THE WAY THINGS ARE

STANLEY LEWIS
Matt Farnum’s Farm, Chautauqua, NY
2004
Oil on paper on board
33" x 49"

New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting & Sculpture
October 3, 2016
through November 13, 2016
Curated by
Karen Wilkin
Essays by
Karen Wilkin, Alison Hall, Martica Sawin,
and Eleanor Ray
Notes from a Collector
William Louis-Dreyfus
Works by Stanley Lewis from the
Louis-Dreyfus Family Collection,
courtesy of
The William Louis-Dreyfus Foundation Inc.

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Stanley Lewis: The Way Things Are

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Stanley Lewis
The Way Things Are
View from Studio Window
2003-2004
Graphite on paper
44 5/8” x 50 7/8”

View from Studio Window (Detail)
2003-2004
Graphite on paper
44 5/8” x 50 7/8”

Following page
It is tempting, if we search for analogies for Stanley Lewis’s compelling, hard to categorize works, to describe them as visual equivalents of John Updike’s short stories. Lewis’s nominal subject matter, like Updike’s, is often the apparently ordinary, quotidian aspects of New England town where he lives – glimpses of unremarkable interiors or whatever can be seen through the windows of his house or from its close environs. Occasionally he wanders down the street or ventures into a nearby town. Sometimes he draws at the railroad station when he travels to New York. But for all his loving attention to specifics – a banister, an assortment of things clustered on a kitchen table, the branches of a familiar tree, parked cars, overhead electrical wires – what really concerns him – again like Updike – are the unstated, powerful relationships that underlie his images of his New England town: not the emotional cross-currents that engaged the late writer, but the spatial volumes within the seemingly banal places that capture his imagination.

Lewis’s drawings, with their evidence of repeated attacks and insistence, record his passionate struggle to discover ways of encapsulating those volumes in terms of marks on a flat surface. Cézanne-like, Lewis agonizes over the implicit tension among the individual elements of his images, teasing out the subtle relationships between the boxy form of a short flight of porch steps and the buildings across the way, between the frame of window and a random pile of objects on a table, reminding us that we experience our surroundings by constantly negotiating the distance between ourselves and everything around us.

The fervor of Lewis’s interrogation of his surroundings is translated into agitated surfaces, created partly by accumulations of strokes and scrawls, partly by physical changes to the support in created by folding or by cutting out, moving, and replacing sections of the paper, interventions that bear witness to scrupulous looking, thinking, and rethinking.

“I think I’ve invented a good technique with cutting. I can cut and repair,” Lewis says. “You can do anything to the drawing. You can tear it apart and fix it. I can keep changing and changing. I can do anything. It becomes seamless.”

Something similar obtains in his paintings – evidence of repeated campaigns of relatively broad brushstrokes that can cumulatively create a dense, crusty surface, and, often, the scars of physical manipulation, interruption, and repair of the canvas itself. The cutting and shifting, like the accretion of paint, might be interpreted as longer or slightly altered confrontation with his chosen motif. That is to say, we could construe the signs of the physical interventions that inflect many of Lewis’s most ambitious drawings as part of a quest for greater truthfulness to experience. This is not entirely wrong, since it’s clear that Lewis is deeply attached to the specific qualities of his motifs. Yet his “tearing apart and fixing” – the slicing and relocation – are also driven by formal concerns.

“The cutting is wonderful. It lets me say ‘That’s all very well, but you’d look better over here’,” Lewis has explained, not altogether facetiously, in describing his working methods. The result, paradoxically, is to intensify both the sense of the particular and the inherent abstractness of his work. The layering and suturing of Lewis’s surfaces, the signs of surgery and reconstruction, set up a tension of their own, in relation to the images they generate, at once reinforcing and cancelling out the sense of space and light the flickering drawings
and unstable, layered painted surfaces so potently evoke. This emphasis on effort and a complex process could lead us to expect a labored or inert result, but in fact, Lewis’s drawings are fresh and direct, as are the best of his paintings. His feelings about every element included in his images seem palpable. The evidence of time and energy expended, oddly, does not contradict the apparent immediacy of his perceptions. In part, this may be because Lewis always works directly from his motifs. “I can’t really draw outside,” he says, so the majority of his drawings are done from windows or similar vantage points, often in winter. “I can paint outside,” he adds, “but not in winter. Usually, though, I don’t paint where I draw.”

