

Credits

This catalog was published on the occasion of *Rackstraw Downes: A Wider View*, an exhibition curated by Andrea Packard for the List Gallery, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, March 5–April 5, 2020.

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ISBN: 978-0-9993904-3-6
Library of Congress Control Number: 2020900653

Inside front cover: Rackstraw Downes, *Nature and Art Are Physical, Writings on Art*, 1967–2008, pp. 269–270.

Front cover and back cover: *A Fence at the Periphery of a Jersey City Scrap Metal Yard* (detail), 1993 oil on canvas, 15 x 116 ¾ inches. Courtesy of The William Louis-Dreyfus Foundation Inc.

Photo on page 46: c. 1989–90, Varick Street, near Holland Tunnel entrance, New York City

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Catalog Editor: Andrea Packard
Design: Phillip Unetic, UneticDesign.com
Printing: Brilliant, Exton PA

Rackstraw Downes A Wider View

Rackstraw Downes A Wider View



I think our culture has to learn a whole new relatedness to the physical world, and that in order to attune ourselves to this we need an art not of reference but of presence—of the physical thing itself in its integrity.

—RACKSTRAW DOWNES

List Gallery Swarthmore College

Rackstraw Downes *A Wider View*

March 5—April 5, 2020

List Gallery, Swarthmore College



Rackstraw Downes's Landscapes of Experience

Andrea Packard List Gallery Director

The List Gallery is pleased to present *Rackstraw Downes: A Wider View*. Comprising 23 paintings created between 1966 and 2017, the exhibition offers insight into the artist's close attention to the appearance, history, and evolving character of his chosen subjects, be they farmlands in Maine, underpasses or architectural interiors in Manhattan, shipping lanes or landfills in New Jersey, or radio towers and ditches in Texas. Although the List Gallery exhibition is small in scale compared to comprehensive surveys such as *Rackstraw Downes: Onsite Paintings, 1972–2008*, which was organized by the Parrish Art Museum in 2010, it allows us to consider acclaimed masterworks side by side with less well-known Maine landscapes from the mid-1960s and early 1970s, portraits and figure groups from the 1970s, and recent small-scale images of places that are integral to Downes's personal life. Collectively, the paintings provide the viewer with more than panoramic views and close attention to overlooked sites. They also synthesize sustained empirical observations made over months and years, challenging conventions that too often cloud perception and alienate us from our environment.

A Wider View also allows us to appreciate the consistency of Downes's creative practice over the years since his first one-person exhibition, which took place at Swarthmore College in the fall of 1969.¹ Back then, exhibitions were curated by Harriet Shorr and presented in the Florence Wilcox Gallery, a converted classroom space. Shorr graduated from Swarthmore in 1960, and went on to study at Yale School of Art, where she met Downes and other gifted artists. In 1963, when she returned to Swarthmore to teach and oversee the gallery, she began offering exhibitions to emerging artists such as Brice Marden, whose first one-person show took place from December 6, 1963, to January 6, 1964. She also organized thematic exhibitions, such as *Landscape USA (1968)*, which featured Downes together with Fairfield Porter, and Jane Freilicher, Elias Goldberg, Wayne Thiebaud, Paul Resika, Claes Oldenberg, Allan D'Arcangelo, and George Nick.² Although Swarthmore College was somewhat off the beaten track (back then, it didn't have its own interstate highway exit

Demolition and Excavation on the Site of the Equitable Life Assurance Society's New Tower at 7th Avenue and 52nd Street, 1983
Oil on canvas, 32 x 36 inches
Courtesy of The Heiskell Family Collection

as it does now), its gallery already featured works by important artists as varied as Andrew Wyeth, Alex Katz, Horace Pippin, John Cage, and Eva Hesse.

