

Peeping Ed

Watching Hopper watch **BY R.C. BAKER**



Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Maybe I am not very human. What I wanted to do," Edward Hopper once explained, "was to paint sunlight on the side of a house." A telling observation from an artist whose characters are as enigmatically motivated as the gumshoes and dames in a Raymond Chandler novel. A mini-blockbuster, "Hopper Drawing," at the Whitney Museum, delves into the painter's working methods, presenting hundreds of drawings that provide clues to how he created the rarefied selection of canvases also on view, undoubtedly the best painting show in town.

First, a bit of Yankee surrealism: On one sheet of paper the teenage Hopper (1882–1967) drew a sleek bullet, a toy cow, and—upside-down and seemingly hanging from the top of the page like a light fixture—a matchbox in a metal holder. Other studies show through from the back of the page, revealing that Hopper, who grew up in Nyack, New York, was both thrifty with materials and precociously aware of shading, volume, and mood in a multi-part composition.

Like Georges Seurat a generation before, Hopper drew and drew and drew, pushing

beyond his exceptional academic talent into a profound modernity. Few images—whether in cinema, street photography, or any other medium—capture the hectic isolation of the American psyche between the world wars better than a Hopper cityscape. Even when there are no figures, Hopper implies drama waiting in the wings.

Curator Carter E. Foster's insightful layout joins two of Hopper's most famous compositions as pendants: the deserted Seventh Avenue block of two-story shops in *Early Sunday Morning* (1930) and the die-hard diner patrons of *Nighthawks* (1942). It's not hard to think of Hopper's questioning of his own humanity when you contemplate drawings that give equal graphic attention to the shiny curves of a coffee urn and the soda jerk's hunched posture. The blocky façades of *Early Sunday Morning* morph into a gloomy backdrop for *Nighthawk's* modernist wall of glass, a luminous chevron pitched at an increasingly dynamic slant as the artist's sketches progress to the final painting.

Hopper's obsessions traveled with him on vacations to Cape Cod. In 1945's *Rooms for Tourists*, you can almost hear soft voices wafting through the screens of the syncopated dark and bright windows of

Coffee urns. And humans, too: Hopper's *Study for Nighthawks*

the rooming house. Triangles of light serenate the shadowy lawn; emphasizing the voyeuristic viewpoint, the top of the gable is cropped as if seen through a window. One biographer noted that when Hopper was working on the canvas, "he used to go almost every night in his car and park near the house and study it." The artist's dealer added, "The people in the house wondered what it was all about."

Hopper saw life as a stage, one in which lighting defined setting, character, plot, and script. In *Office at Night* (1940), we observe a secretary at a filing cabinet glancing at a document on the floor as her seated boss examines papers under a desk lamp. Or are they investigators rifling the joint, seeking clues in an ugly divorce case? Who knows what that missive on the carpet (which appears in none of the preliminary studies) and the bright trapezoid of streetlight bonding these nocturnal operatives is meant to imply—our vantage point is high, suggesting a fleeting peek from an elevated train. The only certainty is Hopper's tight-rope-walking composition, its intersecting diagonals and torqued planes worked out

through successive drawings that ratchet up the visual tension.

The exhibition includes 52 drawings for the masterful *New York Movie* (1939), and you can watch Hopper's careful reportage—here is how the theater's chairs are arranged; this is the way the curtains to the balcony are tied—shift into what he termed his "improvisations," disparate elements combined into forthright, if mysterious, fictions. The copious studies follow Hopper's eye around the grand space, capturing a balustrade here, a lighting sconce there, until he finally settles on a blond usherette in an indigo, quasi-military outfit. While on duty, these young women were forbidden to watch the film, and Hopper isolates her existential reverie at stage right, behind an ornate column. Neither she nor we can see more than a hint of the silver screen. Hopper's genius lies in discovering that the main attraction is found in the hush between the scenes.

Cecily Brown

Gagosian Gallery
980 Madison Avenue
212-744-2313, gagosian.com
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Despite big, roaring brushstrokes, the figures in Cecily Brown's smudgy new canvases never arrive anywhere.

In a repeated trope, various characters thrust out an arm, a clunky spatial device that Brown's flabby draftsmanship utterly deflates. In the 7-foot-wide *All the Nightmares Came Today* (2012), individuals cavort with tone-deaf body language, their pale shapes checkerboard-flat against a dark ground. Brown apparently labors under the misapprehension that indistinct limbs and countenances imply movement; she surely missed the art-history class that revealed Francis Bacon's exhilarating search for that sudden glimpse where the human form may not be wholly comprehended but its weight as animated meat—and our mortal kinship with its depiction on the canvas—is deeply experienced.

Brown's overwrought compositions offer little graphic excitement, her colors alternately bland and noisy. By way of contrast, the crowd scenes in a Bob Thompson painting seethe with messy humanity conjured through assured placement of blank yellow faces or flat orange appendages against richly colored grounds. Despite their scale (two are more than 14 feet across), Brown's groupings feel timid by comparison.

The advantage that great painting—figurative, expressionist, abstract, take your pick—has over other mediums is what Frank Stella termed "working space," a fusion of form, texture, scale, color, and application, which gives even his notorious Black Paintings (as well as Morris Louis's graceful runnels of pigment) a tangible presence that entwines itself physically, mentally, and emotionally with the viewer. For all Brown's energetic smears, her work lacks passion, carnality, or smarts. To quote Gertrude Stein, that connoisseur of the ambiguously palpable from Cézanne to Picasso: "There is no there there."