

Roger Shepard, *Untitled (notebook)* 2003, ink wash and graphite on paper, 5.5" x 14" opened



SURPRISE RESULTS

by Jeanette Fintz

Reading Space: The Work of Roger Shepard at A.D.D. Gallery

"The places we have known do not belong only to the world of space on which we map them for our own convenience. None of them was ever more than a thin slice, held between the contiguous impressions that compose our life at that time. The memory of a particular image is but regret for a particular moment; and houses, roads, avenues are as fugitive, alas, as the years."

-*Swan's Way* by Marcel Proust

Roger Shepard's drawings, prints, paintings, and books, combine the coolness of a minimalist vocabulary with a warmer emotional engagement with his subject. Simply put,

and somewhat understated, this subject is the envisioning of spatial possibilities based on the model of architecture. In an installation of work that spans 20 years, and is as aware of spatial nuance as the work it displays, we are invited to share moments in Shepard's journey of discovery, and are rewarded by witnessing the unfolding of his primary obsession.

For the most part, the works cannot really be described as constructing spaces in a concrete, dimensional way. The few exceptions are beautiful small paintings made of wood, often including aluminum or steel plates. Assembled to create a compacted grid structure, they are actually more instructively read as reliefs. These pieces introduce Shepard's basic building units, the rectangle and the square, which he then proceeds to slice, dice, twist and distend, and dissolve in the ether of reverie. It is this quality of reverie and its relation to Shepard's other vocation, that of author, that points to the emergence of a unique visual metaphor.

Shepard has recently completed two books on architecture: *The Structures of Our Time, 31 Buildings that Changed Modern Life*, and *The Skyscraper; The Search for an American Style 1891-1941*. The work in this show is evidence that his process of thought, his writing and making art have coalesced. The casualness of his additions and deletions to prints and drawings in sanguine chalk and white gouache, and the unaffected expository nature of his line, link the acts of writing and drawing as both having direct access to thought.

When he puts down a few lines, Shepard is thinking in three dimensions, most often in an overview of space called a plan view. His lines are typically extracting something from the given page, not merely putting something on it. The sense of tangible page space is introduced well in his prints whose slightly mottled tinted fields of mauves or grays create an atmosphere containing implicit density.

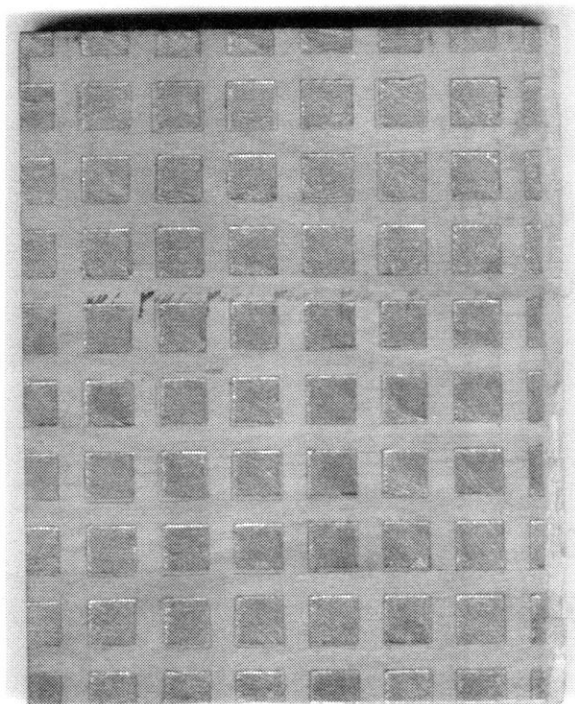
Looking at a plan view, we see the outline of a dimensional space, one floor at a time. We may also see the entire building, its topmost features delineated, as well as its outer contour or footprint. An architect can look at the plan for each level or floor, and know how it sequences to the floor below. In an exploded plan, you can see the building literally in slices, like an etagere, in series of open floors.

Shepard's etching, "Untitled 2000" in ink and gouache on two adjacent pages of rice paper, reveals his thought process, showing a ghostly rectangular image still visible from underneath the blank left page, turned face-down. This image again appears in more solid but altered form on the right page, with the application of white gouache both extending and deleting some of its edges. This piece offers tantalizing possibilities that unite the concept of time, and the function of memory, to architecture, and the concept of narrative.

