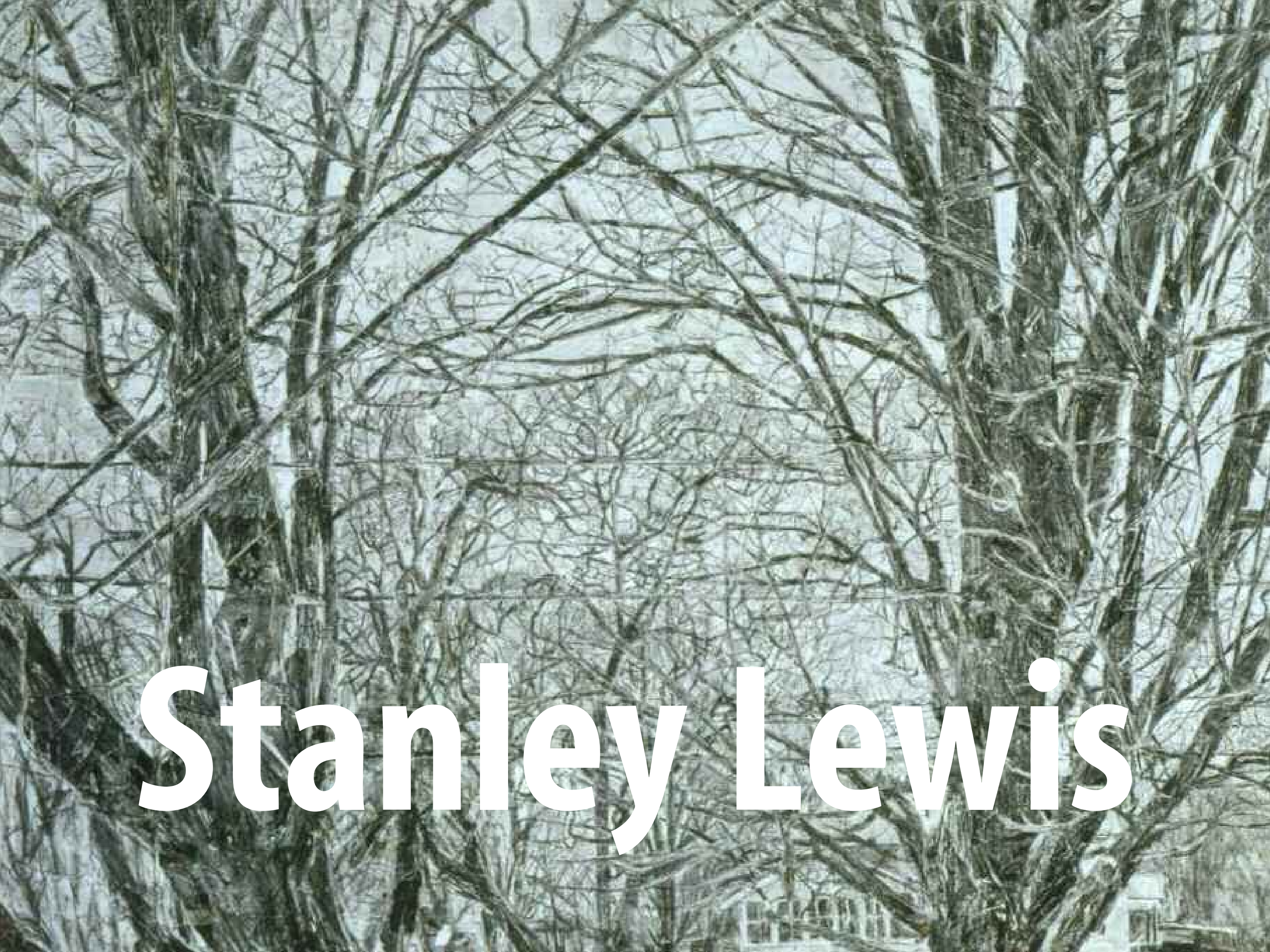
Stanley Lewis

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Paintings and Drawings

BOWERY GALLERY

NEW YORK

STEVEN HARVEY FINE ART PROJECTS LLC 2008

This catalog is a project of:

Steven Harvey
Fine Art Projects llc
780 Riverside Drive, #5aa
New York City, NY 10032
212-281-2281
info@shfap.com
www.shfap.com

and accompanies an exhibition
from January 29–February 23, 2008 at:

Bowery Gallery
530 West 25th St., 4th fl.
New York, NY 10001
646-230-6655
Bowerygallery.org
boweryg@earthlink.net

