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URBAN LANDSCAPE

**Yvonne Jacquette
Rackstraw Downes
John Moore**

Wright State University Art Galleries

URBAN LANDSCAPE
FEBRUARY 12 - MARCH 19, 1995
Wright State University Art Galleries

curated by

Ernest Koerlin

with contributions from:

Ernest Koerlin

The Department of Art and Art History, Wright State University

Robert Godfrey

Department of Art, Western Carolina University

Catalogue design by Eric Davis

The impetus for this exhibition was a small band of landscape painters—looking for pastoral and bucolic panoramas. Instead, finding themselves in parking garages and office complexes painting the view.

I wish to thank Eric Davis and Robert Godfrey for their significant contributions to the show—as well as the support of the Ohio Arts Council.

Ernest Koerlin

**HANDMADE:
THE REPRESENTATIONAL
PAINTINGS OF RACKSTRAW
DOWNES, YVONNE JACQUETTE
AND JOHN MOORE**

Post-Modernism has noted that a fauve landscape smells of paint, a Barbizon one of the dew. Rackstraw Downes'

Some art is in service to itself. The artist who makes this type of art is very conscious of the present in order not to repeat it. As a result, this type of art becomes exclusionary, exempting first content and then form. Other art pays homage to the past as well as to the scene. In our century the former is usually given the label

“modernism” and the later referred to as “post modern.” But art and artists are generally more complicated than this.

Every era has had its share of avant-garde artists as well as its reinholders. But history in accomplishing its role as selector and interpreter has never really favored one “movement” over another. Indeed, in the end, history argues issues of quality, not regional disputes.

The three painters in this exhibition—Rackstraw Downes, Yvonne Jacquette and John Moore have, over the past quarter of a century, established themselves as

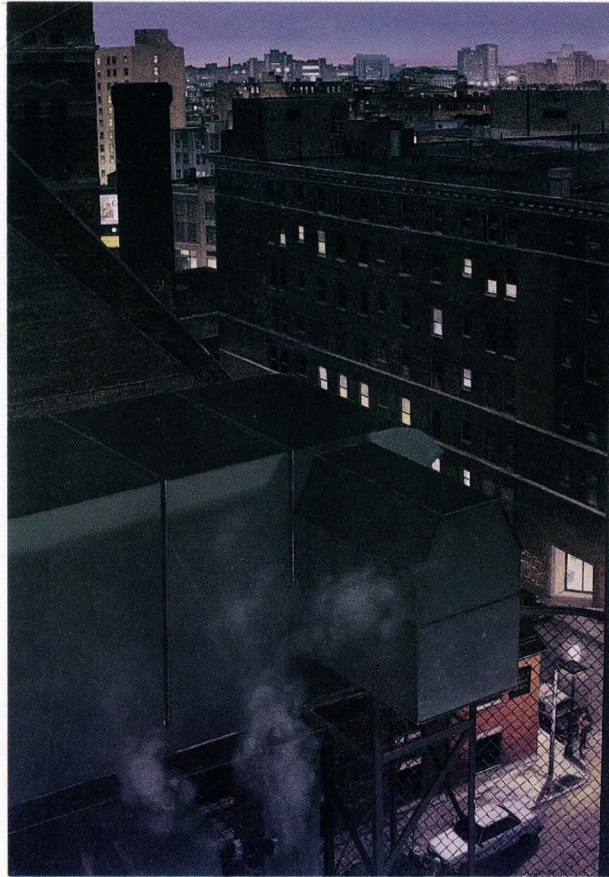
both constrictive and expansive artists. All three bring a strong formalist structure to their work, and yet, they all permit the odor of the scene to penetrate this structure. So on one hand, formal construction tames and stills the picture, and on the other, feeling for the place opens it up.

I first met John Moore in the late 1960s when he was a graduate student at Yale. His mentor at that time was Balthus, that post-cubist master whose work enabled so many emerging and established American artists to break with abstraction and develop or return to a representational vocabulary. Moore had a very careful hand in

John Moore



Southside Light Clue, oil on canvas, 50" x 54", 1992



Weekend Conversation, oil on canvas, 54" x 36", 1992-93

John Moore

his student days, a hand which he has refined and honed over the years. While he no longer portrays the figure, Moore has through his marvelous hand been able to investigate and combine formal with representational modes in his recent urbanscapes.

