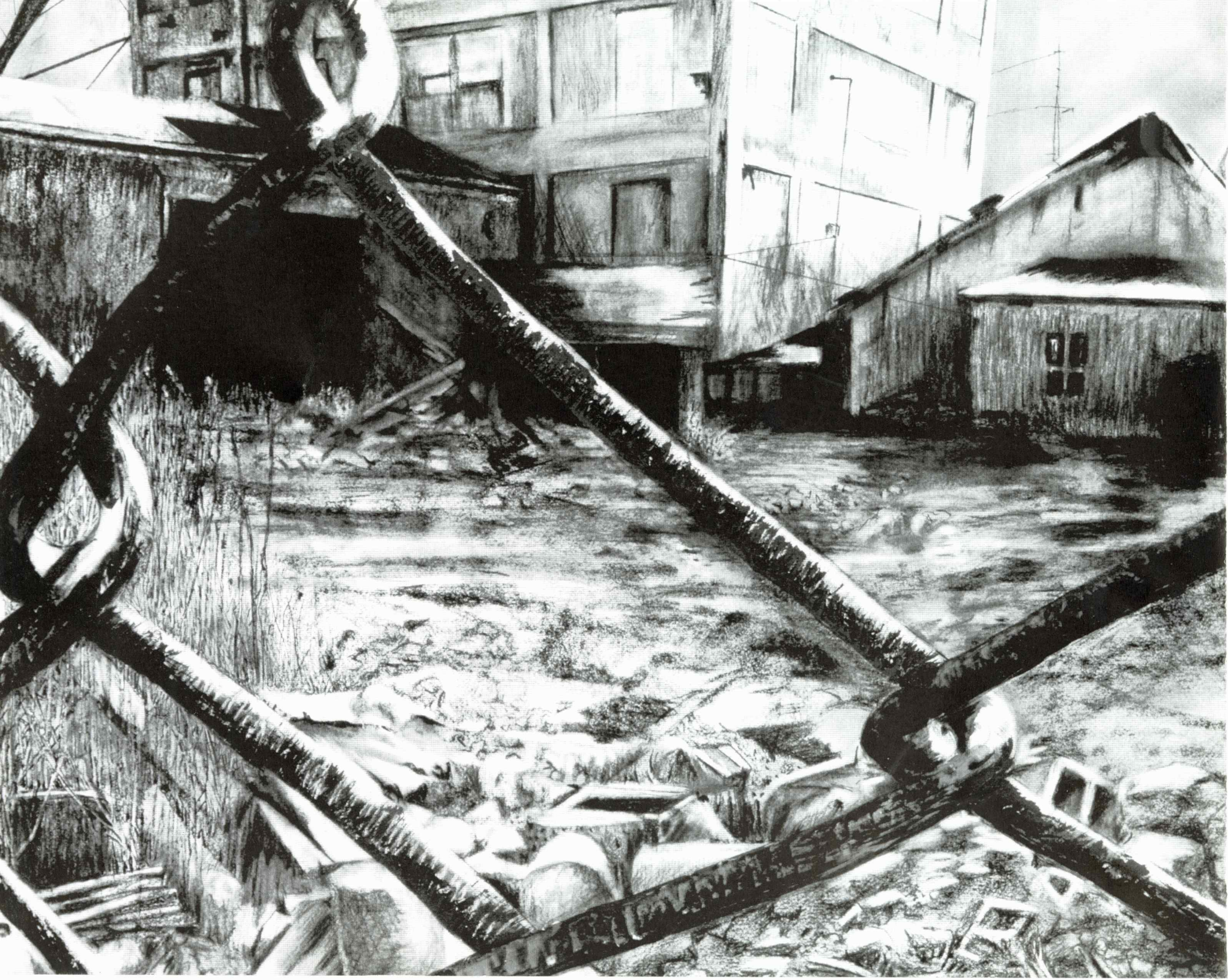




DETROIT DRAWING
WORKS ON PAPER BY NANCY PATEK
Meadow Brook Art Gallery



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BY NANCY PATEK

Meadow Brook Art Gallery
November 22 - December 22, 2002



Nancy Patek's evolving vision of Detroit is articulated through the extensive, ruminative working and reworking in charcoal, ink, conté, pastel and *Prisma* pencil on resilient *BFK Rives* rag paper.