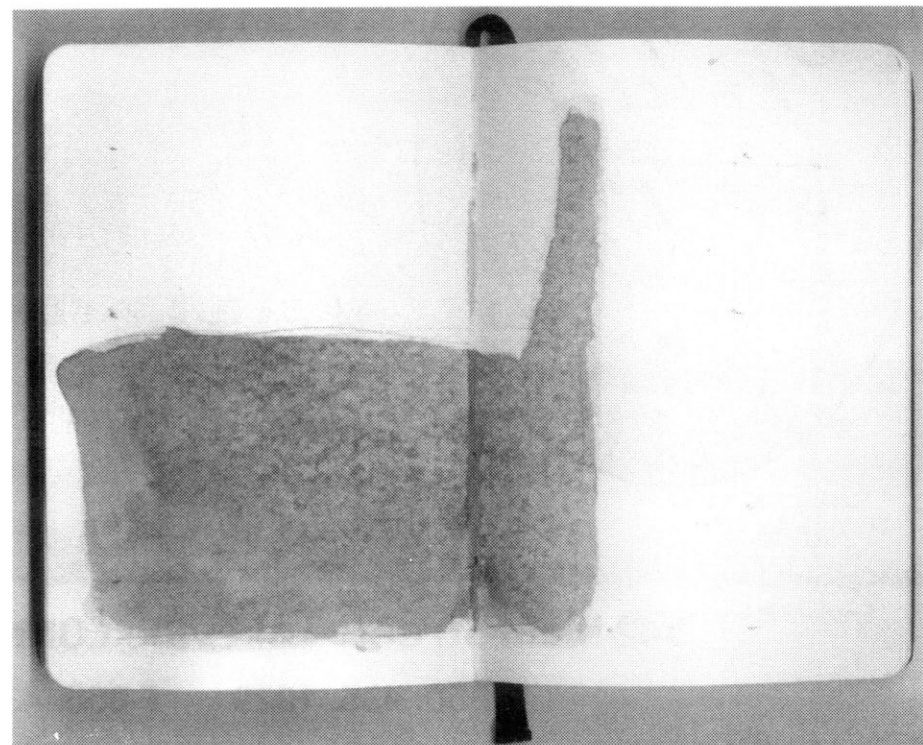
Some delightful word-play comes to mind: Artists use the phrase "reading the space" to describe the process of discovering an artist's distinctly right brain series of instructions on how to move around: the word "story," a synonym for "floor" to describe a spatial level; and history, a sequence of events united by memory of facts, which, having taken place *in* time, are only actually able to be perceived from the limited vantage point of the present.

On the open pages in Shepard's notebooks, the memory of the past may linger and the mystery of the future sit potent but impenetrable. We are confronted with an actual present, which is fixed momentarily, for as evidence suggests, it is ever open to re-vision.