Part of the notable immediacy of Lewis’s work is due to his fine sense of tone, in his drawings, and of unexpected, subdued hues, often with a chalky quality reminiscent of fresco, in his paintings. He’s a master of nuanced light, conjured up with gatherings of urgent, seemingly casual marks and associations of close-valued colors. The mood, temperature, season, and time of day of each of his images often seem distinct.

A tree seen from inside the house in winter, the cozy interior of the kitchen, or an intersection in Brooklyn all have individual qualities, despite the consistency of Lewis’s repetitive, vaguely chaotic touch. Sometimes he appears to capture those fleeting, disorienting moments when we see something but fail to identify it immediately; at other times, he seems to affirm the solidity of the places we inhabit. Sometimes he makes us notice things—like a group of flyswatters hung within easy reach—that we might otherwise ignore.

I’ve often been puzzled by Lewis’s work, since no matter how much we knew about his idiosyncratic method and no matter how potent his evocations of specific places may be, in terms of space and light, it can be almost impossible to visually reconcile the disquieting physical disjunctions of his surfaces with his coherent, seemingly unexceptional images.

Our focus keeps moving, restlessly, as if we were reenactuating Lewis’s process, as he shifts his gaze from motif to support and back again, and it can be difficult to fuse these dislocated glimpses. I’m more and more convinced, however, that the discomfort these contradictory readings generate is the point. We may respond to the familiarity of Lewis’s subject matter or to the evocative qualities of his tones and hues, but in the end, it may be the three-way struggle among specificity, abstract structure, and testimony to the artist’s actions that compels and holds our attention. Perhaps Updike is not the most apt writer with whom to compare Lewis, their common focus on the hidden currents of New England town life notwithstanding.

Raymond Carver might be a better choice. Like Carver, Lewis captures our attention with what appears to be an unremarkable story, simply told, and then sandbags us with strangeness. Nothing in Lewis’s work is quite what it seems. We think at our peril that we have fathomed the mystery of one of his works. We study the drawing or painting carefully, and then try to move away, on to the next, but the image refuses to let us go. We remain, transfixed, by its elusive ordinariness.
View of 12th Street and 4th Avenue Brooklyn, NY
2006
Oil on canvas
35” x 40”
View from the Porch, East Side of House
2003-2006
Acrylic on canvas
38 3/4" x 48"
My friend William gave me a book of Robert Frost’s complete poems. He also asked me to write this essay. I like very different things to coalesce – that William could give me Frost, that Stanley was (and still is) my teacher and that Frost makes me think of Stanley; they are both New Englanders, they are American. Stanley reminded me once very sternly that I was an American painter. Most recently I think about what makes Stanley the American painter that he is. The work ethic, the labor, the objects within the paintings – folding chairs, like the ones from my childhood, or styrofoam coolers, or the back porch, or clapboard-sided houses. An undefined, muddy sense of God and slap-dashness – a repaired, or a cobbled together sensibility. And then there is Stanley’s love and inclusion of European painting ideas. And these two forces remind me of another of Stanley’s great passions, jazz, and the way someone like Thelonius Monk uses the two sides of his body to play music – one hand could be the great European tradition of representational order and the other side American, playing the wilderness of abstract sound.

I love the coalescing of disparate moments, of opposites, brought together in a way that feels like magic, or that one is in tune with something indescribable. Perhaps this is my own muddy sense of God. Stanley called this synchronicity and would talk about such things when teaching from Mondrian. He would point out how a distant vertical or horizontal intersected perfectly with something right in front of your face, uniting distant space to the very thing right before you. This acknowledgment would flatten space and widen it all at the same time, like a pulse or a heartbeat, opposing forces snapping together to become one. Stanley would go on to teach about this pulse even more explicitly with Chardin. The class would draw from the masters for hours, and two hours in Stanley would begin asking questions. Of this particular Chardin Stanley asked each of us to draw a simplified black and white version of the painting, breaking the very delicate and subtle image into the most abstract terms. I’m including an image of the original painting that we transcribed and the small image Stanley had us draw. “This lesson was and is one of the most valuable lessons I have encountered as an artist. Stanley began beating on his chest, using his singing voice to count the time of his heartbeats and of his breathing. He was physically showing us what the painting was doing, what true observation could feel like. It was alive, made flesh and mortal. It was quivering.