Such exhibitions encouraged an eclectic community of emerging or under-recognized artists, most of whom were working outside fashionable art world trends. By the late 1960s, Minimalism and Pop Art had supplanted Abstract Expressionism, and the practice of painting figures or landscapes from direct observation had come to be considered “retrograde” by most critics and dealers, who promoted the notion that new art movements must inevitably supersede previous ones in an almost predictable progression of paradigm shifts. As Downes recounts in his essay, “What the 1960s Meant to Me,”

Whereas the 1950s had been years of cooperatively owned and operated galleries and of comparatively modest dealers who leaned on the advice of their artists, the monied '60s saw the development of an extensive, high-powered management of critics, impresarios, dealers, and curators whose idea appeared to be to stage a stylistic ‘advance’ for every season.³

Now that Downes has been widely recognized as one of the foremost painters of his generation, it may be difficult to imagine what it must have been like for him as an art student in the early 1960s, when he realized that his paintings up to that point had been too derivative and began seeking more generative methods and subjects. Alfred Mac Adam’s essay for this catalog describes the artist’s formative years: growing up in England, studying literature at Cambridge, and painting abstractly at Yale, before embarking in an entirely new direction and learning to paint from observation in Maine and New York. As Mac Adam recounts, Downes’s early experiments were supported by a circle of artists who were already painting from observation, notably: Alex Katz, Fairfield Porter, Neil Welliver, Janet Fish, and Joseph Fiore.

Two pictures that have been included in *A Wider View* offer insight into this experimental and formative period. One of them, *Halldale* (opposite and page 16), shows rural homes, barns, and outbuildings bathed in a warm midday light and surrounded by hayfields. Downes chooses a high vantage point, from which we can see a curving road nearly bisecting the landscape. Rows of trees crisscross the canvas, interrupting the road’s trajectory and partly obscuring the homes and farm buildings throughout the composition. Even in this early painting, we see Downes’s interest in how human labor and technology have been reshaping the environment. His calligraphic brush strokes not only animate the composition, but also describe specific details and relate each part to the whole.

Downes’s intimate familiarity with the landscape was made possible by the fact that he was living in the area, learning about the local history, architecture, and ecosystem, and even growing

vegetables on land he had purchased in nearby Montville. In 1969, when he exhibited at Swarthmore College and taught a week-long drawing workshop there, he stressed the importance of this kind of physical and experiential engagement with one’s subject. He encouraged students to do more than simply copy nature or talk about the need for conservation, telling them, “You should dig up Crum Creek meadow and grow your own vegetables!”⁴

Unlike many artists, Downes does not make paintings from photographs. Instead, after selecting a site that interests him, he usually begins by drawing. Although his drawings sometimes become complete works in themselves, they initially serve as a way to get acquainted with a given place. When a composition looks promising enough, he applies a grid to his paper or canvas in order to see how constituent parts relate spatially and proportionately to the whole. As the elements of light, weather, and foliage change, and as he discovers more about the history of a place, Downes may add supplementary paper or canvas to adjust proportions, rework his compositions, or start new ones. Avoiding the slick surfaces, rigid geometries, and airless predictability associated with Photorealism, he uses a textured canvas that makes brushed lines quaver and scumbled paint vibrate with atmosphere.

Downes’s willingness to surrender to his chosen environment and trust what he sees, even when it contradicts long-taught artistic conventions, resulted in the curved horizons that distinguish most of his works. He began noticing and representing such curves in the landscapes he painted in Maine in the early 1970s. A fine example is *Garden Near Thorndike* (page 19). A year after painting it, Downes reviewed *The Drawings of Paul Cézanne: A Catalogue Raisonné* in *The New York Times Book Review*. His description aligns his observational approach and rejection of perspectival conventions with Cézanne’s:

Renaissance perspective represents the horizon as a straight line extended parallel to the flat surface of canvas or paper. Cézanne noticed that when the head turns—as it must, be it ever so slightly, in order to scan the view—this horizon curves, changing its angle in two dimensions, and enveloping the viewer in three; it becomes concentric. . . . Such is the space Cézanne struggled to represent; in it the head of the viewer is released from the vise in which perspective holds it, and the world is represented in continuity just as the eye in fact examines it.⁵

A Wider View also allows us to compare Downes’s varied panoramas to a series of intimate portraits and figure studies he made while living in the Columbia University section of New



Halldale, 1966
Oil on wood panel, 12 x 17½ inches
Courtesy of Betty Cuninghame Gallery,
New York

York City in the early 1970s. Always working from direct observation, he painted friends, including Andrée Hayum, an art historian who, at the time, was researching a monograph on the iconography of Matthias Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*. Admiring Hayum as an accomplished athlete as well as a scholar, he posed her standing in front of tennis courts, but instead of a racquet, she holds a copy of, *Trois Primitifs*, by J.K. Huysman. Huysman's fascination with primitivism, eccentricity, and the contributions of self-taught artists intrigued Downes as well as Hayum.