The best examples of Moore's ability to mix formal, almost classical, structure with the depiction of place may be seen in *Southside Light Clue*. This painting is not unlike Piero's *The Flagellation* or William Sidney Mount's *The Power of Music*, where a shallow advancing plane is played against an illusionistic receding space." (This subscription to duality probably

reached its most minimal, stripped-down state in works coming from such artists as Ellsworth Kelly and Morris Louis.³)

Yet like Piero and Mount, and unlike Kelly or Louis, Moore includes more than mere formal architectonic balance. With *Southside Light Clue* and *Week-end Conversation*, Moore is able to depict the isolation and emptiness of a city. The existential realist Edward Hopper is a clue in locating Moore's representational aesthetic, with its opening and closing of spaces, stillness of air and lack of atmosphere, dramatic and lingering light. One almost experiences the metaphysics of de Chirico in Moore's oeuvre, too.

Huston Paschal, the Associate Curator of Modern Art at the North Carolina Museum of Art, has noted that Yvonne Jacquette's audience will be mesmerized by her "intricate patterns created by the stitch and weave of the artist's brush strokes...."⁴ This is an important observation Paschal makes because it indicates that, like Moore, Jacquette has a careful, deliberate hand much like a quiltmaker. The statement also indicates the artist's formal inclination to touch and retouch the surface of a picture plane in a most "modern" fashion. One is reminded of that 1890 stance by the Pont-Aven painter Maurice Denis, that painting is essentially an



Left Wing, Boston Industrial Area II, oil on canvas, 85" x 70", 1990

Yvonne Jacquette

Yvonne Jacquette



Hong Kong Harbor with Floating Restaurant V, oil on canvas, 64 3/4" x 91 1/2", 1992-1993

arrangement of colored marks on the surface of a canvas.

The marks in Jacquette's *Left Wing, Boston Industrial Area II* go across and up the picture plane. Illusion is thwarted at every turn. The artist herself has asked: "What kind of marks or strokes suggest rotation in space? Is there any kind of perspective, any vanishing point? Why does the earth 'flatten out' from above?"⁵ And there are other modernist tendencies in Jacquette's work. The collage-like *Carnavon Road (Street Signs IV)* and *Hong Kong Harbor with Floating Restaurant V* conjure up certain American modernists such as Marsden

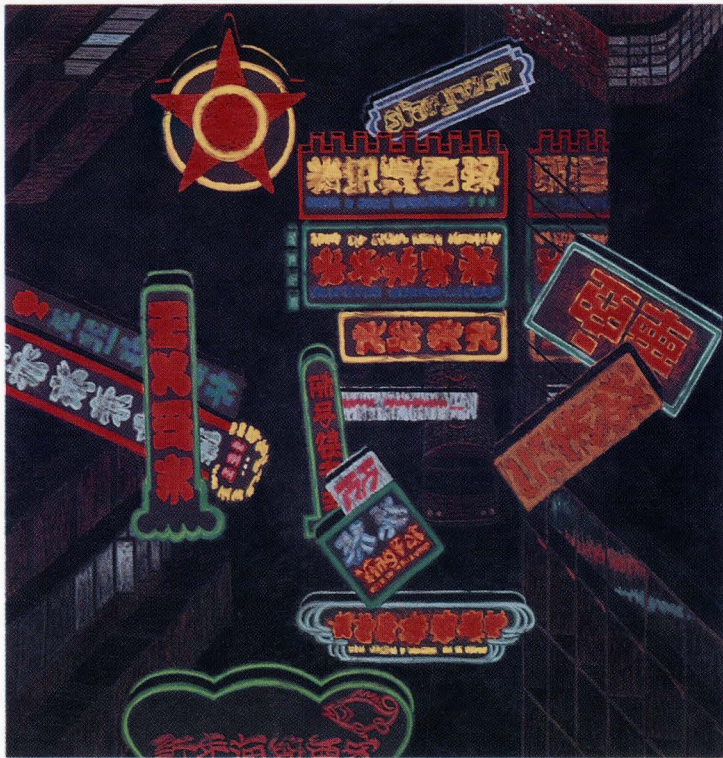
Hartley (*Iron Cross*), John Marin (*Lower Manhattan*) and Stuart David (*Owh! In San Pão*).

