

THE LONG LOOK



JOHN BARTELSTONE

ELIZABETH YAMIN



John Bartelstone
Capstan at Drydock No. 4, 2001

THE LONG LOOK PAINTINGS AND PHOTOGRAPHS



MARCH 12, 2020 - JANUARY 25, 2021

BROOKLYN NAVY YARD
YARD WORK GALLERY, BUILDING 92
63 FLUSHING AVENUE
BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

Installation, photograph by Elizabeth Yamin



John Bartelstone

Bulk chemical carrier ship named "Assos", 2007

The Long Look

When John Bartelstone published *The Brooklyn Navy Yard* (powerHouseBooks, 2010), I had been painting at the Yard for over 20 years. I couldn't stop looking at John's images. I loved the resolution of intricate details, the expansive space, the rich "color" of the blacks and grays. Although Bartelstone has produced sharply focused images of the objects in the Yard as well as panoramic views, his goals are as much poetic as expository. He describes his first glimpses of the Yard, which he saw from the water in 1984, as almost like finding an undiscovered room in one's house. When I first saw the Navy Yard in 1989, I felt a similar sense of mystery and the excitement of a marvelous discovery.

In 2017, I began work on a triptych loosely based on photos I took in 2000 of the machinery stored inside Building 128, before it was completely renovated. As I worked on *The Birth of a Small Appliance*, I began to think how much sense it would make to juxtapose John's photographs with my paintings. Carli Beseau, the director of Exhibits and Programs at the Brooklyn Navy Development Center, approved the proposal and her assistant, Shimrit Lee, curated the show, which was beautifully installed at the Yard Work Gallery in Building 92 in March 2020. Due to the pandemic, the show was closed before it opened. Visiting became possible in October, but access was limited, and impossible for many. John and I hope that this catalogue will make up for some of what was missed, and we have added some images of works that were not included in the exhibit.

Elizabeth Yamin



Elizabeth Yamin
The Birth of a Small Appliance, 2017-2019
Oil on three canvases
51" x 99" (Triptych)

Magnificent Remains and Parallel Visions

The title, *The Long Look*, perfectly represents my experience viewing this exhibition. The show is a selection of pieces produced over a period of years during which these two artists, unbeknownst to each other, were making art inspired by the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Upon discovering they shared parallel visions and led parallel creative lives, Liz Yamin and John Bartelstone found themselves inadvertently in cahoots. Their works are now presented here together for the first time. Although the two artists use different mediums, they share concepts and perceptions.

Shows like this offer more than the typical opportunity to see an artist's work. Rather, what is special about an installation such as *The Long Look* is the multilayered richness of presentation. Context, history, and multiple perspectives are provided via various mediums. This allows the viewer to take a deep dive into both Yamin's and Bartelstone's subjective and objective responses to the historic Brooklyn Navy Yard.

Produced over 15 years, John Bartelstone's photographs present an unabashed journalistic view of scenes inside the Brooklyn Navy Yard, yet the images suggest a poetic temperament. His personal response to the grand, rusted, and colossal structures comes through powerfully. "Magnificent remains", a term used by Bartelstone, captures the awe one can imagine him feeling, bringing forth a life that was. In *Dry Dock 1: Pump well*, a rotund electric pump, installed circa 1940, stands vertically as if at attention. A long staircase beside the pump leads to a dark chamber beyond, evidence of days gone by, suggesting a transcendent existence of that which no longer functions yet still remains.

Liz Yamin is a painter of shape, movement, and intense rhythms of color. Her abstract responses to the Navy Yard convey the dynamic experience that is a confabulation of machine, time and space. A powerful and surprising metaphor is generated as a result of Yamin's intense processing and internalizing of the Yard's defunct forms: the idea of the human is unavoidable in the canvases and drawings. The metaphor of the artist's own body in the artworks suggests an agent of motion and a bustling, machinelike function. In Yamin's large triptych (oil on canvas), *The Birth of a Small Appliance*, 2016-19, a spine with vertebrae is spliced jauntily with the chains, engines, spinning wheels and axles that once powered these great machines. All is alive.

The two artists share this sense of Animism, bringing to life that which is inanimate. Yamin uses painterly rhythms and disjunctive planes and applies the metaphor of the machines to her own body in order to animate her paintings. Though painted over long periods of time, her abbreviated touch, bold contrasts and “unfussy” style preserve the fresh aliveness and physical energy that characterize her work. In *Red Hat*, 2010 (oil stick on paper) criss-crossing black slash marks rise through a central structure, with washy soft blues on either side and the floppy red “hat” propped up top. In Bartelstone’s photographs, ship hulls and machine detritus conjure an archeological dig. In *Bldg. 128: 25 ft. tall Toledo press*, 1994, one can imagine glimpses of animal skeletons, bones, creatures with long necks, vertebrae and more. It’s almost as if these animals could suddenly come alive, slog through rocks and dirt, reach for branches, twist to find sunlight.