How a European sees nature, versus how an American does is very different. Joseph Brodsky in the essay “On Grief and Reason”, pursues this idea when thinking of Frost. “When an American walks out of his house and encounters a tree it is a meeting of equals. Man and tree face each other in their respective primal power, free of references: neither has a past, and whose future is greater, is a toss-up. Basically it’s epidemic meeting bark. Our man returns to his cabin in a state of bewilderment, to say the least...”

I love thinking about the image of a painter facing the landscape in Brodsky’s terms. Imagine Stanley facing his hemlock – baseball capped, backpack (a gift from his son), entering his painting stand – hand-built and held together with paint-covered clamps, a chapel of sorts. His paints and gear are heaped in a wagon (all paint covered, of course). I can hear Stanley singing, peering out at the big overwhelming form of that tree, giving it all he has got, considering every leaf, every crevice. The working man, the devotee.

I feel Stanley is living like he is teaching. Big expansive ideas that apply to all things. Like the Mondrian lesson where space is coalescing and what that can mean philosophically. The last lesson that approaches these kinds of ideas is a lesson from Poussin and the painting Landscape with Saint John on Patmos.
We would spend all morning drawing in a dark room from a slide. Stanley would pick up your coffee cup, and after several cups he would really get going. Saint John sits studying with a bird at his back. We were looking for the major rhythm of the Poussin painting. Stanley started talking about the bird, what it means, how birds always appear with Saint John, the man of the wilderness. “Do you see what Poussin is doing?” He would ask, loudly, so moved by this moment. Your eyes would scan the painting at that point, and you would see that the entire painting was built on the form of the bird. Every. Single. Thing. And he would ask, “What kind of man does that make Poussin?” Through Stanley’s simple question came the understanding that Poussin was making everything count. Everything was about Saint John. Everything was being seen, as he made each mark. From the biggest rhythm to the smallest form, Poussin was thinking of the entire perceived world as the energy of that man, Saint John. What equality! What devotion!

I imagine when someone sees the world like Stanley bewilderment is a given. The visual world feels that way. Perhaps this is the bewilderment that Brodsky refers to in Frost’s poems. I often felt such bewilderment or the sense of being overwhelmed after attending Stanley’s classes: like the whole world was being brightened by ideas Stanley has about painting. My visual experiences are so overwhelmingly imbued with meaning and significance that I am more aware of my own body quivering at the sight of all things.
For Stanley Lewis, plein air drawing is not a preliminary to something else such as the likeness of a place; it is a highly individualized manner of recording a perceptual process. As the artist’s visual intake instructs his hand to move inch by inch leaving its trail on an uneven terrain of paper, that intake is recreated for the viewer as an intensely personal experience. A snow-covered landscape is seen through the artist’s scrutinizing eye as stages of the visual process unfold. One experiences the sight piece by piece as he recorded it, and it is up to the viewer to synthesize the particulars into a whole, much as we would be doing if we were on the spot, scanning the actual subject. The routine taking in of a subject at a glance is slowed down in order to follow the artist’s segment by segment recording of what meets his eye. Our vantage point is not dictated as it would be by Renaissance systematized perspective. Instead, our eye moves across a space as it might if one were standing there, in the artist’s footprint, taking it in, the near and far and the peripheral.

Lewis confirms that this is what he had in mind: “I think of the viewer as myself. I want the viewer to be where I was and to understand what I am doing, which is complicated. I turn my head from side to side to find my picture. I want to get from here to there, not just see a unified central image. I can’t expect the viewer to work that hard so I struggle to unify the sides.”

The resulting drawing incorporates a time dimension, a slowed-down version of actual experience. As the eye adjusts, it then needs to readjust, to confirm what it has observed, to connect the scanned parts. Subconsciously one senses this process in Lewis’s drawing as he reaches beneath an activity (seeing) that we take for granted and hints at the subliminal sorting out of the myriad minute retinal reactions that fire stimuli to the brain. To look at a Stanley Lewis drawing is to be made aware of our visual processing, of the way the brain knits together periphery and centrality, what is below and above, so that they enter our consciousness as an entity.