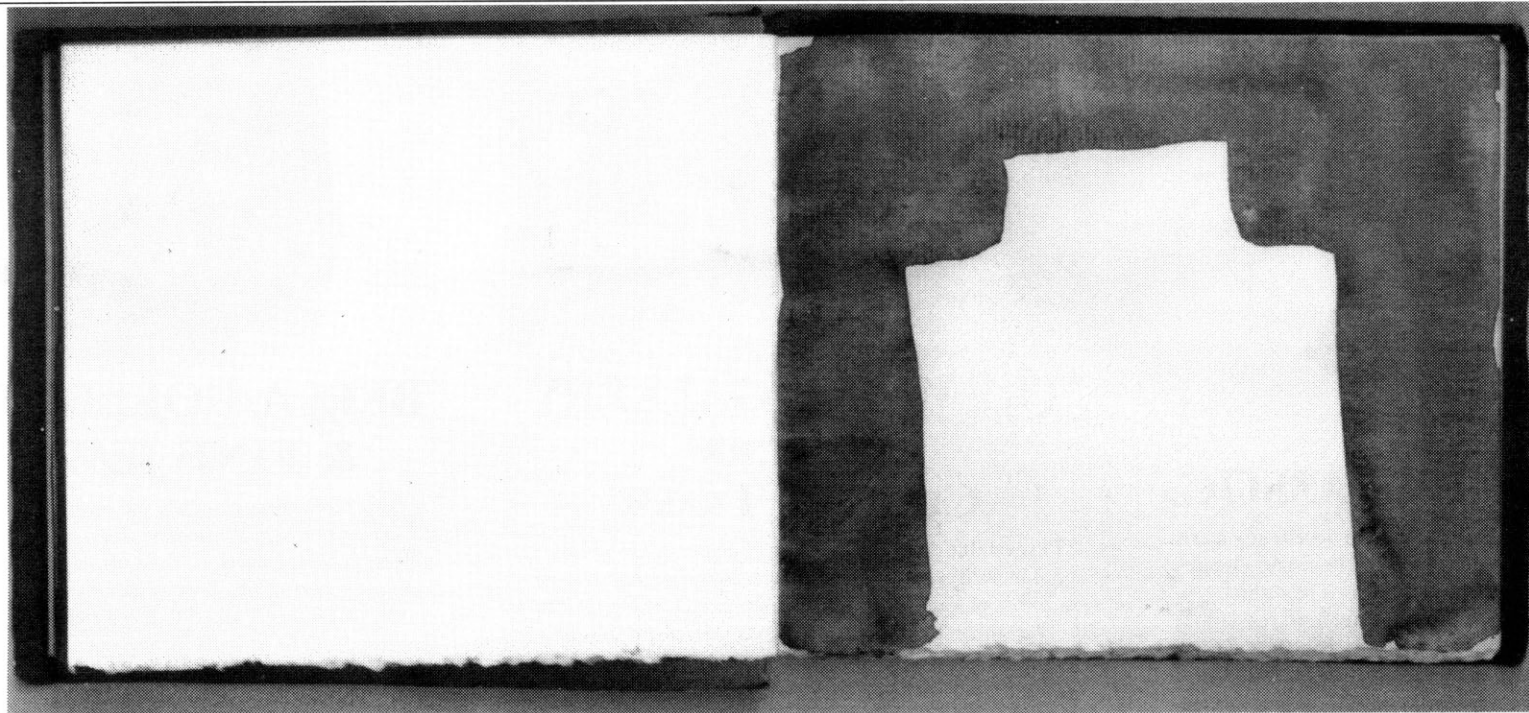
Sealed inside glass frames, the content of his books is unknown except for the one tier of open page. What is hidden engages our imagination. The bookbindings appear as dark edges at the base level of the book, or relief, if you will.



Roger Shepard, *small painting/relief*, wood aluminum and steel



Roger Shepard, *Untitled (notebook)* 2003, ink wash and graphite on paper, 5.5" x 7" opened



Roger Shepherd, *Untitled (notebook)* 1983, ink wash on handmade paper, 5" x 11" (opened)

These dark values are echoed on the top facing pages, in ink washes of geometric shapes in sepias and umbers. The washes are tactile and often seem to have emerged naturally from the page, often appearing to seep out from the central fold.

In "Untitled notebook" (8.5x13, 2003), the loosely notched rectangular shape in golden brown ink, contradicts the actual frontal binding seam, perhaps like a shadow falling, perhaps as a revision of the view given. An additional ink line appears at the right edge, making a new closure, creating a subtle tension by suggesting an asymmetrical, oblique view of the original position.

The organic warmth of these washes that are architectural, yet malleable and evanescent, recalls a passage in *Swan's Way*. It is a loving description of the church floor at Combray that Shepherd, an avid reader, may have found inspirational. "Its memorial stones were themselves no longer hard and lifeless matter, for time had softened them and made them flow like honey beyond their proper margin, here oozing out in a golden stream, washing from its proper place, a florid Gothic capitol."

Two notebook pieces in particular encapsulate Shepherd's use of the book form as architectural model, and as a receptacle of memory in three dimensions. The first is a Japan-fold notebook from 2003, which is 5.5x14—partially opened. It consists of four visible panels, with the third forming a sort of shallow bridge between the beginning flap of the book and the bulk of the pages, which are piled underneath the fourth.

The long, narrow shape implies a narrative structure and a non-Western approach to reading space and time; That is, one that is not fixed by a single perspective. A long, sepia ink wash, T-shaped like a kimono sleeve, appears to run across all four pages, except that the fold in structure links two non-contiguous pages. This crevice is mysterious, being a physical

fold, like a wall, and also like a warp in time. It is a structural re-vision, that also implies the elliptical and subjective connections the mind makes in the act of remembering, and, in the activities of both reading and creating.