Bartelstone’s pieces convey depth, relishing space and layers of detail, while Yamin’s images bring the two-dimensional flatness of the picture plane to bear. Her imagery and color are bright and direct, evoking the present moment, whereas Bartelstone’s monochromatic photos are reflective and tempered by the patina of time, melancholy and nostalgia.

When asked to write an essay about this exhibition, I was brought back to my own time painting *plein air* in the Navy Yard. I recall my own meditations on the powerful cavern of dry docks and large ships pulling in for repair. On the cranes resembling ancient animals as they haul and dip or stagnate with time. I became acquainted with and got to know Yamin later, and while I have followed her work for years, I am new to Bartelstone’s mesmerizing images.

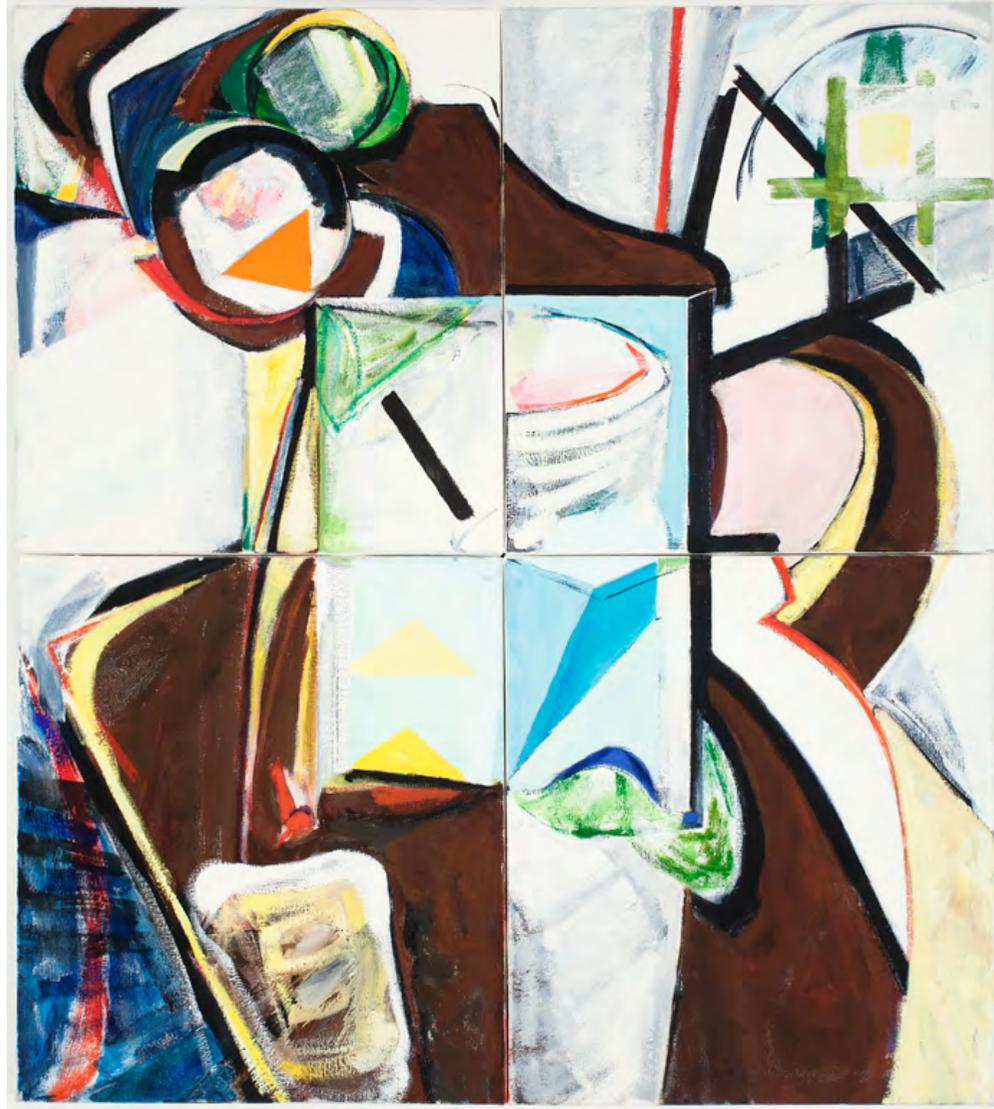
Yamin and Bartelstone share many qualities, including an undeterred practice bound up in the machines and spaces in the Navy Yard. In John’s words, they are “unwitting collaborators,” and I do agree. They also have distinct differences in how they use the elements of time and space, movement and memory. Together, there is the resounding sound of a complex place and of historic presence. Yet it is now a site of renewal, a creative hub of designers and artists and new industry. A past savored, and a future simmering.

