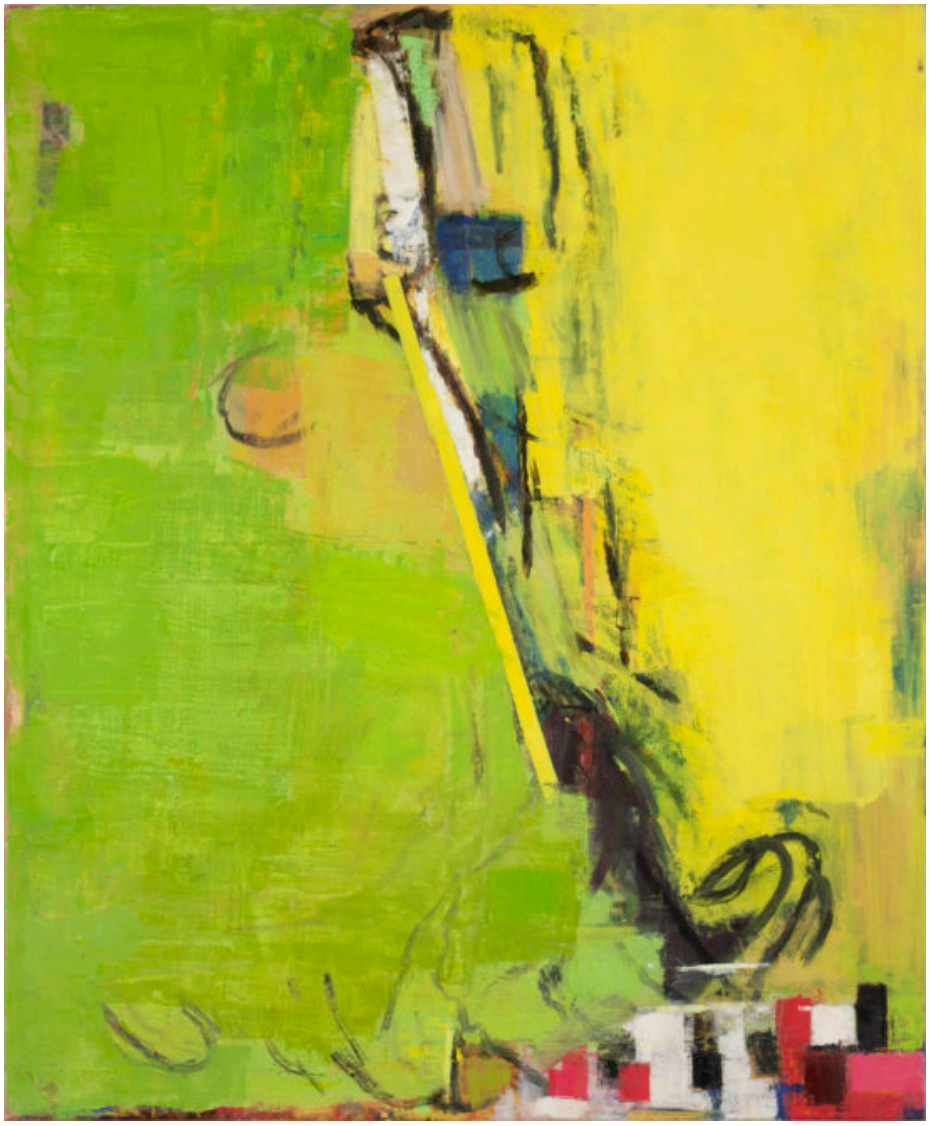
At Zürcher Gallery, Kyle Staver showed large, quirky improvisations on such themes as the stories of Cupid and Psyche, Venus and Adonis, and poor Callisto, who was turned into a bear after Zeus had his way with her, along with Ulysses' travails on his return from Troy, and even the Expulsion. Staver's take on these time-honored subjects, however, is entirely her own and wholly contemporary. Her agile, long-limbed, expressively pared-down figures exist in vast, non-specific spaces, bathed in form-accentuating, dramatic light. Her palette is moody, a feast of saturated red-browns, glowing blues, and electric highlights. Back-lighting often emphasizes important details—the shoulder of a man clutching a lobster, bear claws, the Sirens' hair, a swan's airborne