In another painting from 1973, *Claudia* (page 25), Downes portrays a dancer who had answered his advertisement for a model. She had arrived wearing a striking red skirt, and Downes agreed that she should pose in it, lounging bare-breasted in front of two Maine landscapes that were leaning against the wall. Because her body can be seen as virtually extending the foreground of the landscape, one can imagine her existing in both interior and exterior spaces at the same time.

Whenever friends or hired models failed to show up for a painting session, Downes resorted to making self-portraits, but he invariably disliked the results and discarded them. The portraits and figure groups that he has kept—some for more than forty-five years—mainly portray close friends and acquaintances who shared his devotion to art, scholarship, music, and related disciplines—and so, collectively, they provide a virtual self-portrait.

By the mid-to-late 1980s, Downes's panoramic views of construction sites, city intersections, and peripheral “unloved” spaces had established his reputation and earned him fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and Ingram Merrill Foundation. Representative masterworks from this decade include: *Demolition and Excavation on the Site of the Equitable Life Assurance Society's New Tower at 7th Avenue and 52nd Street* (page 2); *A Bend in the Hackensack at Jersey City* (pages 32-33); and *Ventilation Tower with Estivating Snow Plows* (page 31). By this time, Downes had also become known for reviewing exhibitions for *ArtNews*, publishing essays in *The New Criterion*, and editing *Art in its Own Terms*, a collection of Fairfield Porter's essays. In 1982, two years after becoming an American citizen, he began exhibiting at Hirschl & Adler Modern, New York, which represented him until 1994.

After achieving both critical and commercial success, Downes resisted art-market pressures by traveling extensively, seeking inspiration in varied sites, and working in relative solitude. In 1984, when he visited Texas City, Texas, to lecture at the College of the Mainland, he became interested in the region's industrialized coastal areas. In the winter of 1987, he began painting the High Island oil field near Galveston, a region that sustained his interest for a decade. Subsequently, he immersed himself in a variety of other topographies in Texas—notably Marfa and Presidio—studying deserts, borderlands, energy stations, and agricultural structures.

When friends suggested potential painting locations, Downes was often skeptical. He sought locations that would challenge, rather than meet, expectations. However, in 1986, the art



critic Peter Schjeldahl gave him a tip that was spot on. He recommended that Downes visit a 57-acre landfill, known as Kearny Dump, four miles from the Holland Tunnel in northern New Jersey. The environmental artist Nancy Holt was planning *Sky Mound*, an earth sculpture she hoped would transform the 100-foot-high landfill into a grassy, flat-topped park. She hoped to construct wells that would recover methane from decaying garbage, radiating gravel paths, and small mounds oriented in relation to the celestial calendar.⁶

Downes was very familiar with the art of Holt and her late husband, Robert Smithson, who were leading proponents of the Land Art movement. In his small-scale panorama, *Study for Two Dumps in the Meadowlands, April, Lowtide, A Grassfire* (above and pages 28-29), Downes calls attention to *Sky Mound*, positioning it in the middle distance on the right side of the canvas in stark contrast to the surrounding open space. The diagonal edge of the riverbank directs our gaze toward the center of the picture, but there we encounter a hiatus—a sense of absence. One strains to discern the New York City skyline (veiled by smog on the horizon), before turning toward the left side of the canvas, where Downes painted plumes of black smoke rising from controlled grass fires. While Downes was still getting acquainted with this landscape, a boy approached him and urged him to include his father's dump truck in the picture; it is one of several we see on top of the landfill. Such narrative details demonstrate the way Downes's pictures, though perhaps bleak, are not utterly desolate. Instead, every aspect of the painting describes human activity, from unregulated dumping to power generation and environmental reclamation. Despite their obvious differences in approach, Holt and Downes both reject romantic notions of the picturesque. Instead, they focus on the ways human industry and interventions have fundamentally changed our environment.

