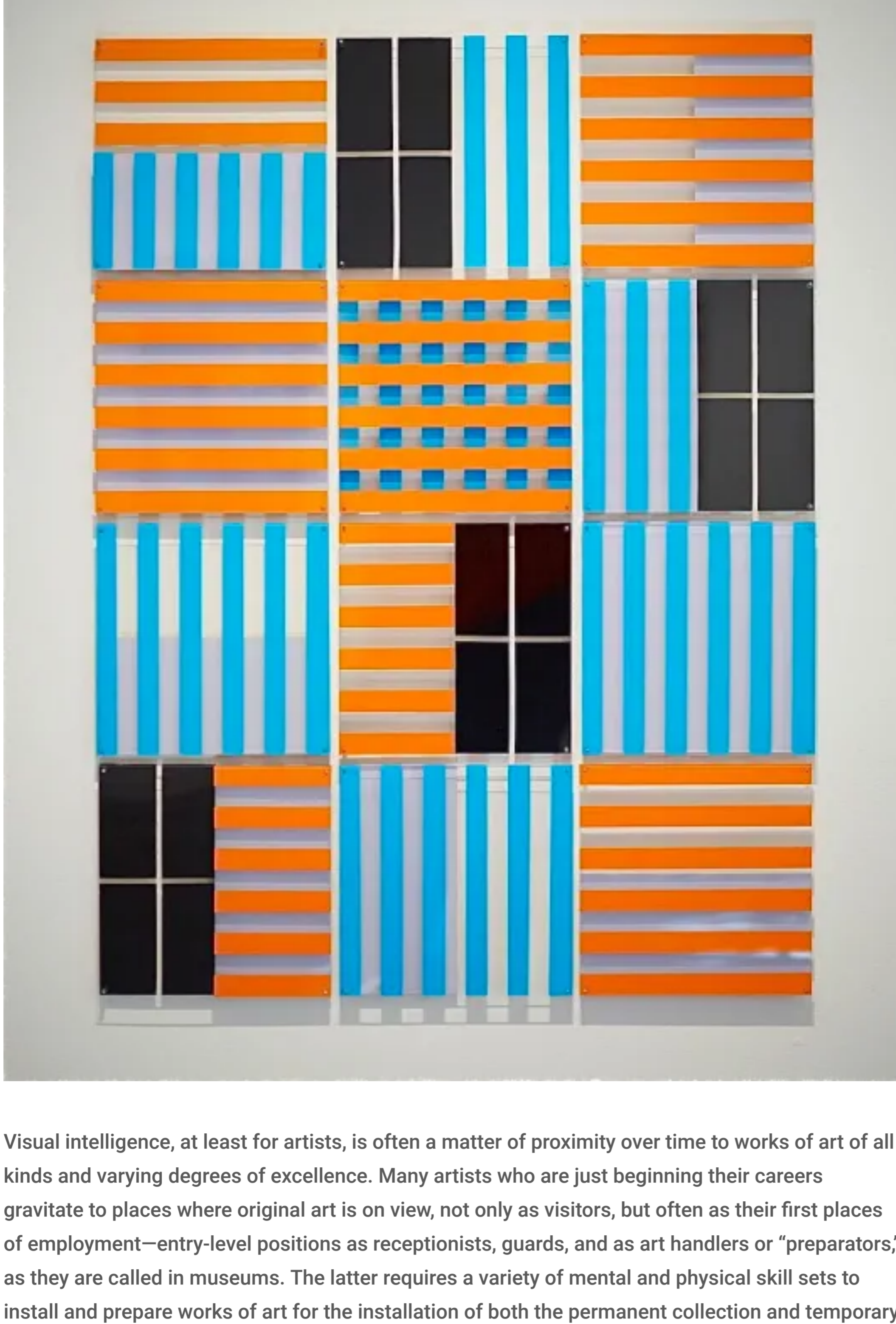




Chris Crosman – Stewart Henderson: The Museum of Famous Pictures

Features and Essays, Spring 2023 | 0 comments



Visual intelligence, at least for artists, is often a matter of proximity over time to works of art of all kinds and varying degrees of excellence. Many artists who are just beginning their careers gravitate to places where original art is on view, not only as visitors, but often as their first places of employment—entry-level positions as receptionists, guards, and as art handlers or “preparators,” as they are called in museums. The latter requires a variety of mental and physical skill sets to install and prepare works of art for the installation of both the permanent collection and temporary exhibitions. An eye for relationships among artworks is quickly developed. The most seasoned preparators will become essential to those curators wise enough to call upon the art handlers’ experience and “eye.” But, most often, preparators are the artists whose close-up and personal