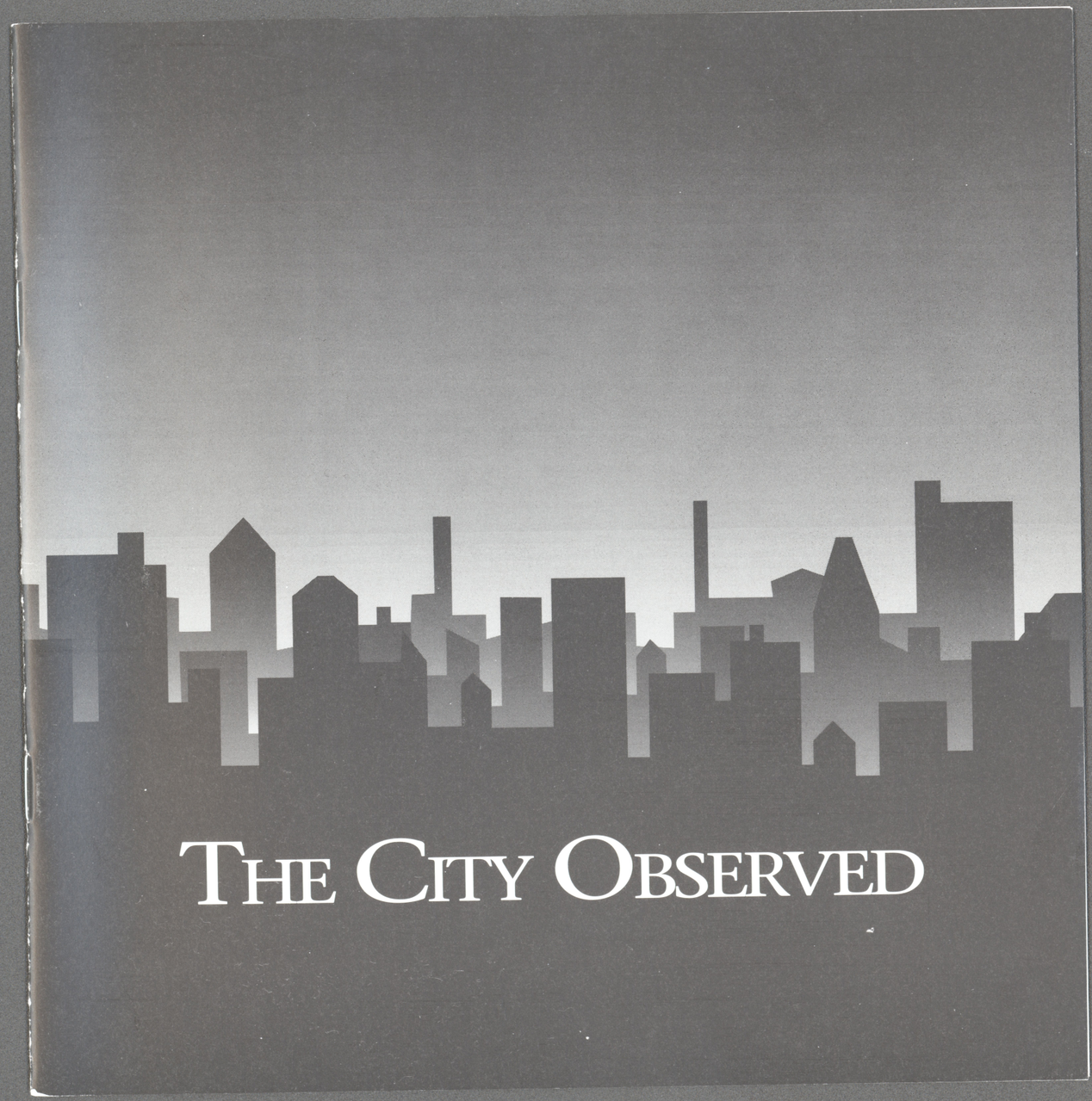

THE CITY OBSERVED

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Barry Roal Carlsen
Douglas Safranek
Stuart Shils

