

GALLERY-GOING

Testing the Urban Topography

By MAUREEN MULLARKEY
Jane Jacobs called the city the "immense laboratory of trial and error." It is a site for experimentation and exploration for painters no less than city planners, architects, and designers. "Urban Landscapes," the summer group exhibition at Elizabeth Harris Gallery, showcases urban topography by eight painters. It is one of the season's most satisfying shows and one of the gallery's best ensembles.

URBAN LANDSCAPES

Elizabeth Harris

Rackstraw Downes is represented by two finely wrought studies that date back a decade or more and forego the extreme horizontality that has become something of a signature format for the artist. The pair illustrates why Mr. Downes is considered by many to be the gold standard of American industrial landscape.

"Ventilation Tower With Scaffold" (1998) is a lovely thing. Under renovation, the tower is swathed in tarps and wrapped around with staging. Its narrow façade is viewed from the angle at which shaded frontage meets a receding, sun-drenched side. The shadow of an adjacent but unseen building floats across the tarps. The construction is a medley of earthen neutrals relieved by a running strip of cobalt blue material that masks the base of the scaffolding; street-side bins and signs provide enlivening color notes. Viewed from a short distance, the delicate scaffolding recalls the Belle Époque tracery of Antonio López-García's views of Madrid's Gran Vía. Indeed, "Irving Trust and the College of Insurance" (1985), depicting a development site in Lower Manhattan, is realized in bleached tones that correspond to the Spanish master's vistas of contemporary Madrid. (With the World Trade Center buildings standing behind the subject, the painting carries a charge that was unanticipated when it was painted.) In all, Mr. Downes conveys the intricate order that makes construction a great wonder. Subduing detail without diminishing complexity is crucial to reconciling man's work to the landscape in which it participates. This is the heart of his achievement, not the fetishizing of perspective that his work is too often cited for.

Ron Milewicz's three-panel urban panorama "Citiwide" (2005)



ELIZABETH HARRIS

Doug Martin, 'Morning Glory' (2007).

If Lindquist does not make a mannerism out of sheet metal supports, he will be a formidable presence.

is eerily beautiful. It presents an unsettling survey, from an elevated viewpoint, of the rectangular forms of Long Island City's industrial architecture encircled by a sweeping train line; the Manhattan skyline is a blue specter in the distance. Painted in expressive, grating tonalities — a binary scheme of blues and acid yellows accented with orange — the view offers more than a scene. Color knits a welter of detail into an entity, a no-man's-land that conveys the urban predicament more powerfully than any anecdote.

In Mr. Milewicz's "Watertower, Long Island City" (2008), color is calmly keyed to nature. A common feature of the New York skyline gains authority from its dominance over the lateral expanse of distant highway. Viewed from slightly below and set in the foreground against the sky, the rooftop watertower takes on the dignity due an unsung monument of civil engineering.

Greg Lindquist, a 28-year-old painter from Greenpoint, holds his own with admirable poise. There is a consciously elegiac component to his scenes of once-vibrant industrial sites that grant them a timely poignance. In addition to their value as expressive

documentation, the four paintings here manage to make their marginal, decaying subjects count.

"Todd Shipyard Graving Dock" (2008) is particularly fine. The historic shipyard, with one of the few surviving dry docks on the east coast, was razed by Ikea, the dry dock filled in and replaced with a parking lot. Mr. Lindquist records the desolation with a suggestive economy of means. Oddments of construction — sheds, site grading equipment, scattered generators — are painted in subdued oil tones against a brooding sky carefully laid in with stainless steel acrylic medium. An atmospheric meditation on the symbiosis between demolition and development, the painting carries commemorative content lightly.

"Rossville Boat Graveyard" (2008) is a mournful image that risks surrendering its impact to the stainless steel panel on which it is painted. A little steel left bare underscores the artist's intention; too much of it has the same gimmicky effect as painting on velvet. Or, in this case, on the door of a Sub-Zero. If Mr. Lindquist does not make a mannerism out of sheet metal supports, he will be a formidable presence.

A recent Camberwell alumnus living in London, Lachlan Goudie is a delightful find, a lively heir to his father's talent and reputation. Alexander Goudie (1933-2004) was a rambunctious descendent of the Scottish Colorists — active in the early decades of the 20th century — and their lush prismatic chords. Brilliant draftsmanship made him one of Scotland's finest figure painters. Young Goudie has

his elder's gift for dramatic color and a fluid line. Each of these free-wheeling scenes of nighttime streets is distinguished by vivacity of description and dramatic coloration. Pleasure in the act of painting is apparent on every embraceable panel.

William Carroll's small monochrome washes record his walks through the city's boroughs. Simple, schematic drawings made on memo pads become the basis for loosely rendered cityscapes in silhouette. Their appeal lies in pattern, rather than structure or line; everything depends on design. Points of emphasis along the gray scale suggest the juxtaposition of buildings, their changes of scale and distance from the foreground.

Doug Martin is the single artist who acknowledges life on the sidewalk and the persistence of nature in the urban scene. A glimpse of street life is seen through morning-glory vines on a fire escape trellis. David Kapp conveys the dynamism of city streets and their traffic viewed from high vantage points. Impressionistic handling and sharp contrasts create nervous images that make urban restlessness palpable. Zooming in to her motifs at street level, Dana Higgins brings a Rust Belt sympathy to Brooklyn settings. Her camera's eye seeks out unprepossessing scenes — a car lot, a subway station — vivified by commercial banners flying overhead or a band of dying light on the horizon.

Until July 18 (529 W. 20 St., between Tenth and Eleventh avenues, 212-463-9666).