FRONTISPIECE: *Mayville Court House*, 2006. Oil on canvas, 35 × 47 inches

Endurance: The Drawings and Paintings of Stanley Lewis

by Jennifer Samet

"THIS BATTLE GOES ON," says Stanley Lewis, "and I think the little guys should win out. It's the sensitivity, the little seeing, not big moves." Lewis is talking about the radically different approaches to art-making that exist among contemporary artists, and what it means to be a landscape painter today, in an age dominated by large-scale manufactured art. Although Lewis's paintings are landscapes of traditional format, their ambition and impact are huge. Surfaces thick with paint bristle with the natural tension of his subject: the edge of the town—telephone wires, massive trees, rambling houses. And Lewis knows this too, so his comment is a bit tongue-in-cheek. "Nobody can compete with this. No one would stay out there long enough." Lewis paints outdoors—from start to finish, making an encampment on the site with his easel, an improvised tent, and enough materials so he can repaint constantly. The endurance required, time spent working out of doors, becomes an important element in these paintings. This may stem back to an early influence on Lewis—John Cage, who taught at Wesleyan University when Lewis was a student there. Cage posited time and chance as critical components of art. Lewis continues to be motivated by the possibilities of accepting everything that is present in the landscape.

Lewis's approach shifted dramatically about fifteen years ago, when he realized, "I should paint the details, and keep adding the paint on and make the surface get thicker and thicker and not ever scrape and just add paint." But this is, after all—just the "surface" of Lewis's work; as he himself is quick to qualify—"my surface idea is like a 'how to make art' idea . . . it is not a deep idea." He cautions, "I rely on brute force, and it shouldn't be. But Derain's the key. He's the guy who wins out. He does not rely on surface."

This is a surprising declaration, and Lewis's canon of artistic heroes is unusual. It stems from his most influential teacher, Leland Bell, who championed late Derain. Bell taught at Yale, but was in "another world" from the main forces there, Jack Tworkov and Al Held. Lewis remembers Bell saying "De Kooning's painting is candy-colored. Bonnard is the real painter. His color is violent." And he directed the students to admire a Sienese painting in the Yale Art Museum instead of looking at Abstract Expressionism. Another day, he brought in a reproduction of a Derain, noting how two tones, which comprised a hand in the figure, were playing off one another. Lewis realized that, "the two tones were two planes, and yet it was a hand," and that Bell was demonstrating how "the abstraction is inside the representation. It isn't separate."

Lewis also remembers Bell quoting Derain as stating, "You want to give to each object its qualities and not impose one way of painting on all the different things in life." Lewis considers this a beautiful, anti-modernist way of thinking, in that it rejects a scientific, universal approach to painting. He aspires to this perspective.

Nicholas Carone was Lewis's other important teacher at Yale, and he instructed, "Don't draw the model. Draw *where the model is*." These precepts are still a major part of Lewis's work—they are inherited from Hans Hofmann's theory—how the artist creates tension and space through planar organization. But ultimately Lewis had to reject parts of his training to become himself, and to fully embrace Derain's world view. He realized there was a contradiction in the ideas of his teachers who said both, "Paint what you see," and "Paint large areas and relate them." But Lewis saw trees as "little particulars," and had to come to terms with it. This became the basis for the real battle, waged within Lewis's canvases: how to paint the details and not lose the surface tension of the whole; how to make it right, but not illustrative. Lewis seems to suggest that Derain wins because we don't ultimately read the two tones on the hand as planes—we read it as a hand; it is whole, although it has movement. And this informs Lewis's radical process as a painter—he's working like mad to try to get those trees—because he knows "it's possible to make the picture more dynamic by making it abnormal, but how about making it dynamic by making it more normal?" Although we might not realize it as first glance (after all, Lewis wants "a picture, not the process,") this accounts for the charge, the force his pictures wield. It is all there—the landscape with leaves and branches, the four-wheel-drive vehicle, the apartment building, the sidewalk—but it is a full on attack, an assault to the senses that comes from the energy of areas of the painting pressing against one another, catapulting toward the surface, the intensity of those networks of tree branches.

In Lewis's drawings, the attack is especially shocking. His process challenges the traditional concept of drawing as a preliminary step in art-making, in that he works for a considerable length of time, focuses on details such as each tree branch, and establishes a convincing sense of space and depth. As Lewis works over the drawing, he tears and breaks through the sheet, then pastes additional layers of drawing paper behind so that the next day he can go deeper. This gives the drawings a literal substance that contributes to their massive sense of scale and purpose.

However, if we take Lewis's statement at face value, he is more interested in the "little seeing" than the force or the attack.