The other notebook piece seems to elucidate quite the opposite, more Western view of space/time. "Untitled notebook," 1983, (ink wash on homemade paper, 5x11), once again shows the ghost of a line-drawn shape, face down in the center of the left page. It sits inside an outer square and its contour is pulled to each side of the square in a curve that resembles a window curtain or a proscenium. This same shape is carved out of the right-hand page by a gray ink wash surrounding bare paper, so it is a negative shape in parallel location to the one on the previous page. The shape flip-flops so that it can be read as both a window view *into* the book, implying point-of-view and dramatic revelation, as well as a *top* view of a solid shape extruded from the space.

Proust's description of the church steeple at Combray opens the way again into Shepherd's visual poetry. At one moment it looked like a golden brown sunlit loaf and "thrust its sharp point into the blue sky." Then, at the close of the day it was soft and gentle, "it looked as if it had been thrust like a brown velvet cushion against the pallid sky which had yielded beneath its pressure, had hollowed slightly to make room for it and had correspondingly risen on either side."

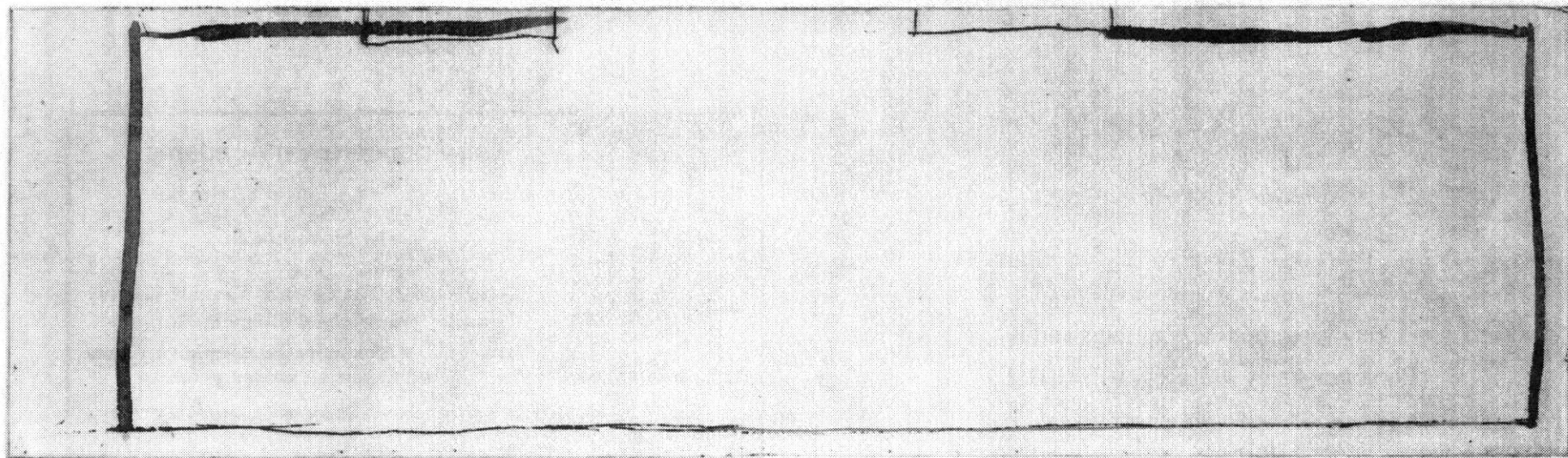
The steeple seems to be ever changing its contours, and to be reappearing and sought -after from many vantage points. It is a unifying thread of constancy and structure in memories of Combray, as much because of its many variations in appearance, as for its omnipresence and stability. Coming upon another steeple, in another town, and seeing it lift the peak of its "ecclesiastical cap;" he sees "some dim resemblance to that dear and vanished outline." But he knows, even

as he turns toward it, that the goal really only exists within himself.

Roger Shepherd's elegant and deceptively simple works are that rare find, complete metaphors, exposing their secrets in plain view for those who choose to discover them. In his works, he joins narrative and architectural concerns using a visual language that enables them to live both in the physical world and in the realm of possibility and imagination.

Roger Shepherd's exhibition will be on view at A.D.D Gallery, 22 Park Place, Hudson, NY, until November 9. Gallery hours are Friday, Saturday, Sunday 12-5 or by appointment. For information contact Jefferson Snider 518-822-9763

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Roger Shepherd, *Untitled*, 1998, ink over etching 8.75" x 19" paper size