October 2-November 6, 1994

Sordoni Art Gallery
Wilkes University
Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania

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Schmidt-Bingham Gallery, New York
Stuart Shils, Philadelphia
Kenneth Waliszewski, Brookfield, WI
Judith Woodburn, Milwaukee, WI
Three Anonymous Private Collections

Acknowledgments

On behalf of the Sordoni Art Gallery I would like to thank the lenders for generously agreeing to loan works to this exhibition. Christine Kim of Schmidt-Bingham Gallery, New York; Julilly Kohler and Jordana Joseph of Internos Gallery, Milwaukee, WI; Ben Mangel of the Mangel Gallery, Philadelphia; and Diana Sargent of The Pandion Gallery, Fishers Island, NY, have been especially helpful in arranging loans.

Dale Malner supervised the packing and crating of the Carlsen paintings that came from the Midwest. Nancy Krueger of the Sordoni Art Gallery co-ordinated the many details involved with mounting the exhibition. Earl Lehman installed the exhibition. My colleagues Dr. J. Michael Lennon and Dr. William Sterling read drafts of the essay; I appreciate their editorial comments.

Barry Roal Carlsen designed the cover and provided the catalogue layout.

As always I am grateful for the support provided the Gallery by Wilkes University and the Friends of the Sordoni Art Gallery.

Finally, I thank Barry Roal Carlsen, Douglas Safranek and Stuart Shils for sharing their visions with us.

Stanley I Grand
Director

The City Observed

Although Barry Roal Carlsen, Douglas Safranek and Stuart Shils each creates small-format paintings depicting contemporary urban landscapes, their sensibilities, formal concerns and content differ considerably. Carlsen's pictures of a mid-sized, midwestern city express a poetic, oneiric sensibility. Safranek's punctiliously delineated meditations order the discordance and cacophony of New York City. Shils responds spontaneously to the stimuli of a city undergoing constant cycles of decay and rebirth.

With dramatic contrasts of light and dark, glowing enameled colors, and a multiplicity of detail, Barry Carlsen creates an enigmatic, personal and marginal world bathed in crepuscular light. Suspended between night and day, twilight marks the transition from work to home, public to private lives, waking to sleep. It is a bridge and, not surprisingly, the bridge recurs frequently as a motif in Carlsen's paintings.

Carlsen depicts a poetic borderland where different worlds intersect and loyalties diverge. *Stations* suggests the conflict that the artist feels between his studio and his family. In this picture the artist is a night-shift worker for whom the comforting presence of family, suggested by the light emanating from an upstairs bedroom window, is denied. The child's sled, abandoned by the side of the house, underscores the mood of isolation. The tension between home and work is expressed differently in *Night Shift* where lower-middle class backyards butt up against industrial sites.

People become marginal in Carlsen's world. The brave-new-world skyscrapers of the modern service industries march proudly past the vernacular structures of the old rustbelt distribution centers, which seem strangely quiet, eerie, and preternatural. The individuals, like those in *Not Forgotten*, who hang around these bypassed enterprises engage in mysterious, and often ominous, encounters with each other. Mementoes of projects begun, but left unfinished, abound. The mood is haunting, melancholic and elegiac. Even the world of *The Dreamer* is troubled by disturbing outside forces—symbolized by a strong wind that depresses and flattens the ascending smoke. The painting's highly finished, glossy surface becomes a mirror of dreams.

Despite their small scale, Carlsen's paintings share some of the grandeur of classic nineteenth-century American landscapes. The dramatic, expansive skies recall those of Frederic Edwin Church, but the mood is closer to that of Thomas Cole's allegorical *Course of Empire*, updated to show the waning of the American empire. Other influences include the Immaculate painters: *Reunion II* in particular shows a knowledge of Charles Sheeler's photographs of the Ford Motor Company plant at River Rouge, Michigan.

The tension in Douglas Safranek's paintings derives, in part, from the paradox of imposing a rigid sense of order on what has become, increasingly, a subject synonymous with disorder. Unlike, Stuart Shils, Safranek paints the city from an intellectual point of view: he brings to his paintings a Cartesian sense of order, reinforced, no doubt, by his undergraduate training as a French major. Typically, as in *Still Open*, Safranek employs a high, god-like perspective. He looks down on the city from the safety of a window in a tall building. He is a distanced viewer, a *flaneur*, who orders what he sees, carefully removing all chaotic and accidental elements from the composition.