encounters with original artworks fuels their own creative needs and independent artistic lives. When hanging a painting or wrestling a sculpture into position, the art handler will be nose-to-nose, cheek-to-cheek, with master works. Love affairs ensue.

Among those artists who trained their eyes “on the job” at art museums is Stewart (Stew) Henderson, whose work often fuses both sculptural and painting practices. He worked for many years at the Farnsworth Art Museum and later at the Colby Art Museum as the Lead Preparator at both institutions. His own work references a variety of artists whose work he admires and acknowledges while finding ways to make highly original work that is adamantly his own and like no one else’s. Direct “quotes” and influences are well-disguised—often just a fragment of an idea that only he can notice.

There needs to be a word about “truths and lies.” It seems to me that art has always been fundamentally about both—lies (I prefer to call them illusions or stories or inventions) that speak to universal truth(s). Some artists use shadows and trompe l’oeil tricks and distortions to create illusions and subvert reality.

Even abstract work, like Stew’s, does this, albeit not so directly. Henderson’s work has no lies, but it does contain secrets and a kind of misdirection. His work clearly is based on a kind of precise abstraction, but it is always a way for Henderson to describe his personal, local experience and long-held beliefs about how art teaches him to experiment—to try new things that probably others will never notice unless they look very hard for a long time. Secrets.

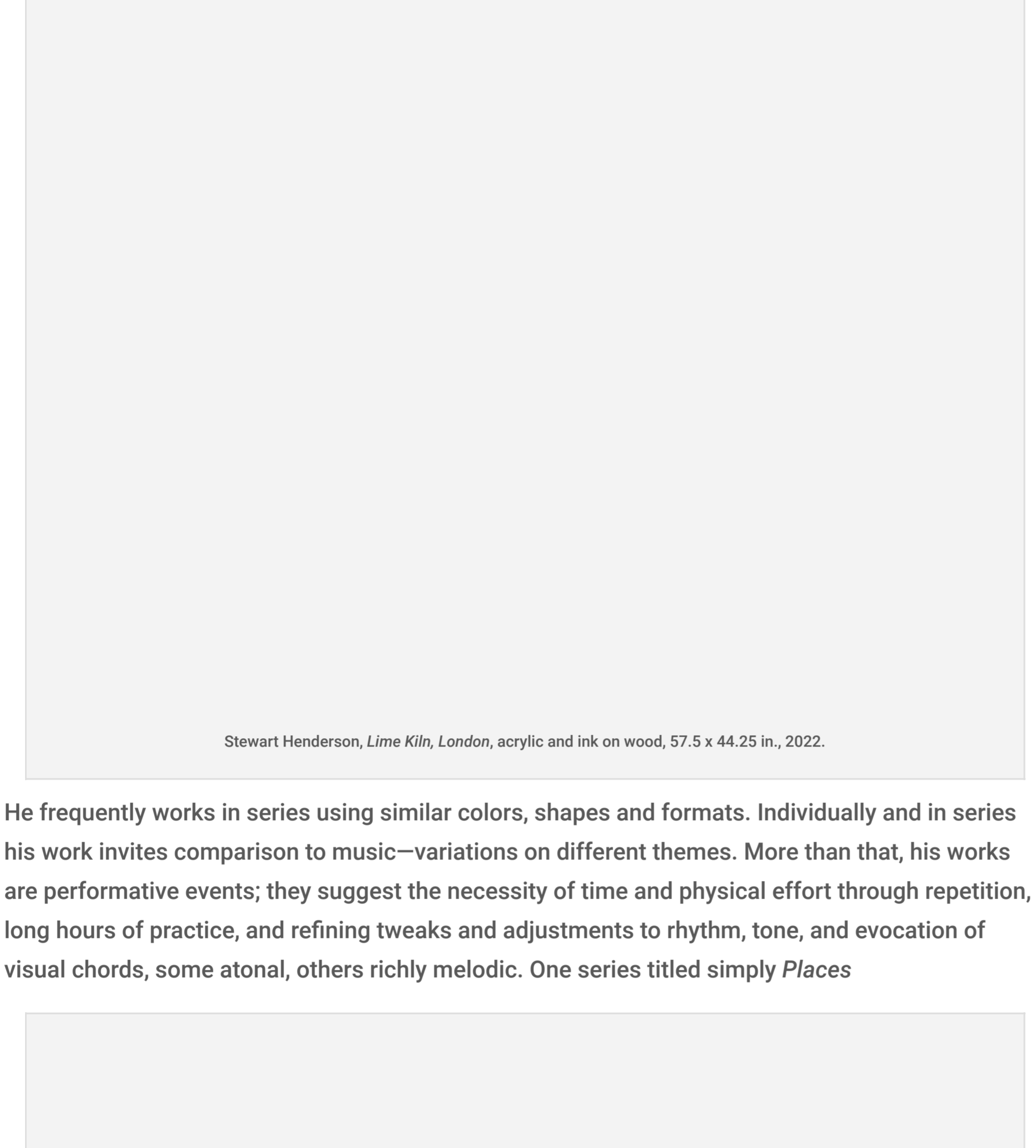
As part of his “day job” at Colby, Henderson literally spent months and years with black and white prints and drawings by James McNeill Whistler. He notes that certain, softly smudged charcoal passages in one of his paintings is a kind of echo and memory of photographing and handling them; the touching intimacy of physical closeness—more than any particular image—is the essential point of his own work.

