

From The Sketchbook, Watercolors 2020 - 2022, Caldbeck Gallery, Rockland, ME.
Review by David Whelan

When you walk into David Dewey's exhibition *From the Sketchbook*, on view at the Caldbeck Gallery through September 30th, you see one long line of panoramic paintings. At first glance, Dewey's watercolors communicate a sense of clarity and competence. Perspective paired with geometry take command of the space and organize what is considered a very temperamental medium. However, when you approach the work, you discover a very active surface, one filled with painterly excesses and lyrical improvisations. From up-close, Dewey's paintings express the enjoyment of dancing around rigid structure, emphasizing the expansiveness of color and rendering hard boundaries porous.

The most abundant subject in the exhibition is a stone cabin, an unusual structure more suited for the Swiss Alps than Downeast Maine. Dewey paints its archways and stone facades with relentless curiosity. Of the bunch, *Center Arch, Beech Hill, 2021* is the most impactful. Placed in the middle of the page, the center arch frames the open sky into a lovely bell shape. Everything coalesces around this empty center, using the arch as a kind of bowl around which the composition forms. As I stared through the opening, I thought of the many archways represented in Western painting, used primarily to mark an entry point, separating public from private life, the secular from the sacred. My favorite entrance in *Center Arch, Beech Hill, 2021* was not this archway, but a tiny opening hidden between a group of foreshortened pillars. The shape reminded me of Constantin Brâncuși's sculpture *Endless Column*, which launches the eye up and down its zig-zagged pole. In Dewey's case, the opening invites the viewer to wiggle through, only to be pushed out by the distant sky, a snake-like spring of yellow and blue.

I was moved by Dewey's most ambitious painting, *Cradle, Heritage, and American Eagle, 2021*, which depicts the contents of a local shipyard. The viewer's eye is positioned at the cradle's foundation, its scaffold reaching out to the edges of the page. The perspective guides our attention towards the harbor, but is stopped by an obstinate stack of reddish blocks. After a long pause, the eye finds its way around the stack, seeking alternative routes around poles and under props. As my eye went from one passage to the next, I felt it braiding a visual net across the picture plane, pulling the painting's contents together with every loop and knot. As a whole, Dewey's watercolors are made with layers of transparent paint. However, in this painting, these layers are punctuated by a constellation of small opaque dots, each one loaded up with pigment. For me these dots felt like rivets, at once expressing the constructed nature of a working shipyard, but also what it means to hold things together pictorially. In this way, Dewey has tapped into how we actually perceive the world, our eyes moving all over the place, relying on cognition to piece it all together.

It's not immediately clear what is happening in *The Gem, 2021*, and that's why it's such an alluring piece. Slowly the bow of a pale-yellow ship emerges out from abstraction, occupying half of the picture plane. Our viewpoint is once again positioned down low, level with the ship's maroon-colored waterline, the linchpin of the entire painting. The vessel seems to be expanding with air, pushing its surrounding structures to the side. The ship's rigging is almost cubist in

style, deconstructing the space as though each brushstroke was a fragment turning in space. When I learned *The Gem* is the name of a local ship recently retired and displayed on land at a local nautical museum, I thought of J. M. W Turner's *The Fighting Temeraire*, which depicts an infamous ship being towed into port, destined for the scrapyard. Both in form and content, Dewey's painting shares Turner's insight, reflecting on what we hold onto when things are slipping away, meditating on what is gained and lost by change.

The paintings in *From the Sketchbook* have a formidable presence. They are deeply proficient, carrying the weight and cache of perspective and architecture. But behind the imagery, these structures begin to loosen. There are many artists who use watercolor in an expressive manner, unabashed, unleashing the medium's unplanned characteristics; these are not those paintings. Instead, Dewey maintains a dynamic tension between measurement and flux. What I find interesting about this exhibition is how artist who has spent decades mastering the medium, is now finding his way past the limits of his knowledge. For Dewey, it seems like the way out is through opening forms and allowing paint to call the shots. Dewey is more than ever listening to the temperament and unpredictability of paint.