Downes's List Gallery exhibition also features several larger-scale paintings of scenes that lie south of New York City, along the Hackensack River, such as *A Bend in the Hackensack at Jersey City*, (pages 32-33). At a nearby scrap metal yard, he created one of his longest panoramas: *A Fence at the Periphery of a Jersey City Scrap Metal Yard*, (pages 34-35). Some viewers might consider these works monumental because of their ambitious scale, masterful rendering, and presence. However,

Study for Two Dumps in the Meadowlands, April, Lowtide, A Grassfire, 1986
Oil on canvas mounted on board, 7 x 41¼ inches
Courtesy of Betty Cuninghame Gallery, New York

North Searsmont, 1966
Oil on canvas mounted on board, 8 ¾ x 14 ¼ inches
Courtesy of Betty Cuninghams Gallery, New York



unlike most monuments, they do not commemorate fixed causes or ideas. Instead, they envelop us in the experience of flux.

After painting these and many other panoramas in New Jersey and Texas, Downes shifted his attention to more familiar spaces and intimate formats. Although he had painted architectural interiors and vertical canvases before, as in *Snug Harbor, Main Hall (Looking South)* (page 36), his recent paintings of his Soho studio more directly reflect his personal interests and aesthetic. It can be difficult to see one's own home with fresh eyes, but *Skylit Loft Space (standing)* (pages 10 and 44) seems to vibrate with his enduring curiosity. The picture shows us the living area of his loft, facing southwest, from the vantage point of his sleeping area. Waist-height bookcases span the long wall on the left, reflecting his love of literature, philosophy, and jazz, as well as art. Hanging above them, and metaphorically resting on that literary foundation, are several artworks that reflect Downes's artistic friendships and interests, including an etching by Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778) depicting an excavation site and architectural ruins in Rome; *Jagannath*, an etching by Jim Long (b. 1949); and a calligraphic print by Suzan Frecon (b. 1941). The glass that covers two other pictures reflects the large windows at the southwest end of the room. Overhead, the enormous skylight serves as both an additional light source and metaphor. Its curving edge reminds us of Downes's elastic and persistent gaze. When viewing *Skylit Loft Space*, our attention cannot rest for long on

any one thing. It moves among myriad interrelationships, between sources of light and the objects they illuminate.

In contrast, *Outdoor Passageway at 15 Rivington* (at right and page 45) portrays a more austere and less inviting space: the alley behind the Betty Cuninghams Gallery on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Like many previous works by Downes, *Outdoor Passageway* focuses on the mechanical systems and other structures upon which we depend—in this case: electrical connections, drainage systems, and air conditioning units precariously cantilevered overhead. *Outdoor Passageway* has a remarkable presence for its small size—a combination of radiance, specificity, and wholeness one associates with masterpieces by Johannes Vermeer. In striking contrast to Vermeer, however, Downes does not portray the symbols of global exploration, colonialism, and wealth. There are no globes, tapestries, or oriental rugs—only a closed door, a sliver of sky, and a single weed pushing up through pavers.

Outdoor Passageway has been described by some viewers as a metaphor for humanity's alienation from our environment. Others have suggested that it offers a meditation on mortality. Still others may scan it, seeking signs of resilience. A self-described agnostic, Downes provides viewers with complex physical evidence and resonant metaphors that allows them to draw their own conclusions about the nature of reality. In this sense, the passageway, like Downes's empiricism, is open-ended. For more than fifty years, Downes's profound curiosity and freedom from didacticism have been broadening his view—and through his work, he broadens ours. Because of this, it seems fitting to conclude with an observation Downes made early in his career, when he wrote the introduction to *Art in its Own Terms*. His description of Fairfield Porter's values can also be said to express his own: "For what he loved above all, and all along, is art that is yieldingly attentive to the life of its materials and to particular sensations of reality."⁷