His choice of medium expresses well his relationship to his subject. Working in egg tempera, a difficult medium that involves mixing dry pigments in egg yolk, he applies his colors to a carefully prepared surface with small, deliberate brushstrokes. Since egg tempera colors—unlike oils—do not blend easily, the artist must lay down many, semi-transparent layers of paint. The medium requires the artist to work slowly, to eliminate chance effects, and encourages an almost meditative attitude, as that of a monk copying and illustrating manuscripts while the world outside spins out of control. Egg tempera's dry quality, in contrast to the juiciness of oil, reinforces this perception.

Egg tempera is ideally suited for artists whose work has a strong linear quality. (Safranek also draws in silverpoint, one example of which is included in this exhibition, a virtuoso technique that is unexcelled for precise draughtmanship.) His linear sensibility aligns him with the Classical, rational tradition that gives precedence to the intellectualism of line over the sensuality of color. Safranek's clear, deliberate forms and contours look back to the Classicism of Ingres rather than the Romanticism of Delacroix.

A Classical air of quietude and timelessness permeates *Still Open*. The glowing facade of a Mini Market draws residents of an urban neighborhood together on a desultory summer night. Two women lean against the side of a parked car watching four men and a boy, carefully arranged to form a flattened circle. The single, approaching passerby is balanced by another who departs. Graffiti tags, a frequently cited symbol of urban decay, become mere visual incident. Yellow lights, like jewels, draw the eye around the composition, in which a solitary office tower dominates the horizon. To the left massed skyscrapers suggest the presence of Manhattan as do the lighted catenaries of the suspension bridges. The planar recession of the buildings is static, unanimated by glimpses of human activity spied through open night windows. Here, unlike in an Edward Hopper or a John Sloan, the shades are drawn.

Stuart Shils, on the other hand, relishes the din, the noise and the dirt of the city. Working quickly with oils on paper in a painterly, gestural style, his *plein air* cityscapes capture the transitory and impermanent nature of the urban scene.

Shils has said that his paintings are about the "visual quality of the place." His is an aesthetic, not a sociological, point of view. Concerned primarily with visual phenomena, he records what he sees but refrains from making overt programmatic or political statements. He invites the viewer to contemplate the scene but, by means of an empty, foreground intermediary zone, keeps the viewer at an aesthetic distance.

Although his palette, which consists primarily of earth colors, recalls that of the Ash Can Painters, he does not share their picturesque view of poverty. Shils lacks the optimism of a Robert Henri or George Luks who viewed poverty as a transitory state populated by individuals whose lives were more raw, more full, more gutsy. Nor does he explore the themes of alienation, loneliness and estrangement, like Edward Hopper, or those of human suffering and pathos, as did Ben Shahn.

In *Alley Near Schmidt's Brewery* Shils finds a certain tattered beauty, like that of an old face, reflecting experience and, perhaps, wisdom. Despite having fallen on hard times, his buildings maintain their dignity. Abstract pictorial considerations, however, predominate: the architectonic structure begins to dissolve, forms open up, edges become brushy and indistinct, broad flat areas of paint are rendered expressionistically. As in most of his paintings, the alley is deserted, but no sense of melancholy intrudes.

Throughout the twentieth century, artists have found inspiration in the American city. Despite a wide variety of styles, from the naturalistic interpretations of the Ash Can Painters or the American Scene Painters to the increasingly abstract paintings of the Immaculates, Stuart Davis or Piet Mondrian, the city has fascinated artists. The City Observed demonstrates the continuing vitality of this tradition.

Stanley I Grand
Director

Barry Roal Carlsen

The places I visit in my paintings are reconstructions of another time. They are amalgamations, the kind of blending or restructuring of place that our memories recall for us. While they are spawned from memories of my past and the people that were and are dear to me, I want very much not to make the narratives just a visual diary of personal events.

