

James Stephens at Oakland University Art Gallery

Art in America, April, 2008 (Work Sample #3)

James Stephens came of artistic age in Detroit in the early 1980s, just after the first tsunami of deindustrialization hit the city, leaving a ruined landscape in its wake. He moved to Chicago in 1990, but his paintings have retained a sense of trauma. This midcareer survey offered an opportunity to track their evolution. The prevailing esthetic in Detroit when Stephens was emerging was a form of bricolage incorporating local remains--factory castoffs, household detritus and other debris--into gritty works of assemblage. He substituted finely crafted renderings of devastation for the standard collaged junk.

His early painting *Book Building* (1985) is surrounded by a massive frame painted a dull, pale industrial green, its otherwise smooth surface distressed by scoring and pitted rust-colored patches. Here the sooty Beaux-Arts façade of a landmark skyscraper rises up from the scorched earth under an impastoed lead-colored sky that appears heavy with particulates.

Work created after Stephens's relocation to Chicago features Detroit imagery less specifically. A Rust Belt sensibility persists in a palette of sulfuric yellows, acid greens and grungy earth tones, punctuated here and there with more intense and artificial colors—an effect that distinguishes his work from earlier images of urban disaffection, such as those of the *Ash Can School*. *Winter Vista* (1992), for example, presents a bleak panorama of rooftops. In the foreground, an urn-shaped architectural ornament, a redbrick chimney and a TV antenna bend toward the picture plane as if registering an explosion that has generated black-and-brown clouds in the distance.

Later works reflect broader influences, in particular Midwest regionalism, in landscapes of Manifest Destiny gone sour. In paintings depicting small manufacturing cities such as Hammond and Hobart, Ind., John Steuart Curry's bucolic vision morphs into a cyberpunk dystopia. Images portray life lived off the grid, *Blade Runner*-style, in a wilderness of desolate brownfields where idled equipment is slowly reclaimed by nature.

The most recent paintings, *Topsy Turvy* (2005) along with *Portrait of Robert* and *Construction Site I* (both 2007), show reconstruction amid the ruins. According to Stephens, who is quoted in the catalogue, this suggests a new optimism. And yet *Portrait of Robert*—with its shirtless, statuesque figure who looks almost pasted onto the foreground, running a vacuum cleaner among wreckage awash with toxic pink—can just as easily be read as a metaphor of the artist as a modern-day Sisyphus, striving to rehabilitate a hopelessly broken world with meticulously executed works of art.