View from West Side of House, 2004–07. Pencil on paper, 38 × 47½ inches

In the later works of Derain, a deep psychological probing is achieved that also may account for Lewis's admiration. Many years ago, Lewis wrote that he found in Jean Hélion's painting, "a synthesis between the plastic reality of abstract painting and a sharp sense of the visual and psychological realities of the outside world." Derain's approach is similar in that he was a pioneer of experimentation into painting's possibilities, but in his later years he refined his approach to focus on broad areas of form, the mass of the subject—and a subtle, edgy interrogation of the mood and psychic realities. His paintings seem to catch the sitters at a specific dramatic moment in time—and it is left to us, the viewers, to deal with the situation.

Lewis's paintings are similarly edgy, because of the way they play with space, perspective, and the relative size of elements in the landscape. Both in his choice of subject, and the framing of his view, he always challenges the pastoral. In *East Side of House,* the porch of a large old house is set in the extreme foreground, and so it appears tilted forward in a triangular formation. The side of the house thrusts back, closing in on the porch's edge. The background is compressed, despite the tree-lined hills shown off in the distance. The yard slopes down, nearly evaporating, and clouds push forward, floating on the surface of the picture plane. Objectively everything occupies a clear and real space, but the overall effect is vertiginous—the domestic and the scenic gain a threatening edge.

West Side of House has a whirlwind force: the thick snarls of tree truck jut out from the painting's edge as its branches unfurl across three-quarters of the picture plane. Still, a lightweight blue and white lattice lawn chair is given strange pride of place at the center of the painting, while the mass of the side of a house plunges back into space.

Lewis seems obsessed with uncovering secret truths—the reality of what we see, and how painters work. Copying the art of the old masters has informed his practice (and he was inspired in this by Bell). Over the years, he has spent a lot of time drawing from Cézanne, trying to figure out the incongruities, like the tables with edges that don't quite meet up. Copying forces Lewis to "come up with these bizarre solutions"; he proposed to me his theory that Cézanne actually was painting a still life across two tables, each of slightly different heights. Cézanne then obscured this reality with cloths that drape over the two tables. Painting a still life that spreads across two tables lends the work dynamism, but merging the two gives the picture a needed overall unity.

View of West Side of House, 2003–07. Oil on canvas, 40 x 49 inches

The combination of an obsessive focus on perception, together with the realization that the artist must "fake" reality to create a compelling painting, is at the heart of Lewis's work. Although he wants deeply to get the essence of what he sees—all those little particulars—he also says "You don't paint what you see, you paint very abstractly. If there's a dark green on the tree that's way behind, I paint that right on the surface of the tree. I make the darks into decorative flat rhythms. I paint the lights back and bring the darks forward. I find these loopy rhythms. I find accidents in the situation that enable me to make another tree, not the one I see." Lewis's paintings are unrelenting—as he says, "endurance is the key." They remind us that it is not enough to paint dynamic abstract planes: you must get the whole, true form; and it is not enough to paint the realistic form: you must get the whole forceful picture. This was the ultimate lesson that Lewis gleaned from Bell, Carone, his understanding of Derain, and ultimately, his own personal experience. It is a tall order that not many artists working today are willing to take on.

All quotations of Stanley Lewis are from an interview with the author in October 2007.

View from the Porch—East Side of House, 2003–06. Acrylic on canvas, 38¾ × 48 inches

View of 12th St and 4th Ave, Brooklyn, NY, 2006. Oil on canvas 35 x 40 inches

Northampton Parking Lot, 2007. Oil on canvas 31½ × 38½ inches

Stanley Lewis was born in Somerville, New Jersey in 1941. He graduated from Wesleyan University in 1963 with a joint major in music and art. His painting teacher was John Frazer.

He received a Danforth Fellowship for graduate study and received an M.F.A. from Yale University in 1967. His main teachers there were Leland Bell and Nicholas Carone.

Starting in 1969, Lewis taught at the Kansas City Art Institute for 16 years. He joined the Bowery Gallery in New York in 1986.

Lewis taught at Smith College from 1986–1990 and then at American University from 1990–2003. He retired from American University in 2002.

He has taught summers at the Art School at the Chautauqua Institution since 1996 and is currently teaching part-time at the New York Studio School.

In September 2004 he was in a two-man show at Salander-O'Reilly Galleries in New York and was subsequently in several group shows there.

From February 17 through April 8, 2007, he had a major retrospective at the Museum in the Katzen Art Center, American University, Washington, DC. A smaller version of that show traveled to the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, Summit.

This will be Lewis's eighth exhibition at the Bowery Gallery.

He lives with his wife in Leeds, Massachusetts. In 2005, he received a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Produced by Steven Harvey
Designed by Lawrence Sunden, Inc.
Photography by Stephen Petegorsky
Printed by United Graphics/Robert Freudenheim
Cover stock: Lakma handmade paper

Special thanks to Karen Lewis and W. Louis-Dreyfus