To look at his *Homage To Anni* (above), without the titular hint, one would be hard-pressed to recall the geometric textile works by Anni Albers, save Henderson’s own tight weaving of line and color with surprising movement and balance rendered on and under slightly separated clear sheets of acrylic. Henderson is a sculptor by training and inclination who happens to paint by layering colored segments that create an illusion of existing within and above a shallow spatial plane. In his most recent work he collages small thin wood strips that he scores or hand paints onto underlying wood or canvas supports. Each of these quasi-jigsaw puzzle pieces has their own individual tightly managed identity. Shadows, both painted and actual, are important.



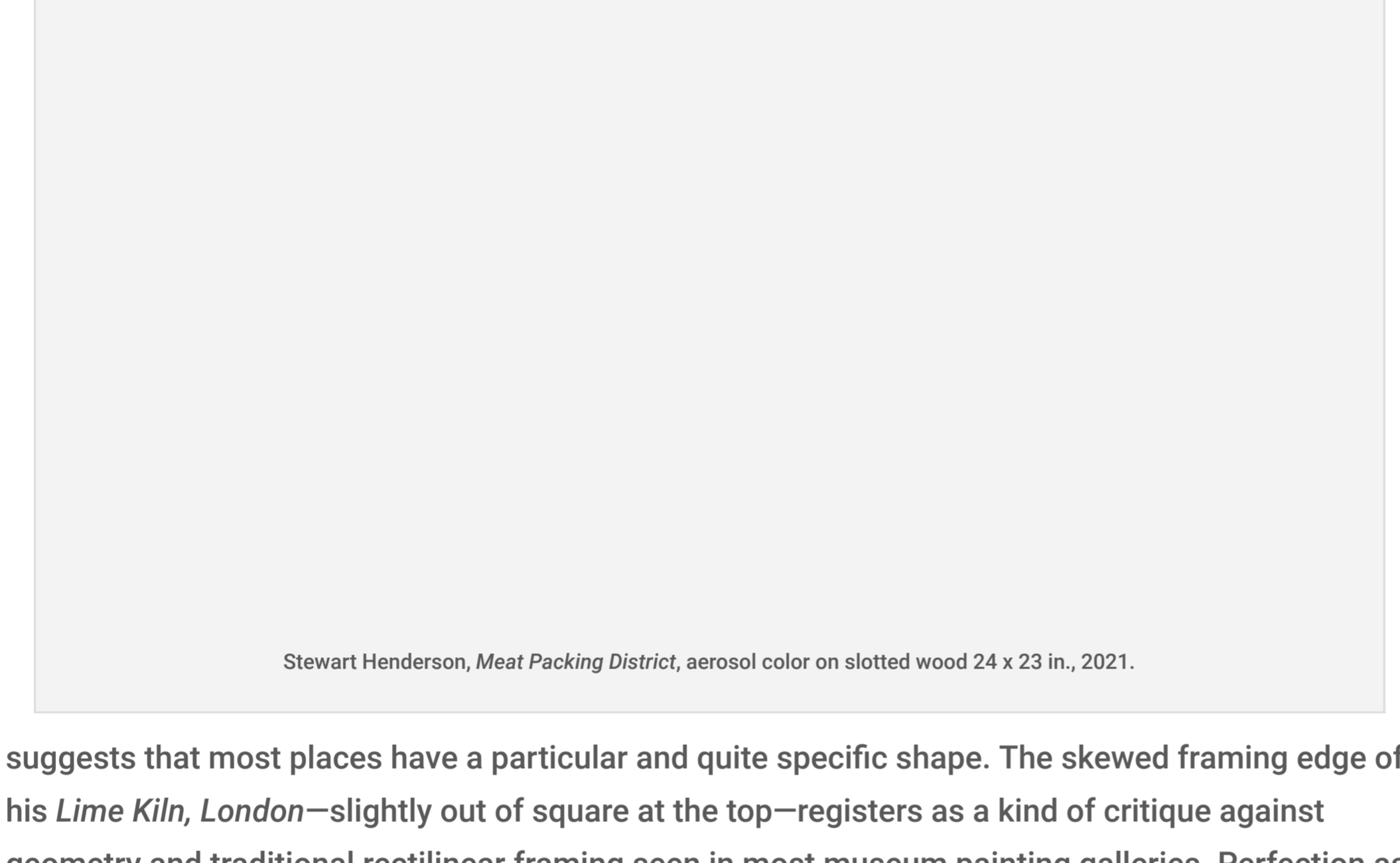
Stewart Henderson, *The Museum of Famous Pictures*, ink and aerosol color with composition leaf on wood, 35.5 x 48 x 2 in., 2022.

It is his ongoing fascination with part to whole, intersecting structures, structures within or on top of other structures—relationships—that has informed his work from the beginning to now. That, and his attention to measurement and precision that he regularly subverts, often subtly and wryly—hidden easter eggs for the eye to discover and the attentive viewer’s imagination to conjure with, like the “mistakes” and hidden signatures purposely applied to antique patchwork quilts.



Stewart Henderson, *Lime Kiln, London*, acrylic and ink on wood, 57.5 x 44.25 in., 2022.

He frequently works in series using similar colors, shapes and formats. Individually and in series his work invites comparison to music—variations on different themes. More than that, his works are performative events; they suggest the necessity of time and physical effort through repetition, long hours of practice, and refining tweaks and adjustments to rhythm, tone, and evocation of visual chords, some atonal, others richly melodic. One series titled simply *Places*



