

John Moore
Shades of Gray

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LOCKS GALLERY

Shades of Gray (Between a Water Tower and a Billboard)

By Paul Galvez

Modern art's infatuation with industry has a long and distinguished pedigree. Around the middle of the 19th century, newfangled things like steam locomotives and buildings of iron and glass paraded across the canvases of Manet and the Impressionists, sparkling with the effervescent glow of the New. Soon technology began to make itself present in the very making of art. By 1886, it was no longer enough to represent industry; the practice of art itself had to become industrial, on the model of the engineer or scientist. Gone, then, were the traditional recipes of academic oil painting. In their place arose color theories pilfered from dye manufacturing and optical theory. Idiosyncratic, grandiose swipes of the brush gave way to painted pinpoints, systematically arrayed.

If Claude Monet and Georges Seurat were the heralds of this first phase, the photographer Charles Sheeler, with whose photographs the work of John Moore is often compared, can be considered the harbinger of a second, one could say more heroic, phase. As photographed by Sheeler in 1932, the Ford Motor Company plant in River Rouge, Michigan, is a hygienic fantasy of efficiency. Nary an oil spill or worker (let alone a strike) invades the pristine workings of a factory that has now mushroomed beyond the plant proper to engulf the surrounding landscape. In this fanciful apotheosis of industry, the dominion of technology over nature appears total, as ruthless as aesthetic.

It is one of the achievements of John Moore's latest series of drawings to map the terrain left over from the collapse of these two foundational moments. In contrast to earlier epochs of modernity, Moore is a skeptic of progress. This attitude explains Moore's dramatic return in this exhibition to the medium of charcoal on paper, a technique unused by the artist since he was a graduate student. For drawing throughout much of its history was considered a reservoir of preliminary thoughts and rough ideas, like a diary entry. It was never the finished product as an easel painting could be. And almost never was it considered at the cutting edge of technical innovation – which is why Seurat and Sheeler turned to science and photography, respectively, in their search for the *ultramoderne*.

Moore's medium, like the structures he depicts, is a resource mined from a modernity that once was. One feels the labor of that excavation with every chalky deposit of charcoal and in every object summoned from the foggy depths of the past. By temporarily abandoning his normally highly-keyed paintings for these somber drawings, Moore, rather than Sheeler, shows himself to be Seurat's true heir. For while publicly exhibiting manifesto paintings whose scientific spirit was loud and clear, Seurat privately made small, monochromatic studies in conté crayon. It is to these less bombastic works that Moore's drawings pay homage. *Kudzu* (p. 31), for instance, would not look out of place alongside Seurat's desolate landscape drawings. But in Moore's hands the bits of charcoal caught in the paper's grain do not constitute a test-run for pointillism, as they did for Seurat. Nor does the incredibly diverse grayscale prefigure the range of lights and darks to be magically unfurled in some future painting.

What matters in these drawings is that the contrast between areas of light and dark be made to underscore an even more fundamental tension. For despite their apparent innocence, these works are carefully staged dramas in which the built environment is pitted against both nature and itself. The signs are obvious enough: sinister, snaking tree trunks often occlude one's view (*Tree and Ventilators* (fig. 1), *Thicket* (p. 23)); a forlorn telephone tower, a billboard, or, most commonly, a water tower punctuates an otherwise open sky (*Billboard, Water Tower* (p. 37); *Dusk* (p. 44); *Cement Works* (p. 35)); wayward vines and branches interrupt the order of things, popping up unexpectedly or, as in seemingly reclaiming the world back from mankind (*Tudor* (p. 27), *Trestle* (p. 33)). And when nature is not exacting its revenge on the manmade, the battle is waged between structures themselves. This can be seen, to cite one example, in the way in which a window or wall (*Cathedral* (p. 45)) brutally bars access to the scene. Or it can be the strange coupling of constructions from different eras, like the aforementioned water towers and billboards (*Billboard, Water Towers, Kudzu* (p. 39)).

This is not to say that the drawings lack any structural impulse whatsoever. They *are* constructed, but not according to any deterministic or technocratic plan and most certainly *not* in the utopian