Carol Diamond is an artist and educator who lives and works in New York City. She is an Associate professor at Pratt Institute, and her work has been shown in numerous group and solo exhibitions. Her writing on art has appeared in *Two Coats of Paint*.



John Bartelstone

Bldg. 128: 25 ft.-tall Toledo press, 1994



Elizabeth Yamin
Untitled, 2011
Oil on four canvases
38" x 44"



John Bartelstone
Bldg. 123: This attic locker room is adjacent to a former mold loft. A hull mold hangs on the wall, 2007



Elizabeth Yamin
Flood Gate, 2013
Oil on panel
11" x 14"

How Did We Get Here?

The Long Look, an exhibit firmly anchored in a place, also represents a passage through time: what John Bartelstone has called a “long, if unwitting, collaboration.” The show encompasses several kinds of “here.” Most obvious are “right here at the Navy Yard,” and “here they (the works in the exhibit) are!” But what are the paths of discovery and development that have brought Bartelstone and me to a certain point in our work? What particular mixture of happenstance, influence and invention brought us “here”?

Yamin: It began, in 1989, with a search for a better studio. When I was shown around the Yard, it seemed vast and almost empty. It was easy to pick a space—light, light, and the river. Northwest towards the Williamsburg Bridge and the skyline of Manhattan.

I have always responded strongly to landscape of all kinds, but now I surveyed a scene of almost unimaginable complexity and constant transformation. My roots in Ab Ex and Action painting reverberated to the power and thrust of track cranes, their lifting and lowering, the emptying and filling of the dry dock, the ships with huge hulls and decks crowded with fantastic shapes.

I didn’t set out to get all this into my work. I watched it happen. First, a crowding of forms nudging each other. Gradually, more specific shapes appeared—a barge series—and stronger lines delineating structure in a wide-open space. Another series was a response to the dismantling of a crane—weeks of patient labor followed by the sudden severing of the neck. Every day there was a new scene that I couldn’t help trying to interpret. What shape belonged to which ship or structure? Was this unnameable object behind or in front of that one? And then it all moves, anyway, only partly resolved.

My large triptychs incorporate the shapes of the bits of detritus I collected and of the machines I observed and photographed in Building 128. The tripartite format allows for a kind of back and forth narrative, both a sequence and a unity; the large size lets you walk in. There is a long process of development, from a sketch to a 2D laying out to years of additions and subtractions until

eventually a sense of space among the many elements starts to emerge. Finding/making that space is a journey into a kind of reality, something that can be entered.

the real is like a construction

something that builds piece by piece

and then it falls on you or you move into it

- David Antin, *Is This The Right Place?*

Bartelstone: Since the age of two, I have been in search of a certain type of sublime image: the machine out of its element, either enclosed by architecture or nature. An old pump engine in the woods or an elevator machine atop a beautiful building. I need to see these things, as they are sublime. Given my addiction to the mechanical sublime, I started to photograph scenes that evoked a sense of it. Others have done it, of course, but just because others have taken heroin doesn't mean that you can't be an addict too. While most people consider the German photographic couple Bernd and Hilla Becher to be dispassionate collectors of industrial typologies, and they even play along, I know better. They are addicted to the mechanical and architectural sublime. Their images are love letters. Walker Evans had snippets of it in his work and O. Winston Link conjured it in a full-force Asperger's-tinged frenzy. I sought examples of it to photograph and remembered a 1967 tugboat ride up the East River and past the Brooklyn Navy Yard. If only I could get inside to photograph the place. While the Yard was officially off limits, the management was not immune to a photographer's request. So, in 1994, in exchange for giving copies of all images to the Yard's management, I began a sixteen year trip inside the wall. I find that the best depictions of what I am after are seen in black and white, so I photographed the Yard with black and white negative film in 4 x 5 and 120 size, shooting with a Rolleiflex, Hasselblad SWC and mostly with a 4 x 5 view camera. Some yard activities are fleeting, a dry-dock accepting a ship, or a building being built or demolished. But other sites and sights are ever-present while evolving over time. I wandered the Yard for a long enough time to be able to record scenes as I felt they needed to be seen, and sometimes that took time. It did feel like a mission and I'm glad that I did it when I did, because many of the views and buildings are gone now. The Yard is losing its time-capsule feel and becoming part of the City after two centuries of being apart.



John Bartelstone

Ship in Drydock No.6, 1996

What We Made

The following remarks were inspired by my friend Richard Williams, who looked long and reflected on the show in conversation and in writing. Quotations are from an interview with the curator, Shimrit Lee. –E.Y.

Operating with different approaches, mediums, and techniques, Bartelstone and I have for decades attended to the landscape of the Brooklyn Navy Yard. By deciding to show together, we are asking viewers to attend to similarities/commonalities in our work and also engaging them in multiple boundary-crossing explorations: between painting and photography; between abstraction and representation; and between space and time.