I see the paintings as vehicles to convey emotions, rather than just formal landscapes. They may represent a reconciliation with the past, an homage to a certain person, the completion of an unfinished conversation, or just a wellspring of nostalgia bubbling up. Whatever the content of the given piece, I am cautious to avoid cementing the objects and setting completely in the realm of the personal. I want the viewer to bring his or her own experience to bear in viewing the work.

One of the things I enjoy most is hearing others comment on my work. I have heard a single painting interpreted as expressing bright hope and optimism as well as the darkest sense of loss and depression. Either is equally valid to me, both may even exist in the work. I leave it in the viewer's hands. When I hear interpretations of my paintings, it is like discovering a part of myself.

I want to stand quietly in that place between events, spanning both sides of the question. It is important that the narrative is not altogether complete. There must be room for the viewer to complete the picture. The time and place are not meant to be too specific. I am most interested in the human scale in the environment and the relationships between given objects. I like to watch and record the transitional: the implied event, the light from an unseen source, the time just before nightfall or those first moments of the day. These are the things that intrigue me.

Photo: Barry Carlsen

Barry Roal Carlsen, *Not Forgotten*, 1991, 9 x 18 inches, oil on masonite.

Douglas Safranek

New York City's density was quite overwhelming when I first arrived from the vast and tranquil West. Upon months of observation, however, intimidation subsided to fascination. I began to appreciate the clashing contrasts of the big city, and the diversity of the people and structures within. The buildings are piled high and crammed together, and millions of people share this small space. Life is never on hold—the city is perpetually moving. Rundown tenements share the streets with cold, steel giants. In my Brooklyn neighborhood, artists walk along-side Polish immigrants, Italians, Puerto Ricans, and Hasidic Jews from Hungary. I was inspired to portray unparalleled diversity in my paintings.

I found that through the slow, meditative process of egg tempera, I was able to maintain a sense of intimate stillness in even the most active compositions. I wanted to note not only the clutter and eccentricities of daily life, but also to bring out that which seemed timeless and universal in a fast-paced environment. My present work continues to develop these New York images. Being a delicate, precise medium, egg tempera encourages working on a smaller scale than I had been used to. I found, however, that I could achieve the same visual impact in miniature with tempera that I could only achieve on a grander scale in other media. The fragility yet ultimate permanency of tempera seems appropriate for what I hope will be timeless, meditative paintings of a dynamically changing world.