Each work is wrought in layer upon layer from determined observation and expression, and the drawing process: dragging, inscription, scumbling and erasure, central to Patek's vision, is indeed a sedimentary accumulation resulting from hours at the easel subtracting, rendering, lifting and adding until each work is full and realized.

Patek's method of working oscillates between memory and evidence. Her memory of Detroit, which tempers all her work, is informed by the fastidious documentary evidence of sketchbooks and camera, but such evidence is never allowed to belay the certainty and firmness of her dogged recollection.

The three dozen or so works on paper in this exhibition were made over a period of ten years and are the distillation of Patek's acute reflections on the landscapes and structures of her Detroit, on its past, present and future.

Dick Goody
Director
Meadow Brook Art Gallery



American Consumer, 2001

Nancy Patek is an unabashed regionalist, not an easy stand to take in a time when regionalism is dismissed as simply retro or anti-modernist. Concerned with the reality of life and the outside world, Patek's representational works run counter to many trends in contemporary art. The current exhibition clearly demonstrates that Patek's own version of regionalism is both artistically original and politically relevant.

Detroit, a city full of "American ruins," to use Camilo José Vergara's phrase, forms the centerpiece of Patek's oeuvre. In her artist's statement, written for the exhibition "The New Regionalism," (1997) curated by Michael Hall, Patek articulates the following credo:

Growing up in southwest Detroit exposed me to neighborhoods created by blue-collar workers and their families; men and women employed in the various factories that dominated that area. Everyone shared one commonality: their welfare was dependent upon the rhythms of the giants in whose shadows they resided.

Today many of these neighborhoods are abandoned and have become barren wastelands; dry bones waiting for the breath of a new dance of life.

Patek's statement is intriguing in many ways, not the least of which is the fact that central to the iconography in her work is her experience as a Detroiter who has seen a once flourishing city undergo painfully destructive changes and a profoundly unsettling slow recovery. Certainly her works are recognizable to anyone with even a fleeting acquaintance of the southeastern Michigan landscape. Yet, at the same time, she is not a civic booster or apologist, nostalgically waxing about the Detroit of past decades. Instead, she turns her painter's gaze with unflinching intensity on that which has been lost while suggesting that this loss may only be temporary and that, indeed, the slumber that many of her decrepit structures seem to be in, is not rigor mortis, but rather entails the possibility of reawakening, of a positive transformation.

But before such qualified hope can be articulated, one needs to recognize that, at first glance, Patek's prevailing mode seems to be her interest in that which has been left behind - discarded by our consumer culture.

Her deliberately evocative spaces and surprising vistas of crumbling structures and decaying objects, situated in depopulated environments, appear as if they have been hit by some ferocious natural force that twisted materials out of all useful shape, molding them into new and startling forms. However, her drawings do not depict the storm itself, for it is no storm but the equally destructive element of human activity and its aftermath that have made the once useful objects she commemorates irrelevant and obsolete. Thus, Patek's drawings are informed by a legacy of loss, an indictment of the shortsightedness of human activity, and, at the same time, a belief that through her art some of these defects may be mended.

In her political vision, Patek is less indebted to the Midwestern regionalists of earlier generations, such as Zoltan Sepeshy, Carlos Lopez, or Jack Steele, whose work both celebrated and attacked the modern in all its manifestations, but rather intriguingly invites comparison with the work of women writers since the 1970's, such as Doris Lessing, Ursula LeGuin, and Marge Piercy. *Woman on the Edge of Time*, a 1976 utopian novel by Marge Piercy, for example, presents both a horrifying image of dehumanizing contemporary urban life seen from its underside through the eyes of a poor Latina as well as the vision of a potentially liberating future in which humans peacefully coexist with the natural environment. Feminist utopian novels, which also include Lessing's series *Canopus in Argos: Archives* and LeGuin's *The Dispossessed*, became a significant literary production in the 1970's, partly because they represented an aspect of the enlarged consciousness made possible by the women's movement. And this utopian mode, although less apparent at first sight than in Piercy or LeGuin, is also inherent in Patek's work. "The breath of a new dance of life," that Patek mentions and envisions in her artist's statement, is exactly

that utopian component which links her work to that of overtly political artists such as Piercy.

