It might seem odd that a brilliant realist painter would choose to spend months working on a seven-foot-long canvas of a boring stretch of the New Jersey Turnpike. But in Rackstraw Downes hands, ordinary or unappealing elements of the American landscape suddenly seem worthy of close attention. Rackstraw Downes, an overdue tribute to the English-born artist, combines 100 striking color reproductions of the artists panoramic paintings (including vivid details) with illuminating commentary. After studying at Yale University in the early 1960s, when abstraction was beginning to yield to Pop and Minimalism, Downes found his footing by taking a long, careful look at landscape. In recent years, he has painted sites in Manhattan, including luminous city views and an eerie 1998 portrait of untenanted office space in the World Trade Center. But his major subjects have always been marginal spaces in nature—landfills and scrubland, culverts and dumps. Putting up with the vagaries of weather and interruptions by suspicious officials, he paints these scenes onsite. Lively details picked out in jewel-like colors are united by the precise evocation of light and atmosphere, the geometry of lines and curves, and Downes’ complex system of perspective. (He writes about recreating the experience of turning your head to take in an entire panorama.) Seeking neither to romanticize these scenes nor to critique them—although he is an environmentalist at heart—Downes prefers the naturalists dispassionate approach. An essay by Sanford Schwartz engagingly discusses the artists background and interests. Robert Storr, the former Museum of Modern Art curator, analyzes Downes relationship to key issues of realist painting in the twentieth century. Downes, a longtime essayist, contributes detailed observations about his use of perspective, which lead him on conversational excursions into the history of art. A detailed chronology and bibliography round out this superb study of an artists artist who deserves a much wider audience. --Cathy Curtis

My Personal Review:
Rackstraw Downes is a unique artist. He must have been born with the patience of Job or simply endless concentration patterns, as every thing the man draws, etches, or paints represents the most painstakingly observed detail and transfer to paper or canvas.

Though his name is well known to museums and art collectors, the general public is less aware of his prodigious gifts. This superb book should change that. Sanford Schwartz is a gifted writer and his essay on the work and the man is not only eminently readable, it also informs about the clarity of Downes' execution of his landscapes and vistas of cities. Robert Storr contributes another essay that places Rackstraw Downes in the pantheon with other representational artists and surrounds his evaluation with fine art history writing.

But of course the glory of this large-scale volume is in the reproduction plates of the paintings and drawings. Generous space is given to define details so important to understanding Downes' gift. And the extended panorama paintings are given fluid space to unfold so that the reader can slowly absorb the incredible amount of visual information Downes gives us.

This is one of the collectable artist monographs - in content, in visuals, and in design. Highly recommended. Grady Harp, December 05

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