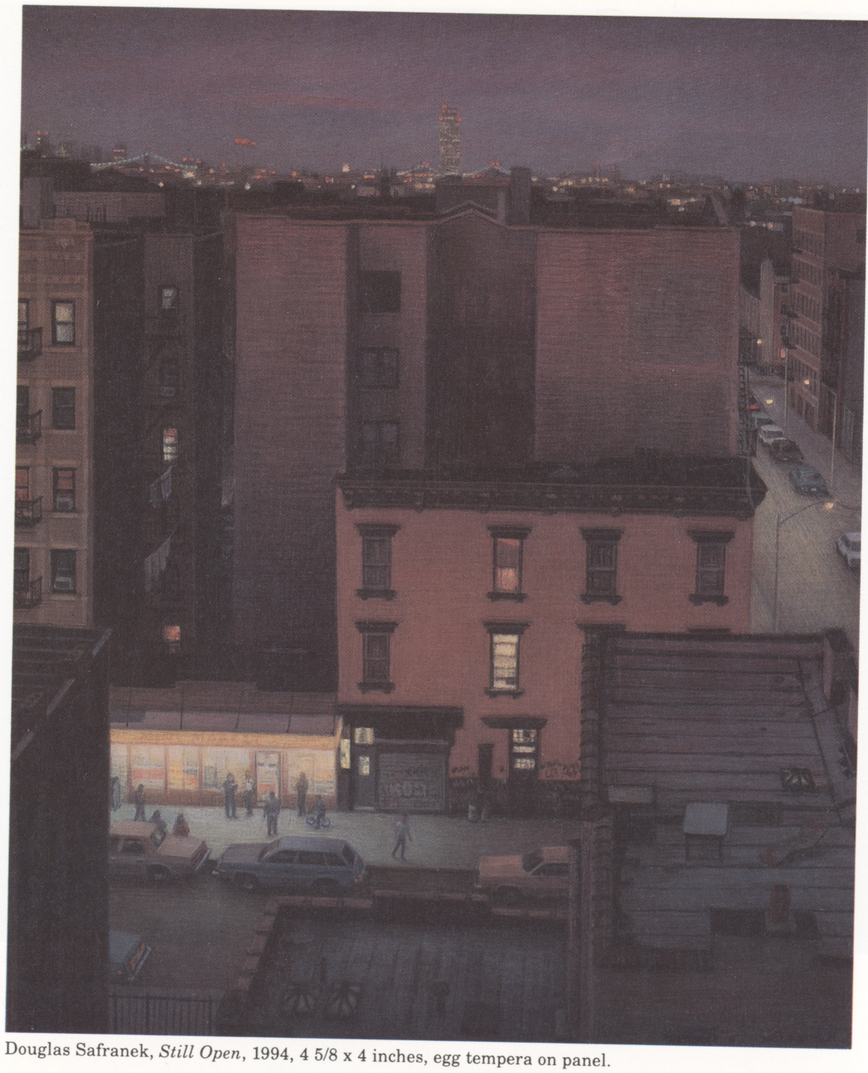

Photo: Adam Reich, Schmidt-Bingham Gallery

Douglas Safranek, *Still Open*, 1994, 4 5/8 x 4 inches, egg tempera on panel.

Stuart Shils

I have an appetite for the material of the city; it's a sensual response really. I try to paint in the same way that you eat grapefruits in the morning, where you stop thinking about what you're doing and just enter into the doing of it. It's like a physical attraction to another person, very animal like. I don't mean that I paint like an animal, but I try to connect on a purely visual level.

—I don't think there's any story in my paintings: if there is, I don't know about it. The paintings don't have a psychological or sociological orientation; I'm interested in visual meanings: how one wall relates to another, what that relationship means abstractly, or in the tonal quality of light.

—I'm painting the city as it exists today. My colors might seem "old fashioned," but that's the city. I don't see bright reds and oranges. I paint my emotional response to the city, but I'm not transforming my colors in a fauvist way. I'm trying to understand the color that I'm seeing.

—I'm not engaged in the whole life-on-the-street issue or involved in what's going on there. I'm just watching the world go by in a very detached, even voyeuristic, way. That feeling of separation and distance may come through in my work although I'm not thinking about it. Rather, I'm trying to remake what I'm looking at, to put it together in a sensual and tactile way.

—The city in its decrepitude is magnificent. I'm not trying to glorify these horrible places, I don't think there's any virtue to living there, although I am trying to glorify their visual magnificence.

—Of course I'm interested in the life of the city and this interest provides me with a certain momentum, but not in formal terms. When I go out to paint it's really more like eating an ice cream cone.

excerpts from a conversation

Photo: Joseph Painter

Stuart Shils, *Alley Near Schmidt's Brewery*, 1994, 10 5/8 x 11 inches, oil on paper.

Checklist of the Exhibition

Barry Roal Carlsen
Bachelor Party, 1990
9 x 6, oil on panel
Courtesy of Gregory and Dorothy Conniff

Barry Roal Carlsen
Casting Off II, 1989
6 x 12, oil on copper
Courtesy of David Grossfeld

Barry Roal Carlsen
Dawning, 1992
5 1/2 x 7 1/2, oil on masonite
Courtesy of Barry Roal Carlsen

Barry Roal Carlsen
Idea Factory, 1989
6 x 9, oil on panel
Courtesy of Gregory and Dorothy Conniff

Barry Roal Carlsen
Midnight Wind II, 1994
12 x 28, oil on masonite
Courtesy of Barry Roal Carlsen

Barry Roal Carlsen
Night Shift, 1989
9 x 12, oil on copper
Courtesy of Barry Roal Carlsen