Space and Time: The Yard is a place where time seems actually visible. The title of the exhibition points to the length of time that we have spent looking at this complicated landscape. But it also refers to commonalities of process.

Bartelstone describes his method for capturing the images in the Yard:

I approach most of what I shot at the Yard as objects in their surroundings. I would walk around each machine or structure again and again until I found the point where it took on a certain kind of scale. I try to find that. It's a point where they take on a certain magic.

Looking long and moving about is an organic part of his process. One usually thinks of a photograph as capturing a moment. The magic of Bartelstone's photographs is the way they capture an object plus time. And he does this by finding, as he walks around, the precise relationship of object to space that seems to reveal something of its long journey to the moment of the shutter snap.

And on another level, the places in the Yard embody time. Bartelstone, on his photograph of Building 128:

That picture shows a building built in 1899, and it was updated in 1917, with a poster from World War I, I think, and machines from somewhere, some industrial plant transferred some of those machines, maybe in the 1980's. It's just a combination of eras and functions and purpose, and it's got that kind of sublime mystery to it. You don't know what's going on because there's so many things happening at once.



Elizabeth Yamin
Wallabout, 2010-2011
Oil on three canvases
72" x 28" (Triptych)

Yamin, on the *The Birth of a Small Appliance*:

My big triptych ... took two years to complete. I think I was finally able to pull together images from the Yard that I've observed over the years—objects and structures.... and also create a kind of space in which the viewer can move.

The painting is partly based on the machines that were stored for many years in Building 128, but many other elements are included. As with Bartelstone's images, I explore the way space can “stand in” for time. The space that the quasi-referential objects in the paintings inhabit is ambiguous and confusing; the time required to puzzle it out echoes the time the artist spent trying to unravel the Yard's complexities.

Abstraction and Representation: As the work of an increasing number of artists attests, there is no firm boundary between the abstract and the representational. Bartelstone's photographs are clear depictions of objects in a setting, and he brings to them an understanding of the industrial uses and processes involved. This contrasts with the confusing visual array that the Yard presented to me, and that I savor and celebrate. As mysteries are deciphered, new ones arise: “...the understanding comes and goes, and I think that's what makes looking at things so interesting.”

Bartelstone's images of machines and maritime infrastructure have presence in space and a kind of personality. Because a machine is ultimately an extension of the operator, a supplement to the human body, a co-actor and co-creator. My *Dismantling* series, made while the track crane at Dry Dock 4 was being taken apart, alludes to the commonalities of function between humans and machines: lifting, reaching, pulling and pushing. Machines themselves are a kind of abstraction, whether realistically represented in photographs or used piecemeal in a logic-defying “abstract” painting.

Encouraged by Shimrit Lee's brilliant curating, the viewer can trace the gestation of the finished works. There are small sketches, watercolors, photographs and found objects, in Yamin's case, and some of the negatives and contact sheets that Bartelstone produced from the hundreds of shots that he took over 15 years. The same shapes and their combinations recur; painter and the photographer draw

their work from a shared reality and a deep appreciation for the beauty and power of the functional. Abstraction and realistic representation converge in the teeth of a gear, in the diamonds in the neck of a crane, in the thrust of a ship's hull.

Photography and Painting: Bartelstone's photographs, with their gradations of grays and blacks, their high resolution and depth of field, convey a sense of the power of the place and the scale of the work that was accomplished there. When I saw his book, *The Brooklyn Navy Yard*, I felt an instant connection, despite the contrast between mediums and between color and black and white:

...the sculptor, Bernini, once said –this is a very loose quote, ...something to the effect that the hard thing in sculpture is getting the color. I think what he meant was getting it so that you have that immediate reaction to it, which one has to color. And that's one of the things I love about John's photographs, that somehow, in the black and white, you still get that feeling of texture, of there-ness.

Commonalities and the crossing of boundaries invite a back and forth experience that requires a certain amount of time. Here one sees a connection between works with spiraling forms, there a black vertical shape that echoes the sunlight on the floor of the room in *Naval Hospital*, 2007. In these juxtapositions, I hope the viewer may be able to experience something of what Bartelstone and I have tried to convey. Max Beckman's words seem to capture the spirit of this show: “My aim is always to get hold of the magic of reality...”



