

## Stealing Light

John McDevitt King is a rock star. Well, maybe not a guitar-slaying kind of rock star, but in the field of gemology, he has evaluated some of the world's legendary rocks—gemstones—including the Hope Diamond. A specialty of his involves noting subtle variations in color, undetectable to most of us, as well as degrees of clarity and other qualities that factor into each stone's evaluation. But before working with gems, John was a practicing artist. I have known John for nigh on four decades, and over that time, as his professional expertise has been honed, his artmaking has evolved in tandem. The two are intertwined, creating an essential, *sui generis* dialogue that emerges in his artwork.

In 2011, the *Brooklyn Rail* published my essay, "In Pursuit of Alien Perfection," on John's work. I noted: "Grading a diamond becomes a sort of reverse, perverse exercise in astronomy, using specifically designed technology to guide the highly trained eye inward in the hopes of finding—absolutely nothing." He recently said that he finds "a comfort in being in the meditative space in that world of gemstone evaluation. "It's a personal space, a closing off of things." Becoming immersed in a microcosm within a gem, or in the detail of a painting.

His exhibition at MERGE in Stone Ridge, NY is titled *Refracted Light*, which encapsulates the impetus for many of the show's works. John perceives the way light is projected, filtered, or reflected, and how it clarifies or obstructs vision; gauges its ephemerality and opacity; and harnesses those perceptions for inspiration. Take the work *Incident*: are we seeing light emanating from an approaching or receding object, or reflected light? And the linear shapes in *Drive My Car* seem to indicate movement or speed... but how? Are the objects moving, or are we speeding along seeing light reflected off of stationary things, as if on a highway or train?

Some of his work immerses the viewer in a space apart from the everyday world, such as in outer space or underwater. One is transported into John's visual world, asked to discard *a priori* thoughts, and left to imagine a new whereabouts. "A work that suggests is more intriguing and involving and keeps you going further than something that just explains or describes," he said. It becomes an exploration, rather than a narration.

After a lifetime of art-making, how does he continue to find source material for subject matter? "More often, I start from something observed. That could be a fragment of a photo, something I see around me, direct observation... that goes through transitions as I begin to work on it." He often returns to objects of earlier inspiration, such as a series based on broken plates of glass and the chance patterns therein. At other times, he looks—and then sees. "Some works are reflective of being in my studio and looking at the windows... what I'm seeing on the surface, past the surface, and behind," similar to the process of looking at a diamond. He nods at Jasper Johns: "You take an object and turn it a different way, or block something out, or twist this, or change the focus of the form—and you see it anew."

It's one thing to create subject matter. It's quite another to render that in a typically two-dimensional work using traditional media. John has been experimenting in recent years with such divergent materials as 3-D printing, video, printmaking, and paper fabrication, but he continually returns to drawing and encaustic painting as the most pure means of expression. "Drawing and encaustic painting somehow embody my personality and the way I put myself in a position to make art."

Encaustic involves combining melted beeswax with pigment, which can be layered and textured to create dimension. John notes: "I continually explore ways to handle the paint, move it around, pouring, layering, different strokes." He most often draws with graphite on white or light paper, but he has also used white pigment on black paper. In any case, he says, "Drawing goes back to childhood. I continue to find that one of the most pleasing forms of interaction that I have in my work." And his technical methods in grading diamonds have been put to use in painting. In a recent conversation, he noted: "There's a certain touch that I use in diamond grading that I tend to use also in painting—a movement of the hand focused on attention to detail."

Bucolic settings have traditionally moved artists to document the land or seascape, but John finds general inspiration in New York City, whether from cityscapes or simply within his studio at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. The pandemic required isolation, and reinforced the need to take special note of such familiar surroundings. But he acknowledges that his work expresses “a specific kind of feel, but not a specific place.” One look at his Instagram feed is a glimpse of how a given visual cue can be the impetus for a new composition. Identifiable objects might become the framework for an abstraction; a lightbulb, the pinpoint focus in a drawing; a window, a mysterious portal. For a non-artist, it can help to understand how a simple walk can produce an endless array of inspiration.

That’s not to say that he hasn’t looked to the horizon for inspiration. His series of hotel drawings, done on stationery from hotels all over the world, have provided a means by which he has captured a visual idea while traveling. But they have also become a vehicle for collaboration, for example with poet William Corbett (1942-2018) in a volume called *Return Receipt*, whose contents are a result of correspondence with Corbett.

In observing John’s work over the years, I have felt that as his eye becomes keener with experience, and his artistic technique ever more honed, that his compositions have become plausible worlds not just to look at, but to enter. Sitting in the studio, letting the eye drift; focusing on a tiny, perfect diamond; descending into the ocean’s depths; or soaring among the limitless supernovas... We don’t know where we’ll wind up, or what we’ll eventually find, but he invites us on his journey. Simply accept and begin the adventure.

Susan Yung, 2022