Three drawings in this exhibition – *American Consumer*, *Saturday Afternoon in Southwest Detroit*, and *Deconstructing under I-75* – most clearly exemplify the political component of Patek's vision. *American Consumer*, a recent work (2001), is set in an unidentified bleak urban wasteland of backyards, garages, and dilapidated houses, with the remnant of an obsolete industrial structure centrally located in the background. The monochromatic use of browns amplifies the drawing's central effect of loss and abandonment. The message is painfully clear: as people have moved out of older neighborhoods, located near industrial sites, they have left behind all that to which they no longer ascribe any relevancy. In our culture which values the new over the old, such restlessness and relentlessness lead equally to the destruction of man-made and natural environments. Those trees, which have not been cut down to stumps, lift their trunks and branches, devoid of foliage – a sign of life – up in a gesture of utter helplessness. Abandonment here is written with a capital A; to infuse this site with new life would require a fundamental change of attitude in our culture. But Patek's intention is exactly to point out the victims, to document that which has been abandoned, and to plead for a new and useful life for an environment on which people have given up hope. The cultural criticism entailed in this work is rather sophisticated. Painters and writers of the Great Depression often indicted the American political and economic system in their works for its failure to live up to its promises. Patek, like contemporary women writers, instead offers a broad cultural critique that goes beyond the mere political and which forcefully inquires into and speculates on fundamental values of our culture.

Such cultural analysis is also eloquently presented in *Saturday Afternoon in Southwest Detroit* (2001), a work which exudes a nightmarish quality with its empty street and the collapsing industrial behemoth in the rear center. Here the focus has shifted from the abandonment of human habitation to the loss of workplace. In a post industrial age, only the remnants of the mighty machine that made Detroit into what it was remain.

As a consequence, not only is the industrial infrastructure decaying, but those businesses, which relied on industrial workers to sustain them, have also been shuttered. Hardly anything alleviates the grim perspective of this work. Decay reigns; only the two working smokestacks in the far distance seem to suggest that there is any life left in this industrial wasteland.

The most recent work in this line of cultural inquiry is *Deconstructing under I-75* (2002), which offers a somewhat different perspective from the other two works. As before, the work depicts the abandoned leftovers of our civilization, but it also locates these remnants in the shadow of recent construction which juts forcefully upward, like newly sprouting branches of a tree. The implications here are manifold, but among them is certainly the curiosity on the viewer's part about the new civilization that has replaced the old. Will it survive? What will bring about its destruction? Again and again, old, decrepit, abandoned cars form part of the iconography. Patek's work combines the activities of a paleontologist – many images in her work resemble prehistoric fossils – and an archaeologist, unearthing the sacred relics of our civilization. Thus, the image of the car absolutely fits. It is one of the archetypes of our civilization, especially of the variety made in Detroit. In this culture, constantly newer models replace the older ones, which are left to rot under the very same highway built to accommodate them. What happens, Patek asks, to a civilization that destroys more than it creates?

Artistically, there has been a significant change in Patek's work over the last few years. Originally approaching her subject matter only in tones of gray and black that reflected a stark view of contemporary urban realities, Patek has recently expanded and augmented her palette through a subtle use of color. Take, for example, the ghostly presences of *Brush Park* (1995), stark and uncompromisingly dark – houses, trees, and sky in the same shades of gray, drawing viewers forcefully into their ban. This drawing epitomizes Patek's earliest approach to representing contemporary Detroit. It describes and narrates the story of an abandoned urban environment. There is, as in most of Patek's works, a profound, palpable silence here, which nevertheless speaks eloquently to the viewer. Patek gives a remarkably



Deconstructing Under I-75, 2002

dynamic and potent voice to these decaying houses.