Barry Roal Carlsen
Not Forgotten, 1991
9 x 18, oil on masonite
Courtesy of Lorrie Moore

Barry Roal Carlsen
Reunion II, 1992
5 x 9, oil on masonite
Courtesy of Thomas and Janet Paul

Barry Roal Carlsen
Shared Gift, 1989
6 x 9, oil on panel
Courtesy of Gregory and Dorothy Conniff

Barry Roal Carlsen
Stations, 1992
9 x 6, oil on masonite
Courtesy of Kenneth Waliszewski

Barry Roal Carlsen
The Dreamer, 1992
6 x 9, oil on masonite
Courtesy of Julilly Kohler

Barry Roal Carlsen
The Lesson, 1989-90
12 x 16, oil on masonite
Courtesy of Judith Woodburn

Barry Roal Carlsen
The Meeting Place, 1989
9 x 12, oil on copper
Courtesy of Lorrie Moore

Douglas Safranek
Before Dark, 1994
5 3/8 x 6, egg tempera on panel
Courtesy of Schmidt-Bingham Gallery

Douglas Safranek
Common Ground, 1994
32 x 22, egg tempera on panel
Courtesy of Schmidt-Bingham Gallery

Douglas Safranek
Domino Sugar, 1994
5 3/8 x 7, egg tempera on panel
Courtesy of Schmidt-Bingham Gallery

Douglas Safranek
Ordinary Life, 1993
16 1/2 x 12, egg tempera on panel
Courtesy of Schmidt-Bingham Gallery

Douglas Safranek
Snow/Steam, 1992
8 x 7 1/2, silverpoint, gouache on toned board
Courtesy of Schmidt-Bingham Gallery

Douglas Safranek
Still Open, 1994
4 5/8 x 4, egg tempera on panel
Courtesy of Schmidt-Bingham Gallery

Douglas Safranek
Walking the Dog, 1993
28 1/4 x 17, egg tempera on panel
Courtesy of Schmidt-Bingham Gallery

Stuart Shils
33rd and Diamond Streets, 1994
7 3/8 x 12, oil on paper
Courtesy of Diana Sargent

Stuart Shils
A Corner of East Fishtown, 1993
9 5/8 x 11 13/16, oil on paper
Courtesy of Private Collection

Stuart Shils
A Dark Side Street, 1992
7 3/8 x 11 1/2, oil on paper
Courtesy of Private Collection

Stuart Shils
Alley Near Schmidt's Brewery, 1994
10 5/8 x 11, oil on paper
Courtesy of Stuart Shils

Stuart Shils
Construction Near Delaware Avenue, 1993
11 1/8 x 11, oil on paper
Courtesy of Ben Mangel

Stuart Shils
Delaware Avenue with a Red Truck, 1992
8 7/8 x 11 3/8, oil on paper
Courtesy of Stuart Shils

Stuart Shils
Demolition on North American Street, 1993
11 7/16 x 9 7/8, oil on paper
Courtesy of Diana Kingman

Stuart Shils
Grey's Ferry and Federal Streets, 1991
7 1/4 x 10 5/8, oil on paper
Courtesy of Private Collection

Stuart Shils
Mellon Bank Tower, 1992
9 1/4 x 8 3/4, oil on paper
Courtesy of Stuart Shils

Stuart Shils
Nocturne, 1992
8 1/8 x 10 1/2, oil on paper
Courtesy of Stuart Shils

Stuart Shils
Nocturne Over Manayunk, 1985
7 1/2 x 14, oil on paper
Courtesy of R. Hiteshew and D. Panzer Collection

Stuart Shils
Old Warehouses with Stack, 1993
10 3/4 x 11 1/8, oil on paper
Courtesy of Stuart Shils

Stuart Shils
The Relic Still Afloat, 1993
8 1/2 x 12 1/2, oil on paper
Courtesy of Mangel Gallery

Stuart Shils
Urban Ruins, 1994
10 5/8 x 10 5/8, oil on paper
Courtesy of Stuart Shils

Height precedes width, all dimensions in inches

Sordoni Art Gallery

Barry Roal Carlsen • Douglas Safranek • Stuart Shils