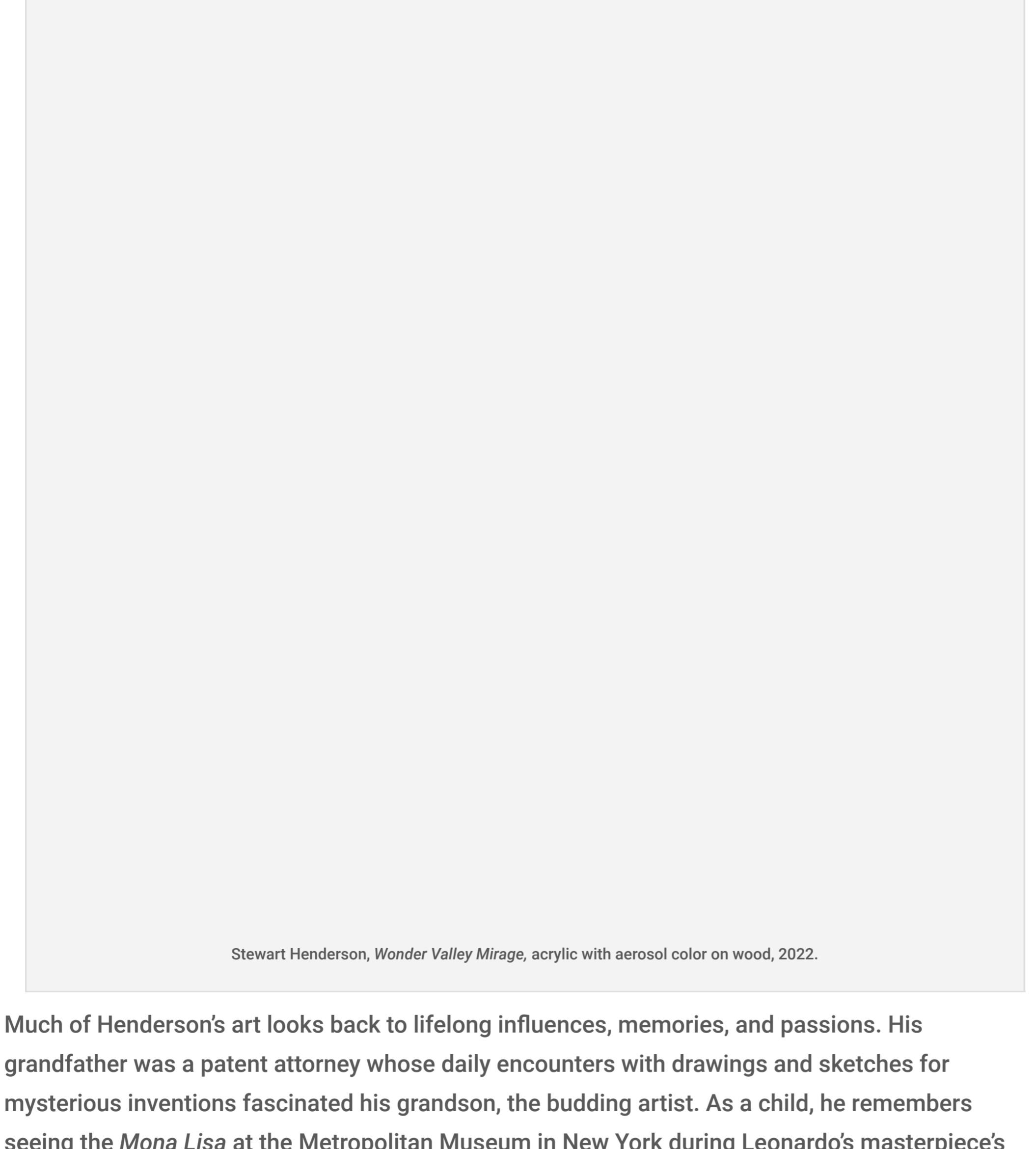
Stewart Henderson, *Meat Packing District*, aerosol color on slotted wood 24 x 23 in., 2021.

suggests that most places have a particular and quite specific shape. The skewed framing edge of his *Lime Kiln, London*—slightly out of square at the top—registers as a kind of critique against geometry and traditional rectilinear framing seen in most museum painting galleries. Perfection as an artistic trope holds little interest for the artist. The distance between the viewer and the wall where the work is hanging greatly affects the perceived degree of distortion in this work. Close up, the painting almost reads as a true rectangle as peripheral vision draws the eye side to side. With further distance the eye scans top to bottom, reading the upper edge at a significant slant. Generally, his intentional distortions power a sense of surprise and a dynamic tension between the flat surface and what we have come to expect from a rectangular easel painting on the museum wall. Rectangular segments with vertical dividers rise across sand-colored bands of the painting. The stacked bands and ribbons variously but vaguely suggest ancient temple architecture, or military battle ribbons on a tunic, or some coded text, or modern computer motherboard chip-set configuration. Why is the painting “tilting?” What is going on here and why? Maybe all the “information” is just to make you look closely at the persistence and subtlety of small differences and the passage of time.