More recently, Patek's work has moved from the realm of drawing, through its exploration of color, to the realm of painting. This exploration of color and its ability to move forms across surfaces has become a new and exciting aspect of Patek's constantly evolving and maturing artistry. Color adds a formal but also an emotional element to her work which is increasingly becoming expressionistic. Compare, for example, the dark and unyielding *Brush Park* (2000), to the expanded use of color in more recent works set in the same general location, such as *Doomed* and *John R Waiting* (2000).

Doomed, through its very title may indicate a sense of hopelessness, a sense of having given up, of abandonment of hope. And yet, the carefully and even lovingly rendered details of this stately Victorian mansion, boarded up and doomed for the wrecking ball, indicates that not all hope is lost. The building seems dormant, waiting for the life that we know will awaken the natural environment surrounding it. These are not dead trees, but dormant ones, waiting for their springtime renewal. In the same sense this home is waiting, its fate not yet totally decided. This change in approach reflects the fact that if Brush Park was apparently doomed a few years ago, it now shows signs of astonishing revival and renewal. This building, too, therefore, may soon see, instead of the wrecking crew, a concerted effort at restoration.

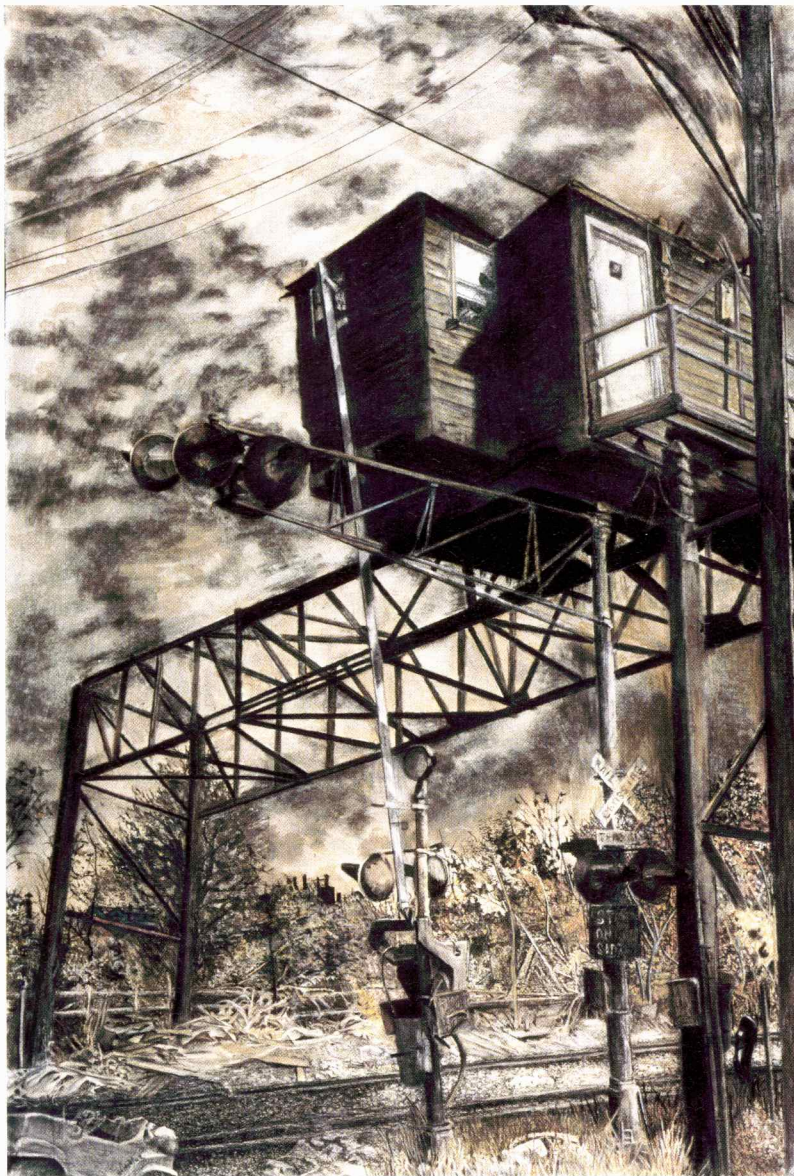
A similar sense of potentially thwarted destitution pervades the scene in *John R Waiting*. The wintry landscape, the open doorways and holes where windows were once installed, are all indicators of imminent destruction. In fact, the former grandeur of the building has been reduced to an empty shell. But the title, if not meant as an ironic statement, indicates the main direction of Patek's thinking, that these are "dry bones waiting for the breath of a new dance of life." As spring follows even the harshest winter, so revitalization of older urban neighborhoods may also become the norm rather than the exception in our culture. In this drawing, the added various shades of red dramatize, rather than romanticize, the anticipation of hope.