NOTES

1. Downes's one-person exhibition at Swarthmore College took place October 31-November 17, 1969. Shorr, who was married at the time to Eugene Baguskas, organized exhibitions at the Florence Wilcox Gallery from 1963 until 1974.
2. The exhibition *Landscape USA* took place February 9-March 5, 1968, *The Phoenix*, Swarthmore College, Feb. 9, 1968, vol. 88, no. 28.
3. Rackstraw Downes, *Nature and Art Are Physical, Writings on Art, 1967-2008*, p. 62.
4. Interview with the artist, July 2, 2019.
5. Rackstraw Downes, "Cezanne's Drawings" in *Nature and Art Are Physical*, p. 93-94.
6. Although Nancy Holt collaborated with the Hackensack Meadowlands Development Commission to close and stabilize the landfill, other aspects of her design were not completed. See: "Jersey Landfill to Become an Artwork," *The New York Times*, September 3, 1986 (<https://www.nytimes.com/1986/09/03/arts/jersey-landfill-to-become-an-artwork.html>)
7. Rackstraw Downes, Introduction in *Art in its Own Terms: Selected Criticism 1935-1975*, by Fairfield Porter. Taplinger, 1979, p. 23.



Outdoor Passageway at 15 Rivington, 2016
Oil on canvas, 29 x 12 inches
Courtesy of Betty Cuninghams Gallery, New York



Rackstraw Downes: The Wider View

Alfred Mac Adam

Rackstraw Downes began in nature. He was born in Pembury, Kent, England, on November 8, 1939. Kent was countryside then: it produced fruit, dairy, and, most importantly, hops. As a small boy, he would smell the reek of the hops being roasted in those odd, conical buildings called oast houses. This combination of countryside and industrial production permeated his consciousness during his earliest years, remained latent, then sprang forth in his greatest paintings. He confirms this in his 1996 essay “The Tenses of Landscape”:

I was born and raised in England and I think this has something to do with my attitude toward landscape. I don’t have what I perceive as a New World sense of an antithesis between unspoiled nature and human culture; a landscape to me is a place where people live and work. There really was no wild nature in the South of England where I grew up and in Europe, as George Orwell said, “Every step you take you’re probably treading on ten dead people.”¹

This concept of a place not being one thing or another but many things at the same time, a constantly shifting, kaleidoscopic environment, is one we should always keep at the back of our minds when poring over Downes’s work. The reason is clear:

My paintings are executed from start to finish on site in the landscape and take months. When you work outdoors, you surrender a lot of control over your subject and that is what I like about it, the interactive, experiential character of it. It is the opposite of starting with a clear-cut idea and projecting that into the work. You learn about the site as you proceed; no matter what thoughts or opinions I may have about what is there when I begin, what comes to concern me as I work are the things themselves, not any sense I make of them.²

Skylit Loftspace (standing), 2015
Oil on canvas, 24 x 27 inches
Courtesy of the Collection of Anthony and Elizabeth Enders

Thus Downes paints and draws sites in transition and attempts to distill what ultimately cannot be captured. A photograph could capture an instant, but what a camera can neither sense nor express is the ongoing process that leads to the moment when Downes puts paint to canvas. His pictures are essays in the sense Francis Bacon and Michel de Montaigne used the term—an attempt or trial—derived from the notion of exploring the quality of something. In carrying out these experiments, Downes finds himself in a paradox: just as the task of self-definition can only be terminated by death, his representations of a landscape in flux must always be understood as remnants of a process that goes on eternally.

Where and how did this esthetic of impossibility begin? We must follow Rackstraw Downes through a series of schools, where he learned to draw and paint—and developed a love for English literature. When he was eight, Downes went to the Marlborough House boarding school in Hawkshurst, thus beginning a fairly normal education process for a middle-class boy of his generation: what in America is called private school. Then, at the age of thirteen, Downes entered Bryanston School in Dorset, a progressive school founded in 1928 (so still a young institution when Downes attended). Progressive the school may have been, but the drawing instruction Downes received was of the most traditional sort. For example, he was taught, when making a watercolor, to hold his brush vertical, in the style of John Sell Cotman (1782–1842), a Romantic marine and landscape painter thought to be a paragon at the time. Again, there was nothing out of the ordinary in Downes’s artistic education, until, at the age of 18, he got a chance to visit the United States.