But as with the other painters in this exhibition, Jacquette goes quite beyond formalism. She combines, as Fairfield Porter would say, nothing but art with nothing of art.⁶ This "nothing of art" is her likeness to the scene and the feeling it conveys. We recognize the specific places in her airplane views—Boston, New York, Hong Kong—and at the same time we sense our vulnerability from this view from above. The heart and pulse quicken and there is an overwhelming feeling of queasiness that contradicts the

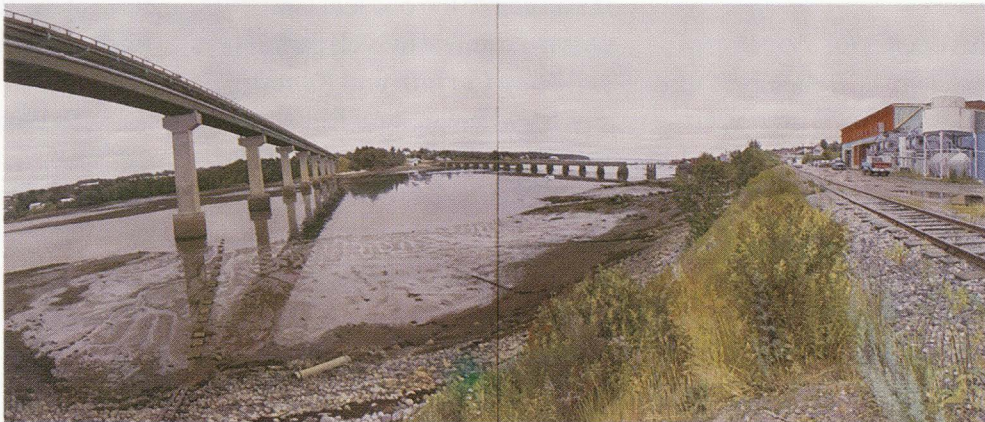
ordered (and seductive) handmade marks. This shift to and fro between form making and the humanizing scene is what brings pictorial strength to Jacquette's work.

The poet Edwin Denby once asked rhetorically and then observed: "How can everything in a picture appear faster than thought and disappear slower than thought? As far as that is a problem it is a problem for critics; for a painter it is a passion."⁷ There is something in Denby's amazement that pertains to the work of Rackstraw Downes, a painter who like Moore and Jacquette has a very strong loyalty to place. To the viewer (spectator) his paintings appear at once, like a

Yvonne Jacquette



Carnavon Road (Street Signs IV), oil on canvas, 65" x 61 3/4", 1992



The Mouth of the Passagassawaukeag at Belfast, ME. Seen from the Frozen Foods Plant,
oil on canvas, 36 3/8" x 84 1/2", 1989

home run, yet are retained like a memory or a residue long afterwards.

This occurs for a number of reasons: There is a wholeness in Downes' work that is organized around long, eccentric horizontal picture planes, and there is an ordered marking within this space. In order to hold this order so that fragments are not created, Downes resorts to figural elements such as fences (*A Fence at the Periphery of a Jersey City Scrap Metal Yard*), lines of automobiles (*Approach to the Holland Tunnel with 75 Varick*), bridges (*The Mouth of the Passagassawaukeag at Belfast, ME*) and

horizon lines that flow and bend rather than abut and resist. The feeling that Downes creates is not dissimilar to the one that Christo is able to manifest in such earthworks as *Valley Curtain* and *Running Fence*, where natural forces take over, or to the measured yet fluid swing of a fastball slugger.

These figurative objects which Downes deploys as linear devices cause the eye of the viewer to speed smoothly from side to side so that the peripheral is always engaged and so that the eye sees in whole, not pieces.⁸ I also think that Downes wants us to see his work as old friends, familiar and recognizable.⁹ (His long, descrip-

tive titles lend support to this.) Here Downes' work is not that far removed from Fairfield Porter's or for that matter his contemporaries, Rudy Burckhardt and Alex Katz.

There are many similarities among the artists in this exhibition. Part of their syntax is working from direct or almost direct (drawings and sketches) observation. All of them have come up with a personal signature that is a result of careful hands, which are able to caress the picture plane as they move over it and at the same time these hands have become fond of the subject.

So in each of these artists' work can be located formal



A Fence at the Periphery of a Jersey City Scrap Metal Yard, oil on canvas, 15" x 116 1/4", 1993



Approach to the Holland Tunnel with 75 Varick, oil on canvas, 7 5/8" x 57", 1989

aloofness and realist sweat. This apparent paradox causes these artists to appear as voyeurs as much as participants to the scenes they are depicting. They are empathetic tourists who have grown attached to the places in which they have found themselves. Unlike the modernists who have removed themselves from the scene, Downes, Jacquette and Moore are on the scene and will return to it. Herein lies their vitality and their metaphors.

