

invokes Louisiana's long history of lynching. But the allusion felt unintended; at best the work was ignorant, at worst a frivolous provocation.

When these images were shown during Prospect.4 this year, they almost certainly stirred memories of Hurricane Katrina, which so doggedly untethered local lives from daily rhythms. Still, "Batture Ritual" resonated far beyond localism—New Yorkers may have seen echoes of Sandy in the floodplain. After all, the future of our warming world may one day belong to the batture, too.

—Zack Hatfield

Rackstraw Downes

BETTY CUNINGHAM GALLERY

"If something is real to you," as the realist painter Rackstraw Downes writes—suggesting that things aren't real until they are *personally* real—then the question is not, "What is this phenomenon I'm perceiving?," as he says, but, "Why is this phenomenon real to me?" Or, how is something important enough to catch the eye and engage the mind? What is the motive, conscious or unconscious, that led Downes to paint what he painted here? We can understand why he chose to depict his studio, a sort of self-protecting inner sanctum eloquently realized in a trio of paintings: *Skylit Loftspace, NYC (seated)*; *Skylit Loftspace, NYC (standing)*; both 2015; and *Studio with Two Skylights*, 2017. He portrays it with a sort of luminous transparency, as though inviting us in. Its grandness is emphasized, perhaps even exaggerated, by the deep, quasi-aerial perspectives from which it is viewed. But the paintings are modest in scale, suggesting that, for all its immensity, the studio is a kind of cell where the artist works alone, not unlike a monk creating precious illuminated manuscripts.

The reasons why his studio is profoundly crucial for Downes are obvious, but it is less clear why the vistas in the canvases *Columbia Presbyterian: Two Pedestrian Bridges Crossing Riverside Drive*, 2013, and *New York State Psychiatric Institute*, 2015, are. (Several studies for these two works were in the exhibition as well). The hospital building in the former could also be glimpsed to the side of the grandly flourishing tree in the painting *Under a U-Turn on the Ramp from the George Washington Bridge to Rte. 9A North*, 2013. The formal aspects of all these works are quite ingenious—especially in *U-Turn* and *Columbia Presbyterian*, where the majestic trees rendered in these images manage to look more essential than all the dreary, man-made colossi surrounding them. Downes is a theatrical

genius. He quite subtly crafts a sweeping stage upon which nature may make a last-ditch appearance before it is crushed under the weight of the urban environment—a landscape of anonymous and intimidating buildings holding life and death in their balance.

Is the thriving tree a metaphor for the artist, still a robust painter at the age of seventy-nine? Might the eponymous edifices be reminders that in the not-too-distant future, he will become sick and die, or lose control of his senses? Clearly these healing facilities are as valuable to him as his studio. I suggest that the deftness of his paint handling masks

a certain anxiety about both. Yet it may just be that he has his uptown psychiatric hospital as Alfred Stieglitz had his downtown Flatiron Building. New York has become much bigger since Stieglitz's day, and Downes clearly recognizes its enormity. Perhaps giant trees are beside the point, purposeless and meaningless in comparison to these major complexes devoted to human health and well-being.

But Downes acknowledges the need for many kinds of sites and experiences—large and small, gargantuan and virtually invisible—that make New York vital. *Outdoor Passageway at 15 Rivington*, 2016, is no doubt an homage to his dealer, Betty Cunningham: Its title is the address of her gallery. The nondescript door—not the main entrance—summons us in. It is as special, even sacred, to him as his studio. Clearly there is a personal reason why Downes chose to paint this site.

—Donald Kuspit

"The Un-Heroic Act: Representations of Rape in Contemporary Women's Art in the U.S."

ANYA AND ANDREW SHIVA GALLERY,
JOHN JAY COLLEGE OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE

During Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh's Senate confirmation hearing, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford testified to how he sexually assaulted her as a high school student. In support of Ford, Artemisia Gentileschi's vengeful painting *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, ca. 1620, based on a Biblical story in which a strong-armed Judith and her maidservant behead the titular Assyrian general, was circulated on social media as a meme. Captioned with women's empowerment hashtags, such as #SlaySisters, the artwork distilled contemporary feminist rage.

"The Un-Heroic Act: Representations of Rape in Contemporary Women's Art in the U.S.," a group exhibition curated by Monika Fabijanska, opened just a few weeks prior to the hearing. A work in dialogue with another painting by Gentileschi was installed in the entryway: Kathleen Gilje's *Susanna and the Elders, Restored*, 1998/2018, an X-ray print on paper that reveals the underpainting of Gilje's meticulous copy of the Italian artist's 1610 canvas. Found in the book of Daniel, Susanna's is a morality tale: While bathing, the young woman is approached by two lustful old men, who threaten to accuse her of promiscuity unless she has sex with them. Susanna refuses, and is nearly executed for doing so until Daniel intervenes on her behalf. Gentileschi is one of the few artists in history who illustrates Susanna's



Rackstraw Downes,
*Outdoor Passageway
at 15 Rivington*,
2016, oil on canvas,
29 x 12".



Sonya Kelliher-Combs,
Guarded Secrets,
2015, sheep rawhide,
nylon thread, porcupine
quills, archival
adhesive, dimensions
variable. From
"The Un-Heroic Act:
Representations of
Rape in Contemporary
Women's Art in the U.S."