There was an exchange program with private schools in America, and Downes, a passionate jazz fan, applied. He was accepted and spent a year at the Hotchkiss School in rural Lakeville, Connecticut. Instead of becoming immersed in jazz, Downes experienced artistic liberation. This was because of one man, the Hotchkiss art instructor, Robert Speier, who had just graduated from the Yale School of Art. Instead of emphasizing discipline and tradition, Speier urged his pupils—there were only two majoring in art—to explore materials and color and, most importantly, to think on their own. Speier’s example inspired in Downes a desire to study art at Yale, but how he finally got there would become a tangled tale.

Returning to England, Downes was accepted at St. John’s College, the University of Cambridge, where he read English literature. At Cambridge, Downes continued to draw and paint, but without the benefit of teachers. He wanted to return to the United States, in part to escape an unhappy family life, and also because he’d found his time at Hotchkiss to be artistically liberating. So he applied for admission to the graduate program in the Yale English Department. His plan was to redirect the funding he hoped to receive and apply it to the Yale School of Art. Despite his scant prior experience, he was accepted, largely because of Robert Speier’s strong recommendation. This shift caused some dismay among the English Department faculty, who probably thought they’d

discovered a budding eighteenth-century scholar after Downes published an article on the use of language in the works of Dr. Samuel Johnson.

At Yale, in addition to taking courses on design, lettering, life drawing, and other disciplines, he came into contact with a series of strong artistic personalities, the first of whom was the abstract painter Al Held, with whom Downes was to have a lifelong relationship. At this moment in his life, Downes was a hard-edge abstract painter in the tradition of Mondrian and Albers. Abstraction was, after all, the order of the day, and it was not until later that he seriously asked himself why he was painting the way he was and made the change to figuration.

This metamorphosis took place between 1964, when Downes used a modest inheritance to buy an old farmhouse and one hundred acres of land in Maine, and 1965, when he left New Haven to move to New York, taking a job at Parsons School of Design. He found himself at a crossroads. The abstract painting he practiced during his Yale years now seemed stale to him. As he says in his 1981 statement, “What Realism Means To Me,” “I first became involved with realism when I felt stuck as an abstract painter—stuck with a set of moves I was repeating.”³ Compare this sensation of being locked into a mode of repetition with his discovery of the landscape of Maine, the domain of three other realists: Fairfield Porter, Neil Welliver, and Alex Katz:

I was in Maine. Maine farming has been deteriorating for 40 years, in consequence of which the unmown fields are grown up with bushes. I looked at these (one has no choice). They were the exact opposite of what I had been doing. . . . They were made of myriads of constantly changing colors, and their edges merged imperceptibly into each other. It was immediately evident that there was no way to copy them, and the first question was, what do you do with the paint?⁴

Downes has been trying to answer that question for his entire career.

The break from abstraction, the embrace of the Maine landscape as a painterly point of departure, the esthetic separation from Al Held, whose generosity was unstinting despite Downes’s metamorphosis: these were not things to be taken lightly. As Downes notes about moving to New York: “I found a cheap flat uptown: someone told me to move downtown so as not to be ‘left out.’” He stayed uptown.

Downes was not quite on his own. The rehabilitation of realism or representation was, by 1965, taking on many forms. Pop Art and Hyperrealism, for instance, were focused on reality, though their artistic point of view has nothing to do with Downes’s. Where Pop and Hyperrealism pluck objects from a context, isolate them, and transform them into art, Downes goes in the opposite direction, immersing himself and the viewer in that context, the processes of nature becoming the processes of his art. This statement by Fairfield Porter, quoted in an article by John Ashbery, might

be something Downes himself observed:

Order seems to come from searching for disorder, and awkwardness from searching for harmony or likeness, or the following of a system. The truest order is what you already find there, or that will be given if you don't try for it. When you arrange, you fail.⁵

By moving to New York, Downes was able to find the intellectual affirmation of what he had experienced directly in Maine. Through the good offices of Tom Hess at *ARTnews*, where one of his favorite poets, John Ashbery, was an editor, he was able to articulate his ideas about what painting should be. He would write on, among many others, Charles Burchfield, Neil Weilliver, Claude, and, notably, Fairfield Porter. Thus the two strands of his genius—language and painting—were able to aid and abet each other. His masterful esthetic and gift for narrative can be appreciated in *Rackstraw Downes: A Wider View*.