Robert Godfrey
Asheville, North Carolina

Notes:

1. Rackstraw Downes. "Post-Modernist Painting," in *Tracks: A Journal of Artists' Writing* (New York: Herbert George, 1976). p. 73.
2. Barbara Novak. *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Praeger, 1969). pp. 107-108.
3. Robert Venturi. *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1966). p. 90.
4. Huston Paschal. "Picturing the City," catalogue essay for the exhibition "New York, New York: Recent Cityscapes," North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, N.C., 1994. p. 19.
5. Yvonne Jacquette. "Aerial Images," in *ACM Newsletter* (New York: Artists' Choice Museum, November 1980). p. 4.
6. Fairfield Porter. "Speaking Likeness," in *ACM Newsletter* (New York: Artists' Choice Museum, November-December 1981). p. 1. (First published in *Artnews Annual*, "Narrative Arts," 1970).
7. Quoted by Yvonne Jacquette in "Ariel Images."
8. Rackstraw Downes quotes from Howard's End in "Post-Modernist Painting: Live in fragments no longer!"
9. Ortega y Gasset. "The Dehumanization of Art, 1925", in *Velazquez, Goya and the Dehumanization of Art* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc, 1972). p. 70. In this essay of 1925, Ortega laments the coming of modernism and the "road leading directly away from the human object."

Robert Godfrey is a painter and art critic who lives in Asheville, North Carolina. He has headed the Department of Art at Western Carolina University since 1985.

Yvonne Jacquette

1. *Left Wing Over Astoria II*, oil on canvas, 79" x 79 1/4", 1990
Courtesy Brooke Alexander,
New York
2. *Left Wing, Boston Industrial Area II*, oil on canvas, 85" x 70", 1990
Courtesy Brooke Alexander,
New York
3. *Carnavon Road (Street Signs IV)*, oil on canvas, 65" x 61 3/4", 1992
Courtesy Brooke Alexander,
New York
4. *Hong Kong Harbor with Floating Restaurant V*, oil on canvas, 64 3/4" x 91 1/2", 1992-1993
Courtesy Brooke Alexander,
New York

Rackstraw Downes

1. *From 75 Varick to Holland Tunnel Entrance*, oil on canvas, 23" x 72", 1988
Courtesy of the artist
2. *Study for A Fence at the Periphery of a Jersey City Scrap Metal Yard*, oil on canvas 7 5/8" x 57", 1992
Courtesy of the artist
3. *A Fence at the Periphery of a Jersey City Scrap Metal Yard*, oil on canvas, 15" x 116 1/4", 1993
Courtesy of the artist
4. *Approach to the Holland Tunnel with 75 Varick*, oil on canvas, 7 5/8" x 57", 1989
Courtesy of the artist
5. *Currie's Woods Housing Project, Jersey City, Buildings 1 & 3 Vacated and Fenced for Future Demolition*, oil on canvas, 29" x 78", 1992
Courtesy of the artist
6. *The Mouth of the Passagass-awauckeaq at Belfast, ME. Seen from the Frozen Foods Plant*, oil on canvas, 36 3/8" x 84 1/2", 1989
Courtesy of the artist
7. *Entrance to the Holland Tunnel*, oil on canvas, 12 3/4" x 39 3/4", 1988
Courtesy of Wright State University

John Moore

1. *Southside Light Clue*, oil on canvas, 50" x 54", 1992
Courtesy of Hirschl-Adler Modern
2. *Embassy*, oil on canvas, 24" x 24", 1993
Courtesy of Hirschl-Adler Modern
3. *Weekend Conversation*, oil on canvas, 54" x 36", 1992-93
Courtesy of Hirschl-Adler Modern
4. *Turbo Dogs*, oil on canvas, 60" x 60", 1989
Courtesy of Hirschl-Adler Modern
5. *Augusta Late Afternoon*, oil on canvas, 60" x 90", 1987-88
Courtesy of Hirschl-Adler Modern
6. *Dutch Pink and Italian Blue*, oil on canvas, 72" x 72", 1993
Courtesy of Hirschl-Adler Modern





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