As in much of Patek's work, there exists an almost symbiotic relationship between man-made structure and the workings of nature. Nature both reflects and underlines the seeming hopelessness of the images. One drawing is set in the fall, the other in winter – seasons we associate with decline and death. Yet these mutilated buildings are not presented with nostalgic romanticism, despite the fact that both drawings are powerful reminders of what opportunities have been squandered and lost. This outrage is an integral part of the chronicle that Patek unfolds for the viewer. She documents, but not in the dispassionate style of a photo realist, but through distortions and a color palette through which a subtle expressionism enters her work.

Patek's main concern is not with the many signs of urban renewal visible in the city because she documents that which, despite positive efforts, may still be lost. Destruction and hope go hand in hand in Patek's work. The weapon she possesses to express rage and consternation against urban and environmental destruction is her ability to make visible what she experiences and what she values. Her work stands in front of us as bearing witness. She tries to see, understand and ultimately make visible the interconnections – ecological, social, and cultural – which bind us to each other and to the communities and neighborhoods we inhabit. It is not necessary to label Patek a "bioregionalist," a term recently used to refer to those artists who articulate in their works ideas of both geographical terrain and the terrain of consciousness. Yet, by sensing interconnections between sky, nature, and man-made structure, between the buildings and the light, between things that grow and structures that decay, by being alert to changes, by possessing a quick and piercing eye, Patek helps us to focus our consciousness on the degradation and potential renewal of the urban environment. There is a resonance here between living organisms, and the drawings are a kind of mapping of an experiential terrain. Her art is an attempt to fight back against an increasingly mass-marketed, mass-produced, and banal world. The structures whose struggles and even death throes she narrates and documents are not mass produced and banal; they show the integrity of craftsmanship and a unique fate.



Doomed, 2000



Delray Switchtower, 2002



Peripatetic Detroit Images, 2002

Still another interesting thing can be gleaned from the development of Patek's depiction of industrial and commercial sites. Early works, such as the dark *Forgotten Heroes* (1995) and the twisted *Depot of Illusions* (1997) present an eloquent and engaged social commentary. There is, however, a shift apparent in more recent works. Take, for example, *Fort Street Bridge* (2001) and *Zug Island* (2000). A certain lushness of color has crept into these works. While all of Patek's works discover a peculiar beauty even in desolate environments, *Zug Island* presents something new. The landscape is not wintry or barren; it is, instead, infused with all sorts of plants depicted in a broader color spectrum than ever before. And the factory island emerges, Chimera-like, as an integral part of this landscape; it rises up in the distance, hovering above the swampy landscape, like an unreachable Oz, or, at least, like a medieval castle, turrets and all. Here, for one, is an almost joyful symbiosis of natural and man-made environment.