Lewis starts a drawing by focusing on one component of a given motif with a fair amount of detail before shifting to another segment of his subject. “I love painting the small things, although I think I get lost in that detail.” It’s not difficult to imagine getting lost in the complex network of thin lines that trace the overlapping tree branches in View from Bathroom Window, West Side of House (page 27) and other drawings of snow-covered landscapes. The strokes follow every twist and turn of even the most slender branches, weaving a delicate tracery that stays in sharp focus even as the trees recede into the distance, the result of days of labor in the frigid weather. Lewis is not one to edit out anything that falls within his line of vision, like signage or parked cars or backyard debris, so he includes the assertive lines of a pair of telephone wires cutting diagonally across the filigree of branches. A devoted plein air practitioner, he will work outdoors at his easel even as the temperature drops below freezing. When winter finally drives him inside he usually manages to angle his rendering of cluttered interiors to include a sideways view of a landscape through a window.

This acceptance of the haphazardly glimpsed ordinary—a railroad station platform, a roadside patch of weeds, the corner of a porch, an anonymous Main Street—means that there is no drama attached to subject matter, no contrived “picturesque,” no extraneous associations, nothing, that is, to distract the viewer’s attention from the artist’s seeing and recording the quotidien scene that meets his eye. Like Jean Hélion, whose later work he greatly admires, Lewis has an affinity for everyday unremarkable subjects, in his case devoid of European associations, neglected backyards, an abandoned vehicle, a melting snowdrift.

Many of these drawings appear as dense as paintings, partly because of the heavily textured rag paper he uses, and his habit of drawing with such pressure that the paper gets worn through and needs to be patched with added layers of paper. The resulting uneven ground contributes minor fluctuations in the way light is refracted by the
surface irregularities. The pockets of light and shadow lend an illusory three-dimensional effect as if the view was portrayed in shallow relief. The ‘handwriting’ of his drawing would be easy to recognize but hard to define, encompassing as it does a variety of modes from a fine ballpoint pen line to blotches of dense black, with many different degrees of pressure in between. Layers of overdrawing give density to patches of tangled growth, and sequences of parallel lines are used to approximate planes. Every imaginable motion of the hand is traceable in the heterogeneity of a Lewis drawing. Although he says, “I too often draw like an illustrator;” his insistence on improvisatory line that responds to his perceptual experience is beyond the formulas of illustration.

The inevitable question arises: How did Lewis develop and maintain such a unique way of seeing and recording? How did he evade the burden of an artistic inheritance, especially when he studied with such forceful artists as Leland Bell and Nick Carone, two painters with acute historical consciousness and profound regard for the painting tradition? His unexpected response: “I think I see the world with the help of Breugel prints – but also Poussin trees. I try not to see it like Cézanne and I want to avoid summarizing just because everyone else is so good at that. . . . There is something 16th and 17th century about my approach, especially Breugel - those panoramic landscapes!”

Breugel! Of course. The artist/traveler whose pen dwelt on every detail of his journeys through the mountains created a composite panorama through which one could recapitulate the experience. The concept is not that far from standing in Stanley Lewis’s footprints, seeing what he saw as he saw it.
Mayville Intersection
2007
Oil on paper
26 1/4" x 39 1/4"
View from Bathroom Window, West Side of House
2004-2007
Charcoal, graphite on paper
38” x 48”
Looking Out Towards the Porch (with Chair)
2008
Ballpoint pen on paper
16" x 24 1/4"
Kitchen Interior with Dartboard
2008
ink on paper
13" x 18.5/2"
View from Kitchen with Marty Rule’s House
2008
Ballpoint pen on paper
10 1/2” x 14”
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 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 artists.