John Bartelstone

Dry Dock 6: Two men work on Ready Reserve Force freighter Cape Avinof, 1996



Elizabeth Yamin

Tinker's Garden, 2010-2013

Oil on three canvases

54" x 102" (Triptych)



John Bartelstone
Bldg 1: High temperature test chamber, 2005



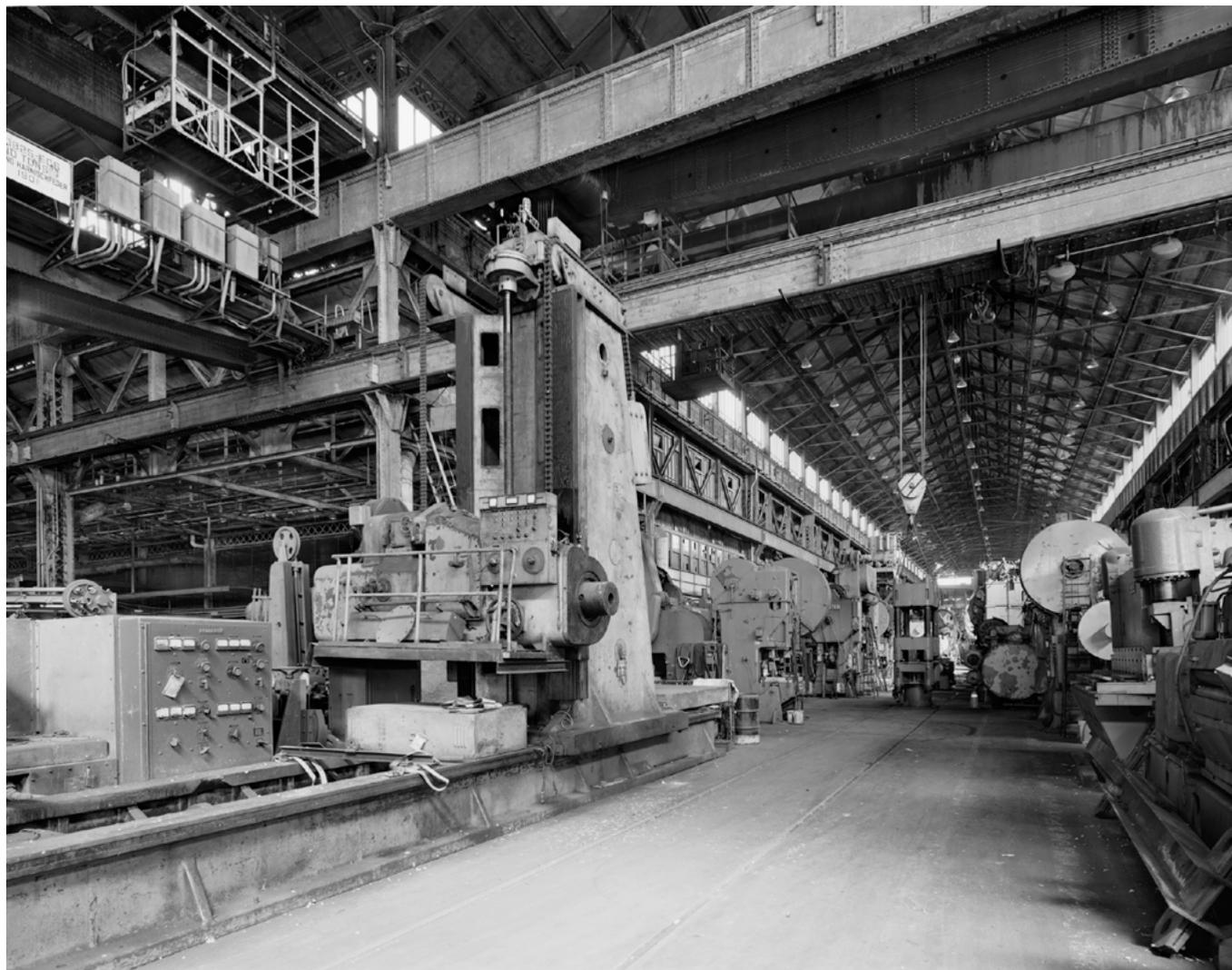
Elizabeth Yamin
Grammar of Distance, 2006
Oil on canvas
35" x 44"



Elizabeth Yamin
Untitled
Charcoal on paper
15" x 11.25"



John Bartelstone
Bldg 166: Saltwater fire pump, 2005



John Bartelstone
Machine tools stored in Bldg. 128, 2001



Elizabeth Yamin
Red Hat, 2010
Oil stick on paper
30" x 22"