feathers—punctuating the enveloping, warm darkness and accentuating the play of color. The show included some of the small, vigorous clay reliefs that Staver models from her paintings, once they have been started, to study the play of light on form, prompting changes to the painted image. The busy relief figures revealed some of her thought processes, while demonstrating how freely her paintings evolve, from early conceptions to their resonant final stages. Like Bradford's, Staver's paintings are lighthearted and grave, playful and ambitious (in the best sense of the word), and elegantly painted. It's impressively brave of Staver to take on themes inextricably associated with Old Master painting, but what's even more impressive is how individual and how much of the moment she makes these loaded subjects appear. History painting, it seems, is alive and well, at least in Staver's studio.

William Corwin (American, born 1976). *Teeth*, 2018. Sand, plaster, rope, wood, 44 x 8 x 7 in. Courtesy of Geary.

William Corwin's sculptures, in "The Old Gods," at Geary Contemporary, offered another take on the past, this time with archaeological overtones. The widely-traveled Corwin, trained as an architect and deeply knowledgeable about ancient history and scientific exploration of the ancient world, presented an installation that simultaneously evoked an archeological dig, a miniature ancient site, and a display of retrieved artifacts, albeit artifacts made of such unlikely materials—for the past—as Hydrocal. Corwin plays fast and loose with ancient cultures and with scale, constructing small objects, now chunky, now delicate, that shift between past and present, while seeming both intended to be the size they are and to refer to larger structures, such as monumental sculptures or architecture. A group of these, arrayed like the miniature ruins of an Egyptian temple on an expanse of sand, filled the center of the room, their associations with buildings and large-scale figures subverted by a scattering of ambiguous, narrow, curved forms, like the ribs of a giant creature or perhaps part of a shattered solar boat.

The more time we spent with Corwin's multivalent objects, the more associations they provoked, but we also became increasingly aware of their specific properties. A repeated vertical form, for example, apparently distilled from a striding Egyptian figure, suggested that it had been built by stacking chunks of something like Styrofoam before being cast in pale Hydrocal. Wheels, hung on the wall, read at a distance like encrusted antique bronzes, parts of ancient chariots, perhaps, but revealed themselves, on closer acquaintance, as more insubstantial. The fairly large, free-standing *Teeth* (2018), a vertical stack of blocky forms, sand-cast in plaster, punctuated with wood, and lashed together with rope, hinted at another side of Corwin. *Teeth* provoked thoughts about dinosaurs and natural history museums, suggesting the remains of some giant, extinct creature, packaged, perhaps, for transportation from where they were excavated. But it was principally a casually constructed tower, articulated in ways that kept us noting its idiosyncrasies and enjoying the way each block revealed itself as different from the others, while remaining part of the stack. Such multiple readings distinguish Corwin's work. We begin by trying to interpret his mysterious objects, finding clues in the many associations they provoke and sometimes in their titles. We give ourselves over to the narratives Corwin hints at, but we are ultimately convinced by formal invention. I have limited tolerance for work that requires verbal explication to make its worth felt. Corwin's thoughtful, informed, and informative comments are very enriching, but in the end, his work stands on its own. Wishing to know more without having that wish fully satisfied simply makes us look harder.



Sangram Majumdar (Kolkata, India). *Summer Chasing*, 2018. Oil on canvas, 40 x 30 in. Courtesy of steven harvey fine art projects.

At Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects, "Sangram Majumdar: Offspring," a series of essentially abstract paintings and works on paper, revealed the most recent of the Indian-born, Brooklyn-based painter's continuing explorations of the nature of painting itself. Majumdar first announced himself with beautifully painted, complex, perceptually based interiors, made unexpected by fractured spaces and overlaps. Since then, his work has steadily moved away from explicit reference—or rather, away from *logical* explicit reference—while remaining about perception and experience. The recent paintings, he says, were provoked by watching his young daughter learn to walk, an effort that he read as a metaphor for negotiating the present anxiety-provoking political situation. Somehow the image of his daughter's efforts got conflated with the walking figure of traffic lights, and all of this found its way into paintings that seem, at first, to be primarily about lushly applied expanses of (for the most part) saturated hues, punctuated with smaller incidents that conspire to suggest coherent interior or exterior spaces, before subsiding into abstractness again. Most of the works in "Offspring," however, were haunted by the echo of a schematic striding figure—a kind of afterimage of a trajectory through a charged atmosphere, like particles that can only be studied by the traces they leave. In the best of the series,

Majumdar makes this hinted-at image work both as an abstract element in the total composition and as a trigger for association. I'm curious as to whether, in future, he will move further from reference or toward more explicit allusion. Either way, the results should be worth our attention.

All these shows took place in Manhattan, south of 14th Street, but two of the past season's most noteworthy exhibitions required—and rewarded—travel. At James Barron Art, in Kent, Connecticut, the beautifully installed "Jeannette Montgomery Barron/Laura de Santillana: Mirrors and Glass" paired works by an American photographer and an Italian sculptor. Montgomery Barron's minimalist images of smallish round or oval mirrors, poised on slender bases, ranged from soft silver gelatin prints to crisp, lushly-hued pigment prints. Rather than reading as austere still lifes, the photographs of these anonymous, everyday objects become "portraits," heads on slim necks, sometimes confronting us, sometimes turning away. They seem introspective, self-contained, as if Montgomery Barron had captured her sitters unawares. That mood was intensified by the proximity of de Santillana's subtle, reticent sculptures: blunt, compressed rectangles of hand-blown glass enclosing stacked blocks of color. The vaguely head-like proportions of these elegant objects reverberated with Montgomery Barron's "mirror portraits," but the trapped, translucent hues within the rectangles also had associations with the larger world—with the sky, water, and light of Venice, where de Santillana lives and works, for example. Seen frontally, her glass pieces seemed connected to abstract painting—perhaps Rothko, scaled down and luminous—but from an oblique view, where the thickness of the enveloping clear glass became visible, these seductive objects were at once declaratively about their material presence and evanescent. The two very different bodies of work entered into a fascinating conversation. De Santillana's pieces underscored the physical properties of Montgomery Barron's subjects in new ways, reminding us of the "glassiness" of mirrors, while the understated geometry of the photographs—the nuanced relationship of ovals and circles to the rectangles or squares of the field—made us consider freshly the shape and proportions of the sculptures' color blocks. That color was ravishing, but among the most memorable pairings in the show was a group of de Santillana's sculptures celebrating the power of transparency and silvery greys, with a selection of Montgomery Barron's ephemeral silver gelatin prints. Who ever thought that color had to be chromatic to be expressive?

Adolph Gottlieb. *Sea and Tide*, 1952. Oil on canvas, 60 x 72 in. Art ©Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation/ licensed by ARS, NY, NY

And chronicling the past, the fall exhibition at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, "Adolph Gottlieb in Provincetown," documented the ten summers, 1946–1956, that the New York painter, an avid sailor, and his wife spent on Cape Cod. A revealing selection of works on paper and canvases made in Gottlieb's small Provincetown studio tracked the evolution of his work from the Pictograph format of the 1940s—allusive, but ultimately unknowable "glyphs," organized on casual grids, that first established his reputation—to unfettered juxtapositions of calligraphy and loose geometry, such as two explosive works on paper from 1956, as fierce as clenched fists. Studies for a vast architectural stained glass project were also included. The large, suggestively titled *Sea and Tide* (1952), may have been painted back in New York, but it seemed to distill Gottlieb's experience of the harbor town and the time he spent in his boat into an early statement of his "Imaginary Landscape" motif: floating ovoid forms above a vigorously inflected band of drawing. Gottlieb's notable gifts as a colorist were made obvious as well as the wide range of his inventions. It was good to see this wonderful painter properly celebrated in a place he found both stimulating and congenial, but it's too bad the show didn't travel to a wider audience.

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