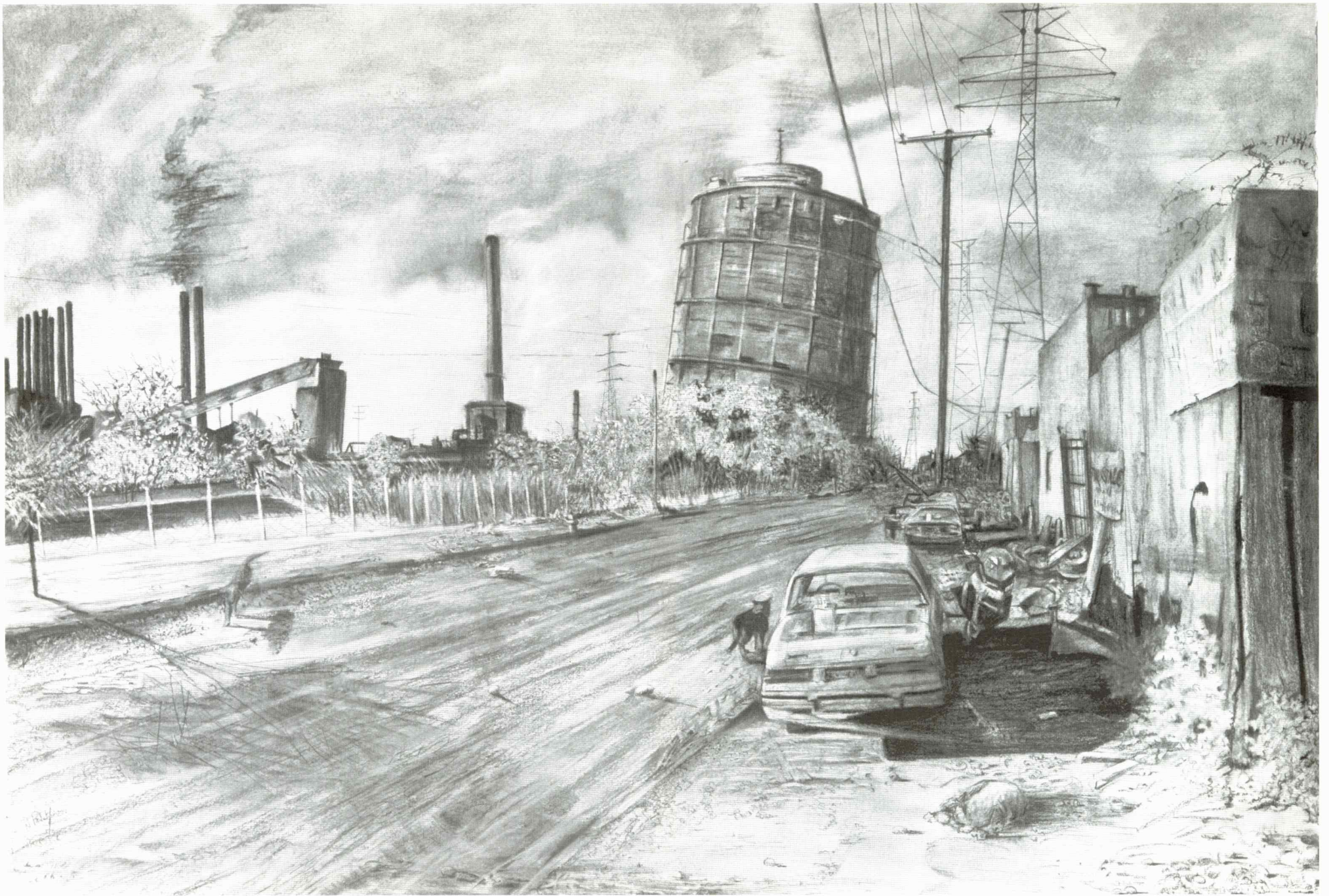
Patek's archaeological diggings into the symbols of our age find their most eloquent expression in the most recent work shown in this exhibition, *Peripatetic Detroit* (2002). Here all of the elements of her exploration into her native city come together. At the center of the drawing is the Bagley Memorial Fountain, built in 1887. Unfortunately, the fountain has never found a permanent home in the city. Having been moved twice already, it has just been relocated again to make room for the Campus Martius development. The fountain has thus become part of the ever-changing urban landscape, useful at times, useless at others, and a reminder that it is not only people who become homeless. What better image than this to investigate urban decay and the potential for renewal and resurrection! The homeless fountain, seemingly twisted out of shape in its search for a new home, is nevertheless still an integral part of the urban landscape. Placed in front of buildings, ostensibly empty but potentially slated for rehabilitation, it embodies the tenacious spirit that ultimately refuses to die and to be swept away into the proverbial dustbin of history. The renewal that Patek envisions, "the breath of a new dance of life," has been achieved at least in this one image – even if only tenuously. Re-growth is not automatically assured, but some of the relics of the old Detroit, so the

drawing tells us, cling more stubbornly to life than even the greatest boosters of the city might have anticipated.