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 45). The immersive spaces have the richness of Bruegel’s crowded 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.
Porch Steps, Trees and Snow
2009
Oil on canvas
14 x 18.58"
View from Studio at Hollins #2
2010
Ink on paper
22 1/4" x 29 1/4"

Westport Train Station with Figures
2009
Ink on paper
13" x 23"

Following page
Looking at the Yard from the Deck
2010
Ink on paper
16" x 24 1/2"
View Towards Don Judge's House
2011
Ink on paper
24 1/2” x 23”
View from the Barn
2011
Oil on canvas
16" x 23 1/4"
Lake Chautauqua with Orange Kayak
2012
Oil on canvas
26 1/2" x 35 1/2"

Lake Chautauqua with Orange Kayak (Detail)
2012
Oil on canvas
26 1/2" x 35 1/2"

Following page
The Hemlocks with Snow from Upstairs Window

2012

Ink on paper

18" x 16"
Westport Train Station Looking South
2012
Ink on paper
21 3/4" x 26 1/4"
Westport Train Station
2013
Ink on paper
16" x 23 1/2"
I think what makes good paintings and drawings is the extent to which the artist succeeds in including the invisible in his visible depiction. The invisible in a work of art is hidden and leaves no traces; its presence extends the accuracy and breadth of the visible, perhaps much like a caesura in poetry attaches to the poem and widens its meaning. Stanley Lewis is a master includer of the invisible. It gives his work constant discovery the longer you look at it. If you watch him work you wonder where all the scratching and cutting and thrashing about is leading to, and the final product, clear and complex, becomes a constant surprise.

I became acquainted with the work by accident. I was visiting a gallery in New York City, showing I forget which well-regarded artist, and in a side gallery downstairs, away from the more grandiose main exhibition space, a number of Stanley Lewis paintings were on display. I was at first puzzled by the disorder I thought I saw in the works. The more I looked the more order appeared until I couldn’t tell which painting I thought was the best. The longer my looking lasted the more enamored I became until I couldn’t resist buying them all.

Perhaps the most rewarding aspect of a good painting is that it makes you wonder and examine how it got that way; Stanley is very much in that line of work. Discussion with him, whatever the subject, is always inquiring into that question. He doesn’t often examine the excellence of his own work except sometimes to describe the mechanics of his cutting and joining, after which a lawn chair or a white coffee mug somewhat suddenly appears.

Collecting works of art is in a sense a foolish enterprise, especially in a world so full of need and fixing, but when I think of Stanley Lewis’s work I am deliciously happy I did it, and that’s before I whisper to myself that perhaps his drawings in pencil and ink may be Stanley doing the superlative.
Stanley Lewis, born in Somerville, New Jersey, received a bachelor’s degree from Wesleyan University and both a bachelor’s and master’s of fine arts degree from the Yale School of Art.

His work has been shown in solo and group exhibitions throughout the United States, and his paintings and drawings were the subject of a retrospective at the American University Museum in the Katzen Arts Center in Washington and the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey. His work was featured in See It Loud: Seven Post-War American Painters at the National Academy Museum in 2014. He is represented by Betty Cuningham Gallery in New York.

Lewis’s work is included in the collections of Hobart College and the University of Indiana among others. He has taught at Kansas City Art Institute, The American University, Smith College, Parsons School of Design, the Chautauqua Institution and The New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture.

His awards include the Altman Prize from the National Academy of Design and a Guggenheim Fellowship.
Looking Out from the Porch
2014
Ink on paper
31 3/4" x 32"
Hemlock Trees Seen from Upstairs Window in the Snow
2007-2014
Pencil on print paper
59 3/4" x 69"
Untitled
2015
Ink on paper
21 3/4" x 25"
## Chronological Index

**Drawings and Paintings**

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<td>2011</td>
<td>Oil on canvas</td>
<td>16” x 23 1/4”</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lake Chautauqua with Orange Kayak *</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Oil on canvas</td>
<td>26 1/2” x 35 1/2”</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Hemlocks with Snow from Upstairs Window</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Ink on paper</td>
<td>18” x 16”</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westport Train Station Looking South</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Ink on paper</td>
<td>21 3/4” x 24 1/4”</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westport Train Station</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Ink on paper</td>
<td>16” x 23 1/2”</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William and His Beech Tree *</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Oil on canvas</td>
<td>25 3/4” x 29 1/2”</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking Out from the Porch *</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Ink on paper</td>
<td>31 3/4” x 32”</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hemlock Trees Seen from Upstairs Window in the Snow</td>
<td>2007-14</td>
<td>Pencil on print paper</td>
<td>59 3/4” x 68”</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Untitled</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Ink on paper</td>
<td>21 3/4” x 25”</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>View of Garden from New Studio Window, Winter *</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Pencil on paper</td>
<td>55” x 42”</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Not in exhibition*