Found Objects
Photograph by Richard Williams



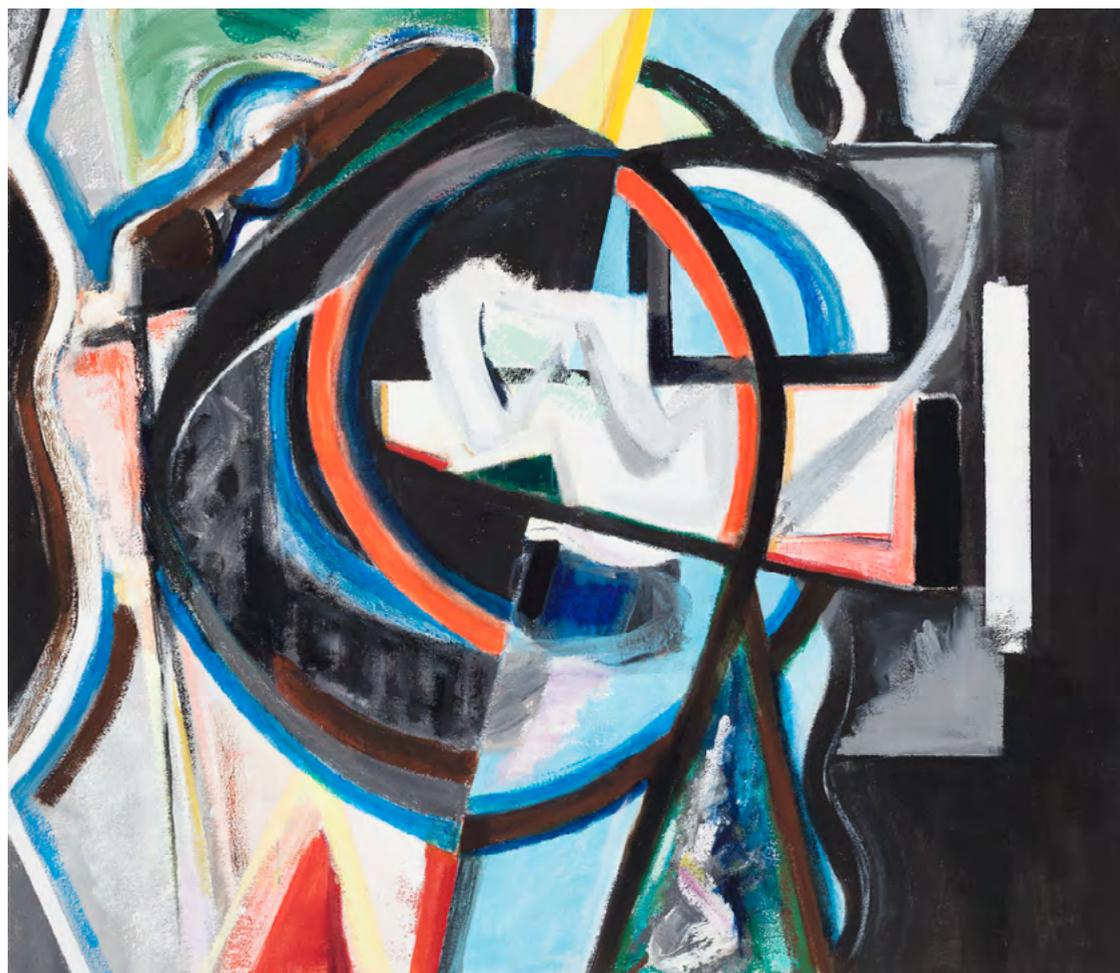
Elizabeth Yamin
Dismantling: Counterweight, 2014
Mixed media on paper
24" x 22"



Vitrine
Photograph by JC Cancedda



Elizabeth Yamin
Dismantling: Track Wheel, 2014
Mixed media on paper
24" x 22"



Elizabeth Yamin
Fulcrum, 2013
Oil on canvas
24" x 28"