All good art is in one way or another socially engaged, whether overtly, as in the work of Nancy Patek, or in a more covert way, as, for example, in the rendition of an artist's inner fantasy world. Some viewers might be inclined to say that socially engaged art of the Nancy Patek variety just wants to depict urban decay or limited renewal for its own sake, create a new urban chic out of ruins. Nothing could be further from the truth. Such art is, instead, a disturbing and insistent call to look at human potential – not only lost, abandoned, decayed, or destroyed potential, but potential for the future as well. Patek's art, on an intellectual, aesthetic, and emotional level is a call to action – social action, aesthetic contemplation, and finally, emotional and intellectual engagement. Hers is an urbane vision, a humane vision, in an environment that seemingly often has abandoned such ideals. She stands in the line of those 20th century American regional artists who, in the words of artist and critic Michael Hall, "remained faithful to the traditional notion that art should function as a language in which the values, beliefs, and histories of a community (or whole society) can be given a visual 'voice.'" Patek is one of these voices that relentlessly remind us of the fact that traditional notions of urbanity and community, that the history of our great urban centers should not be so easily swept aside.

The great German painter Otto Dix once said: "Every painting is an act of exorcism." What for the painter is an act of exorcism becomes an act of revelation for the viewer. It uncovers reality as being various, complex, and often strange. For us the act of exorcism becomes quite literally an eye opening experience. For it is the painter, the artist, who teaches us to see the essence of things, and who exhorts us to dig our way to that which lies beneath the surface, who imagines and depicts for us the things we do not necessarily dare to envision ourselves, and who, finally, calls to our attention those cultural patterns we might not easily discern as such ourselves.

Ludger Brinker, September 2002



Saturday Afternoon in Southwest Detroit, 2001 (reproduced in monochrome)



Storage Tanks, 1999 (reproduced in monochrome)



Looking Down 17th Street, 1998 (reproduced in monochrome)



River Rouge Tug, 2001 (reproduced in monochrome)



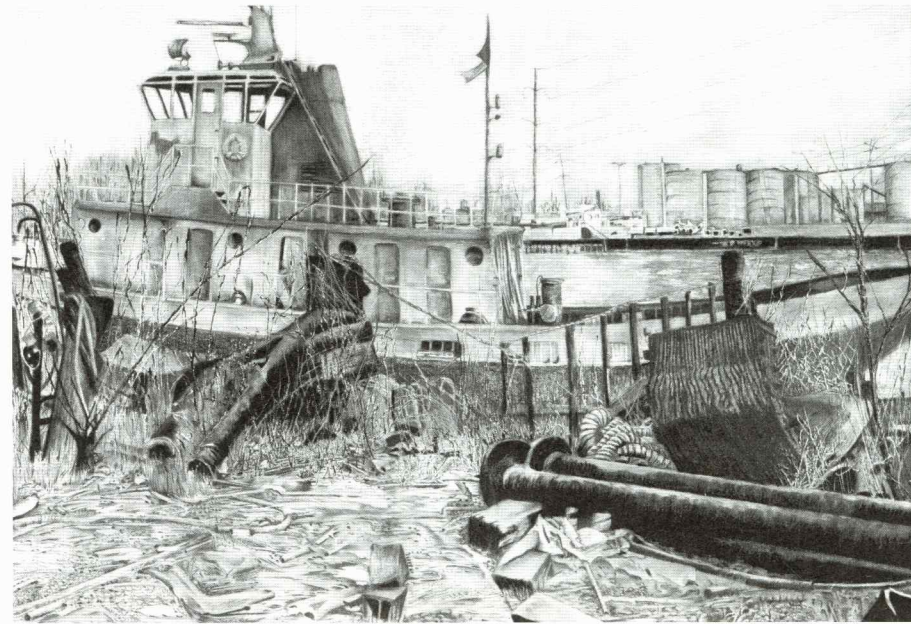
Fort Street Bridge, 2001 (reproduced in monochrome)