In a related work, his *Museum of Famous Pictures*, galleries recede in space, views of artworks can also be hanging, walls, walls read as stacked on top of each other and obliquely angled, possible sculptures simultaneously float in a space and lose their third dimensions. Making geometric forms jump and wave at the viewer is a neat trick. Henderson pays homage to formalism but ruthlessly breaks the picture plane with surfaces that cast shadows and perform as gallery walls and trompe l’oeil sculptures twisting, even spinning in space like a Cubist painting where all sides are visible at once. His earlier use of acrylic sheets on acrylic separated by small spacers creating shadow on shadow, as in *Homage to Anni*, anticipates the more recent paintings where layering is no longer literal, but now operates as shifting spatial relationships among geometric forms against variously worked surfaces and subtly modulated, muted colors.

Illusion, humor, and irony infiltrate other works more directly. His *Wonder Valley Mirage*, a patchwork, quilt-like composition of desert landscape and low, makeshift buildings, is set against a strip of distant, undulating mountains on the horizon. Outlines of multiple UFOs are faintly etched into the desert sky. Are the UFOs the mirage, or is this—an illusion of an illusion—the truth and reality of what painting has always been about since the dawn of myth and religion? The artwork is based on an actual location near Joshua Tree, CA, where there have been many sightings of such objects in the sky, the varied but vague outlines of which Henderson dutifully inscribes. Skepticism notwithstanding, these ghostly vessels could represent something else—clouds, perhaps, or our own moment’s fragile, faded, insubstantial grasp of truth. The “saucers” appear to visit the actual ramshackle retreats in this remote desert landscape now housing mostly artists, musicians, and writers escaping LA’s pollution, crowding, and noise. Who would not see spaceships in such a landscape?

The segmented, dry, brittle-seeming painted landscape may also refer to numberless 35mm sci-fi film frames from *War of the Worlds* to Spielberg’s *E. T.*, as well as balloons downed by the US Air Force. I suspect if Henderson was responsible for launching the recent spate of “Chinese” balloons, their high-flying round faces would be wearing smiling and sad-faced emojis.



Stewart Henderson, *Wonder Valley Mirage*, acrylic with aerosol color on wood, 2022.

Much of Henderson’s art looks back to lifelong influences, memories, and passions. His grandfather was a patent attorney whose daily encounters with drawings and sketches for mysterious inventions fascinated his grandson, the budding artist. As a child, he remembers seeing the *Mona Lisa* at the Metropolitan Museum in New York during Leonardo’s masterpiece’s first and only visit to the United States.

The *Museum of Famous Pictures* is his homage to museums and the “masterpiece” mentality that he became familiar during long hours and low pay, installing countless museum exhibitions. Here, the run-on, mind-shaping, head-spinning mounting of countless exhibitions and a multitude of artworks becomes a kind of homage to time, repetition, and physical labor. Henderson looks at how the multiple meanings and purposes of art connect through acts of serendipity and intention, revelation and remembrance.

As a young child he had entertained himself and family members by making small, colored paper booklets containing his very first “museum of famous pictures” that he never forgot and still has. Much later, as in his recent painting of the same title, black and white squares with scumbled, chiaroscuro smudges animate the right edge section. Indeed, the painting is unevenly divided into three sections, perhaps alluding to early religious triptychs mostly found in great museums where he first saw the *Mona Lisa*. Henderson acknowledges that the softly-applied marks belong to his memory of handling those black and white works by Whistler at Colby. They are also Henderson’s metaphorical fingerprints, his own layered and complex painting to secretly, reverently disclose—essentially for himself—echoes of another artist’s work he knows and owns at the level of a lover’s touch. Truth and lies, affairs of the heart, are ever thus.

Image at top: Stewart Henderson, *Homage to Anni*, acrylic on acrylic sheet in two layers, 45 x 34 in., 2009.

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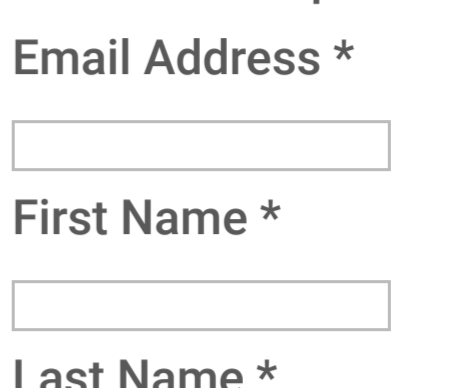
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