Broadway from 104th St. to 105th St., 1979–80
Oil on canvas, 21¼ x 20 inches
Courtesy of Betty Cunningham Gallery, New York

NOTES

1. Rackstraw Downes, "The Tenses of Landscape" in *Nature and Art Are Physical, Writings on Art, 1967–2008*, p. 252.
2. Ibid. p. 258.
3. Rackstraw Downes, "What Realism Means to Me," in *Nature and Art Are Physical, Writings on Art, 1967–2008*, p. 133.
4. Rackstraw Downes, *Nature and Art Are Physical, Writings on Art, 1967–2008*, pp. 71–72.
5. Fairfield Porter, quoted in "A Respect for Things as They Are," by John Ashbery, April, 2010: <http://thisrecording.com/today/2010/4/8/in-which-the-passionately-idealistic-man-feels-threatened-by.html>



CATALOG



Halldale, 1966
 Oil on wood panel, 12 x 17 ½ inches
 Courtesy of Betty Cuthbert Gallery, New York



North Seasmont, 1966
 Oil on canvas mounted on board, 8 ¾ x 14 ¼ inches
 Courtesy of Betty Cuthbert Gallery, New York



Cows Near Easton, 1972
 Oil on canvas mounted on board, 15 ½ x 21 ½ inches
 Courtesy of Betty Cunningham Gallery, New York



Garden Near Thorndike, 1972
 Oil on canvas, 15 ¼ x 30 ¾ inches
 Private Collection



Jay Hamlin, 1974
 Oil on canvas, 14 x 13 ½ inches
 Private Collection



Andrée Hayum, 1973
 Oil on canvas, 20 x 14 ½ inches
 Courtesy of Betty Cunningham Gallery, New York



Steff Reading "A Nest of Ninnies" to Rehana, 1974
 Oil on canvas, 19¼ x 20½ inches
 Courtesy of Betty Cuninghame Gallery, New York



Hester and Christine Rehearsing, 1974
 Oil on canvas, 20½ x 21½ inches
 Courtesy of Betty Cuninghame Gallery, New York

Claudia, 1973
Oil on canvas, 17 ¼ x 19 ¼ inches
Courtesy of Betty Cunningham Gallery, New York





Broadway from 104th St. to 105th St., 1979-80
 Oil on canvas, 21¼ x 20 inches
 Courtesy of Betty Cunningham Gallery, New York



110th and Broadway, Sloan's from Whelan's, 1978-1980
 Oil on canvas, 23 x 39¼ inches
 Courtesy of The Philadelphia Museum of Art:
 Gift of the Alex Katz Foundation
 2010-223-1



Study for Two Dumps in the Meadowlands, April, Lowtide, A Grassfire, 1986
Oil on canvas mounted on board, 7 x 41¼ inches
Courtesy of Betty Cuninghame Gallery, New York

Ventilation Tower with Estivating Snow Plows, 1988
Oil on canvas, 38¼ x 50¼ inches
Courtesy of The Heiskell Family Collection





A Bend in the Hackensack at Jersey City, 1986
 Oil on canvas, 30 ¼ x 80 ¾ inches
 Courtesy of The William Louis-Dreyfus Foundation Inc.



A Fence at the Periphery of a Jersey City Scrap Metal Yard, 1993
Oil on canvas, 15 x 116¼ inches
Courtesy of The William Louis-Dreyfus Foundation Inc.



Snug Harbor, Main Hall (Looking South), 1998
 Oil on canvas, 24 x 16 inches
 Courtesy of The William Louis-Dreyfus
 Foundation Inc.



Snug Harbor, F Attic with Ceiling, (Study), 2000
 Oil on canvas, 19 x 28 ½ inches
 Courtesy of Betty Cuninghame Gallery, New York



Rainwater Pump Station, Texas City, Texas, 1995
Oil on canvas, 18½ x 42¾ inches
Courtesy of Betty Cunningham Gallery, New York

*At the Confluence of Two Ditches Bordering a Field
with Four Radio Towers, Texas City, 1995*
Oil on canvas, 46 x 48½ inches
Courtesy of The William Louis-Dreyfus Foundation Inc.