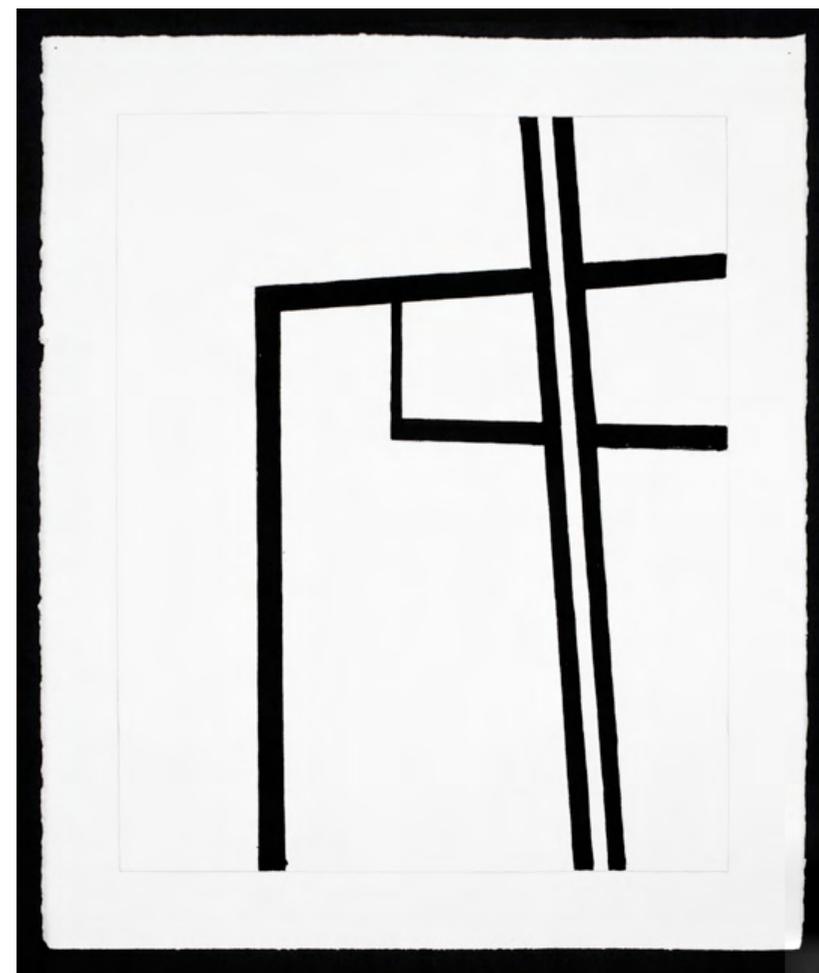


John Bartelstone
Dry Dock 4: Motor and gears of the remaining Orton crane, 1994



John Bartelstone

Dry Dock 1: Pump well. One of two electric pumps installed ca. 1940, 2007

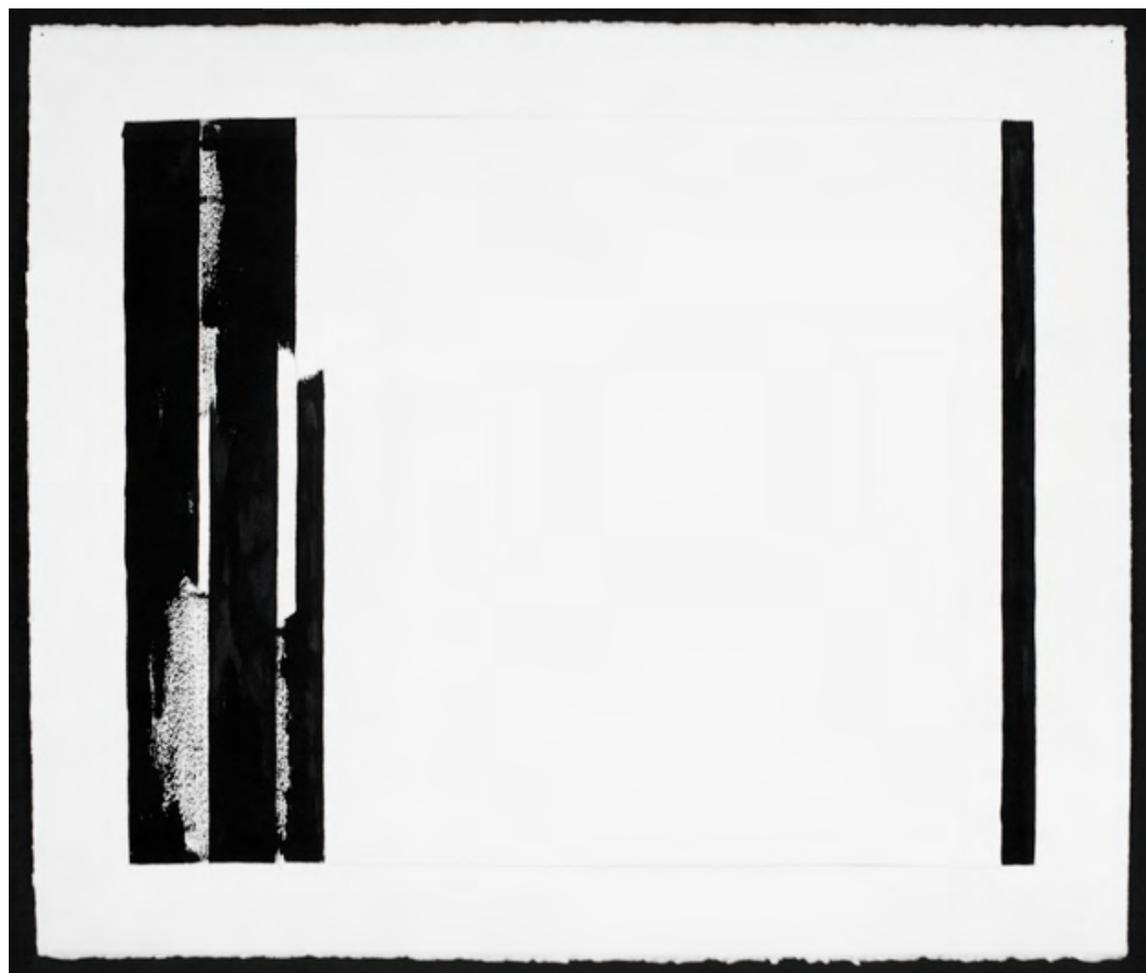


Elizabeth Yamin

Untitled, 2007

Flashe on paper

26" x 22"