Road Warrior, 1999 (reproduced in monochrome)



Brush Park, 1995 (reproduced in monochrome)



In for Repairs, 1998 (reproduced in monochrome)



Zug Island, 2000 (and Brush Park opposite) Courtesy of Ludger Brinker



John R Waiting, 1999

NANCY PATEK

Solo Exhibitions

- 2002 *Detroit Drawing*, Meadow Brook Art Gallery, Oakland University, Rochester, MI
- 2001 *Detroit Legacies*, Ambleside Gallery, Grosse Pointe, MI
- 1998 *Nancy E. Patek: Urban Drawings and Paintings*, Birmingham Unitarian Church, Bloomfield Hills, MI

Group Exhibitions

- 2002 *Celebrating Twenty-five Years*, Paint Creek Center for the Arts, Rochester, MI
- 2001 *2001 Alumni Exhibition*, Community Arts Gallery, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI
- 2001 *Up with downriver*, Biddle Gallery, Wyandotte, MI
- 2001 *Made in Michigan*, Paint Creek Center for the Arts, Rochester, MI
- 2001 *Reality*, Exhibit A Gallery, Birmingham, MI
- 2000 *Michigan Printmakers 2000*, Left Bank Gallery, Flint, MI
- 2000 *From the Landscape*, Paint Creek Center for the Arts, Rochester, MI
- 1999 *Back to the Future*, The Art Center of Mt. Clemens, Mt. Clemens, MI
- 1999 *11 x 8 1/2*, Detroit Contemporary Gallery, Detroit, MI
- 1999 *Contemporary Drawings and Paintings: Nancy E. Patek/Carol Piligian*, Macomb Center Gallery, Macomb Community College, Clinton Twp., MI
- 1999 *Contemporary Relief Prints*, Blue Pony Gallery, Charlotte, NC
- 1999 *Michigan Printmakers*, The Art Gallery, Central Michigan University, Mt. Pleasant, MI
- 1999 *From the Flat Files*, The Center Gallery, College for Creative Studies, Detroit, MI

- 1997 *New Regionalism* (traveling exhibition), Detroit Artists Market, Detroit, MI
- 1997 *Extending Boundaries: Contemporary Women Printmakers*, Birmingham-Bloomfield Art Association, Birmingham, MI
- 1996 *Select Five*, Detroit Artists Market, Detroit, MI
- 1995 *Armitage/Patek: Contemporary Prints*, Start Gallery, Birmingham, MI
- 1995 *Small Works*, Del Pryor Gallery, Detroit, MI
- 1994 *Salon Show*, Community Arts Gallery, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI
- 1994 *Sketchbooks*, Detroit Artists Market, Detroit, MI
- 1991 *Renascence*, Urban Park Gallery, Detroit, MI
- 1991 *Studio Watch*, ARTSITE, Windsor, Ontario, Canada
- 1991 *5=1*, The Art Center of Mt. Clemens, Mt. Clemens, MI
- 1989 *American Relief Prints: A Selection*, Three Rivers Art Festival, Pittsburgh, PA
- 1988 *Women in Art*, The Windsor Printmakers Forum, Windsor, Ontario, Canada

Publications

- 1999 *Woodward Magazine*, December 1999
- 1997 *The New Regionalism*, Michael Hall, 1997, Detroit Artists Market, Detroit, MI

Education

- 1989 MA Printmaking, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI
- 1987 BFA Painting/Printmaking, College for Creative Studies, Detroit, MI

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Cover: *Michigan Central Station, January 4, 1914-Jan 5, 1988*, 1996

Front & back endpapers: details from, *Forgotten Heroes*, 1995 (reproduced in monochrome)

Back cover: detail from *Brush Park*, 1995 (reproduced in monochrome), courtesy of Ludger Brinker

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Dick Goody

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