



Drawing With Stanley Lewis

Eleanor Ray

I met Stanley Lewis in the fall of 2010 when I began the MFA program at the New York Studio School. In his drawing classes, Stanley worked alongside the students, always talking about the peculiar experience of trying to draw what you see.

One of the things I appreciated about his teaching was his willingness to admit what he hadn't yet understood; he presented his ideas not as absolutes but as theories open to revision. More general maxims came only after hours of discussion, emerging from an example he'd found in a student's drawing or the image we were all working from. While ideas recurred, he reformulated them based on the specific experience at hand.

These enigmatic ideas resist general paraphrase — they're fundamentally tied to the immersive experience of looking, of reading space and seeing how it moves in a painting. In front of Hans Memling's *Annunciation* at the Met, Stanley talked excitedly about his idea that Mary, who appears to be kneeling in the painting's foreground, is actually, in the spatial logic of the image, reclining on the bed behind her. When drawing from Constable, he talked about the way the distant clouds seem to come forward, asserting themselves as a solid shape in front of the dark trees on either side, which become holes. To help people see this, he'd say, "Draw it that way. Make the clouds a snowman, give it eyes!" Other times he'd describe his hunch that, in a Cézanne still life, a tablecloth might hide two tables, one taller than the other. Sometimes he would test the group's patience by focusing on a small detail, like the placement of a foot in a Dürer print, for over an hour. He'd ask, "Is the figure leaning back or moving forward?"

While these questions aren't expressly about paintings' content, in the midst of prolonged looking and conversation, they'd feel strangely vital and exciting. Stanley's focus expresses a deeply held belief that meaning is embedded in the visual, and that visual experience is anything but mundane. These close readings of historical artists demonstrated the life that is in paintings; how they cease to be static when you enter into them. Notably, Stanley often waited to comment on an image until he had spent some time drawing from it. His way of looking at art is unusually

View from Barn Window

2008

Oil on canvas
14" x 14"

Not in exhibition

patient; he seems to take nothing for granted, welcoming surprises and second readings. He gives something enough time to become interesting, treating painting almost as a time-based medium. "Watch this one," he'd say.

For Stanley, the best way to discuss visual ideas is to share specific experiences. (His eagerness to do this is visible in his work.) In his teaching, he continually compared perceptual experiences, observing how other artists — from Matisse, Steen and Dürer to the anonymous makers of limestone reliefs — were dealing with certain visual problems familiar to him from working observationally: how to treat the disruption caused by an object meeting the bottom of the picture, say, or what to do with the angles of a table in a still life's foreground. Stanley is always curious about the variety of solutions artists bring to these problems he knows intimately. In his own work, attentive observations of his surroundings meet spatial and structural ideas related to his conversations with other art.

Stanley's drawing activates the whole surface of a picture, communicating in every part an excitement about the shifting mechanics of perception. A paper's top edge begins to feel as tangible as an overhang, as is made explicit in *Looking East Through Kitchen Window with Overhang* (page 23), while a lower edge feels like a ledge from which you could walk into the image, as in *Looking at the Yard from the Deck* (page 43). The immersive spaces have the richness of Bruegel's crowd scenes, but the dramas are spatial — the smallest moments of overlapping, such as a branch passing behind a porch rail, feel charged, with near and far brought into uncanny proximity with equal levels of detail.

The viewer is aware of a doggedly additive process, with the artist working to locate everything. As the image unfolds, the dense field of information yields a space of light and air. But both readings, of objects and the space they hold, remain stubbornly present. Relationships of space are mapped onto unapologetically nameable things — fences, grass, branches — and the work breathes as we alternately register the world observed and the world pictured. In his commitment to asking straightforward questions about what he sees, Stanley reveals the mystery that is rooted in the visible.