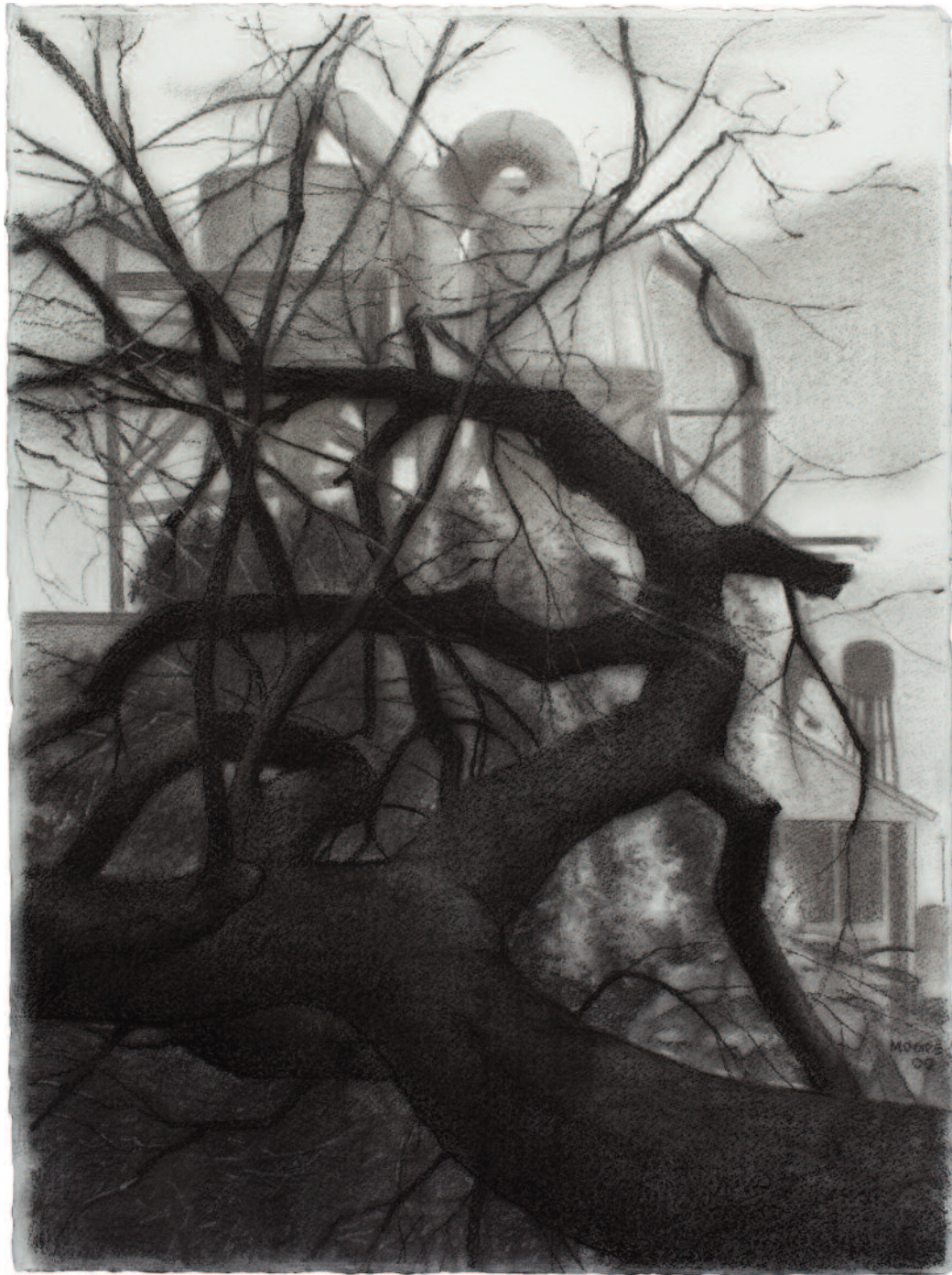


Fig. 1. *Tree and Ventilators*, 2009, charcoal on paper, 30 1/4 x 22 1/2 inches



Fig. 2. *Near Lincoln Highway, Coatesville*, 1988-92, oil on canvas, 30 x 33 inches

vein of a Seurat or Sheeler. When Moore moves objects within a composition his intent is to heighten spatial discontinuities and odd juxtapositions, not to program an underlying geometric order or to glorify technology.

What is paramount in these works is that the illusion of receding into distant space begins to unravel, while not quite falling apart. This precarious state is difficult to achieve and is particularly apparent in items like Moore's billboards – sometimes legible, but at other times quasi-abstract solids – and the various backlit towers, smokestacks, and poles that in their almost grid-like organization compress pictorial space by pushing one's attention towards the picture plane.

Unlike Sheeler at River Rouge, Moore travels through an industrial landscape shorn of its glow, well after first euphoria has dissipated. Old factory towns like Coatesville, Pennsylvania (fig. 2), and Greenville, South Carolina, not Dearborn, are his preferred destinations. His six large-scale drawings obviously start from Sheeler's example, but they recast the latter's techno-optimism in a muted, minor key. In *Interior* (p. 17) and *Slab* (p. 21), monolithic walls dominate the pictorial field, rendering all other geometries subordinate or alterior to its own. The selective use of windows in *Harper* (p. 43) and *Transfer* (p. 15) complicates matters further, piercing the surface of a



Fig. 3. *South End*, 2009, charcoal on paper, 22 1/2 x 30 1/4 inches

central edifice in the one, while erecting a barricade in the other. It is important to note that despite Moore's obvious attraction to sites tempered with the patina of age these drawings do not give off the sweet perfume of dilapidated and derelict monuments, as the vestiges of 19th-century Paris did for the Surrealists. The uncanny aura of the outdated is noticeably absent here. Instead, anonymity and everydayness, neither hopelessly grand nor entirely forgotten, reigns.

These are moments of historical memory that today's culture of virtual image-feeds, in its perpetual conflation of past and present, obliterates. All the more reason to appreciate an art like Moore's that savors them, without spectacularizing them. The church ominously towering over the school building and park in *South End* (fig. 3) sits a couple blocks away from where this essay was written. Today the view as Moore saw it in the mid-nineties is inaccessible. A new gymnasium of brick, steel, and glass has arisen where an outdoor court once stood. By the artist's own admission, this drawing, earlier by almost 15 years than all the others, was the inspiration for them all. There is something poetic, dare I say it, about the fact that the passage of time has now made that original view, finally, a scene from the past.

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