Presidio: In the Sand Hills Looking East with ATV Tracks and Water Tower, 2012
Oil on canvas, 16½ x 65¼ inches
Courtesy of Betty Cunningham Gallery, New York



Skylit Loftspace (standing), 2015
Oil on canvas, 24 x 27 inches
Courtesy of the Collection of Anthony and Elizabeth Enders



Outdoor Passageway at 15 Rivington, 2016
Oil on canvas, 29 x 12 inches
Courtesy of Betty Cunningham Gallery, New York



Biography

Rackstraw Downes, born in England in 1939, received a BA from Cambridge in 1961 and a BFA and MFA from Yale University in 1963 and 1964 respectively. He became a United States citizen in 1980. He is the recipient of the Guggenheim (1998) and MacArthur (2009) Fellowships, and was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters (1999). A retrospective, *Rackstraw Downes: Onsite Paintings, 1972–2008*, was organized by the Parrish Art Museum in 2010. It traveled to the Portland Museum of Art, in Portland, Maine, and the Weatherspoon Museum in Greensboro, North Carolina. Notably, in 2009, he delivered the Ninth Annual Raymond Lecture for the Archives of American Art; in 2011, he participated in a Wyeth Foundation for American Art Conference at the National Gallery of Art, entitled *Landscape in American Art, 1940–2000*, where he delivered the address “From There to Here”; in 2012, he was featured on PBS’s critically acclaimed *Art 21* series; and in 2015, he delivered the inaugural Betty Jean & Wayne Thiebaud Endowed Lecture at the University of California, Davis.

Downes’s essays have appeared in *The New York Times Book Review*, *Art in America*, *ARTnews*, and *Art Journal*. In 2014, Edgewise Press published a collection of his essays: *Nature and Art Are Physical: Writings on Art, 1967–2008*. Other publications by the artist include *Under the Gowanus and Razor-Wire Journal* (Turning the Head Press, 2000) and *In Relation to the Whole: Three Essays from Three Decades–1973, 1981, 1996* (Edgewise Press, 2004). Downes introduced and edited, *Fairfield Porter: Art in Its Own Terms* (Zoland Books, 1979, reprinted by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2008). A monograph, with essays by Robert Storr, Sanford Schwartz, and Rackstraw Downes, was published by Princeton University Press in 2005.

Downes is also the subject of *Rackstraw Downes: a painter*, a film by Rima Yamazaki (40 minutes). Robert Sullivan’s review, “A Film About the Painter Rackstraw Downes,” appeared in *The New Yorker* (September 21, 2018), and Chris Packham’s article, “Patient and Transcendent, ‘Rackstraw Downes: A Painter’ Honors the Act of Creation,” was published in *The Village Voice* (April 26, 2017).

Acknowledgements

The Department of Art and Art History at Swarthmore College is pleased to honor Rackstraw Downes as the 2020 Donald J. Gordon Visiting Artist. We are deeply grateful to the Gordon Family for funding exhibitions and lectures by preeminent artists. It is also with profound appreciation that we acknowledge the generosity of Kaori Kitao, William R. Kenan, Jr., Professor Emerita of Art History, Swarthmore College, who established the Kaori Kitao Endowment for the List Gallery. This exhibition catalog was made possible through her ongoing support. We also wish to thank Alfred Mac Adam for his insightful essay for this publication. List Gallery Assistant Tess Wei and List Gallery Interns Isabel Llosa and Max Gruber contributed valuable assistance. I also greatly appreciate the support and expertise of my colleagues: Visual Resources Curator Stacy Bomento and Administrative Assistant Meghan Gebhard.

Rackstraw Downes: A Wider View would not have been possible without the generous support of private collectors and art institutions. Key works were loaned to the List Gallery by The Philadelphia Museum of Art, the William Louis-Dreyfus Foundation, Inc., The Heiskell Family, Anthony Enders and Elizabeth Enders, and several anonymous collectors. We are also especially grateful to Betty Cunningham and her staff for lending numerous works to the exhibition and supporting this endeavor at every stage with their time and expertise.

I am deeply grateful to Rackstraw Downes for generously granting interviews, allowing me to curate this exhibition, and loaning works from his personal collection. Like many other artists who had the opportunity to study with him, I have found ongoing guidance through his art work, essays, and sage advice.

—Andrea Packard