Elizabeth Yamin
Untitled, 2007
Flashe on paper
22" x 26.5"



John Bartelstone
Naval Hospital: Patient room and private bath, 2007

John Bartelstone

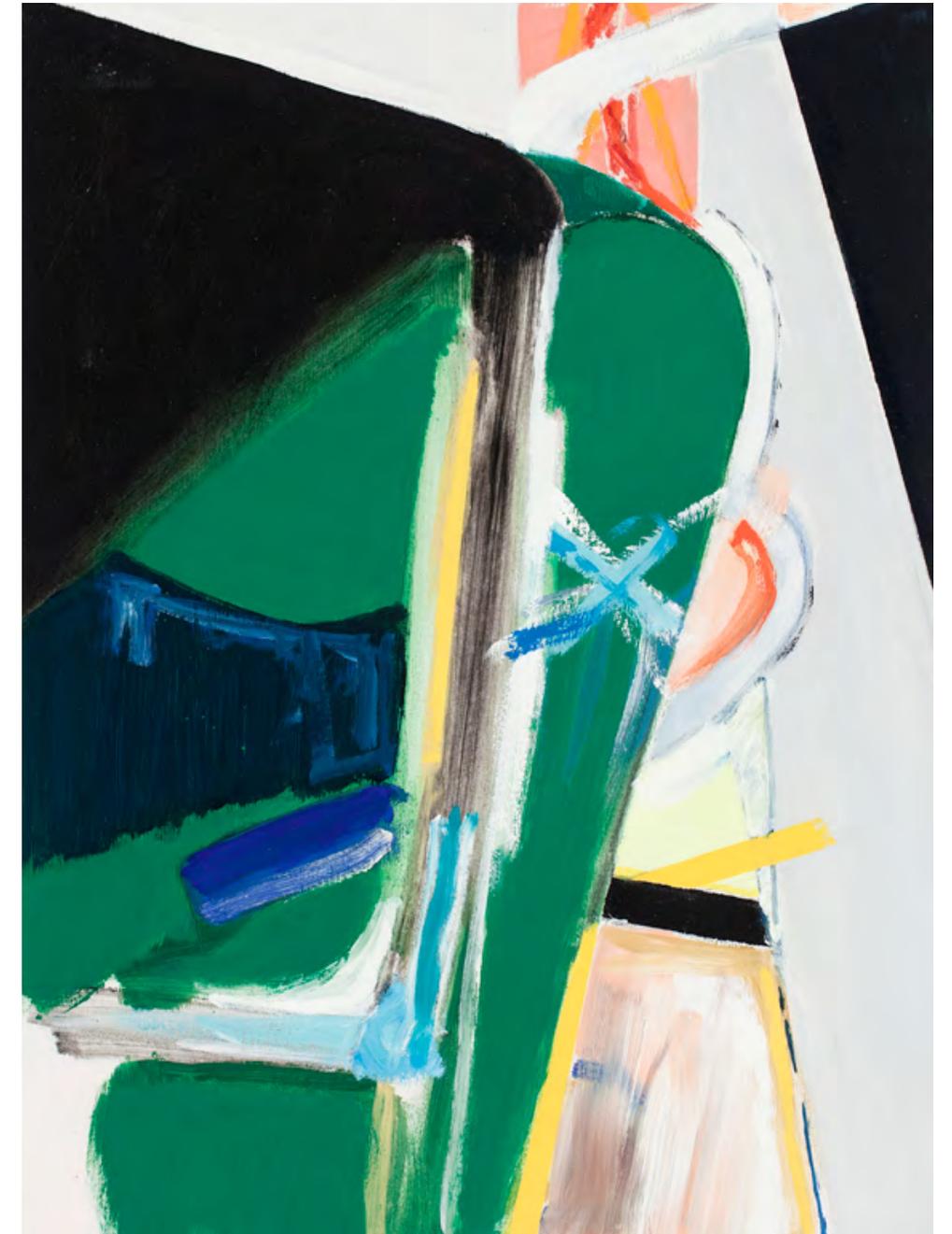
John Bartelstone was born in Manhattan in 1956. He started out as a recording engineer and then he became an architect, working at the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, a place where a lifelong love of infrastructure was further kindled. In 1996, after a decade in architecture, he began a new career as an architectural photographer.

Liz Yamin

Elizabeth Yamin has spent 31 years painting in Bldg. 62 at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. She has had one-person shows at The Painting Center, St. John's University and Long Island University in NYC, and at WORKS and the Stadler Gallery in Maine. Group exhibitions include *The 183rd Annual Invitational* at The National Academy Museum, NYC and *Painting Is Not a Good Idea*, HallSpace, Dorchester, MA. She has received a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship.

John Bartelstone and Liz Yamin wish to thank:

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Elizabeth Yamin
Green Edge, 2011
Oil and flashe on panel
16" x 12"

