

Sherry Camhy: Drawing It All Together

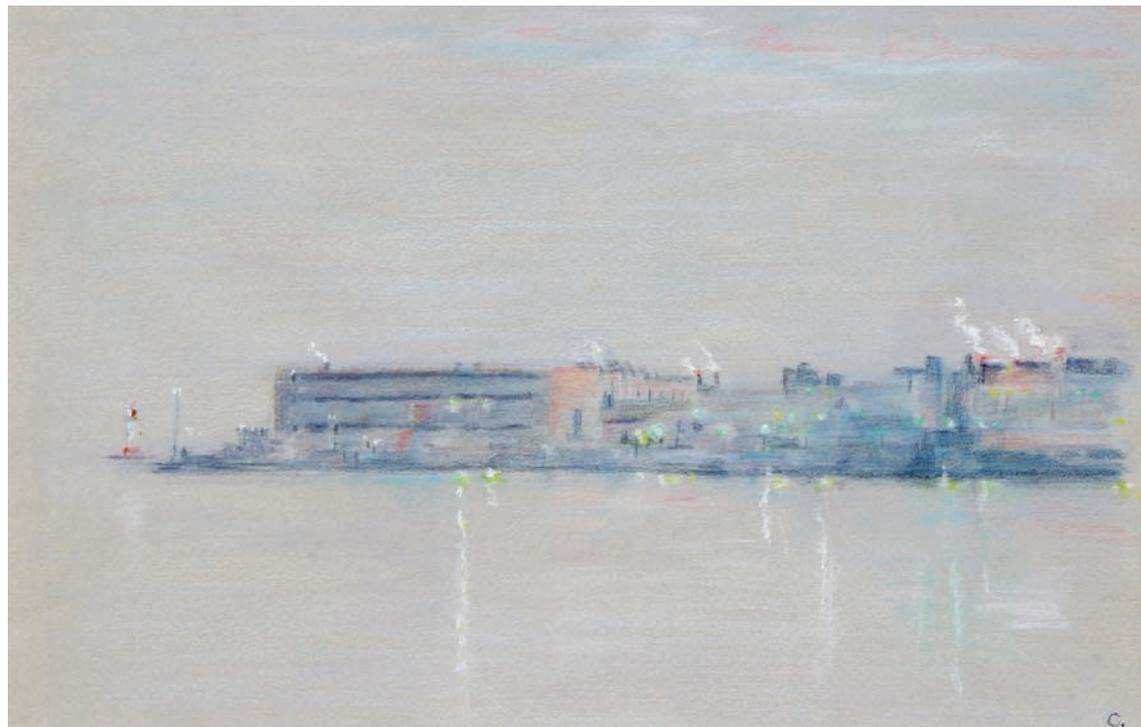
By MATTHIAS ANDERSON



As a child growing up in Brooklyn, the artist Sherry Camhy (b. 1940) was “often sent to bed early by my parents because all I ever wanted to do was draw.” Some things never change: On a dusky evening in 1991, Camhy was driving across the Tappan Zee Bridge from New Jersey to New York when she glimpsed the massive General Motors assembly plant twinkling on the shore of the Hudson River. As there was no traffic coming behind her, she pulled over and began to sketch this atmospheric scene. “Suddenly,” Camhy recalls, “police cars were all around me. They thought I was going to jump. I explained that I was an artist — but they still made me move on.”

Fortunately, Camhy usually draws in calmer locations, most often her studio in the Chelsea district of Manhattan and her home in the aptly named suburb of Pleasantville. Given her lifelong passion, it makes perfect sense that she now keeps busy teaching drawing and anatomy at leading New York City institutions, including the School of Visual Arts, Art Students League, New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts, and New York Academy of Art.

It was not always thus. Camhy earned her BA at Adelphi University on Long Island and her MA in art education at Columbia University, but did not think her life as a wife and mother would



GENERAL MOTORS PLANT

1991, WATER-SOLUBLE PASTEL PENCILS AND SOFT PASTEL ON PAPER, 14 x 18 IN.

COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST



allow her to pursue a career in art after graduation. As it so often does, fate intervened: “A forest stood behind my home until a builder began to clear the land. The noise was unbearable, so I used that as an excuse to do what I really had wanted to do all along: go back to art school.” In 1982, Camhy found herself learning the anatomy necessary to face the challenge of drawing the human body accurately — not from a book, but by dissecting cadavers alongside future doctors at NYU’s School of Medicine.

This intensive experience launched her into a phase of *atelier* studies and workshops. The list

SUNSET

2005, PIGMENT AND PASTEL ON BLACK PAPER, 60 x 120 IN.

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INNOCENCE

2004, SILVERPOINT ON GREY CLAY BOARD, 46 x 35 IN.

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as Corot and Cézanne, she also frames the challenge in the context of her own experience: “When I was beginning to study art, I was told to learn drawing before learning painting. After years of working with both pencil and brush, I discovered how much I disagreed with that premise. To my surprise, painting helped my first love, drawing, partly because both deal with the concepts of values, edges, massing, light, planes, and composition. Sometimes I draw with my brush; more often, I paint with my pencil, but I am always trying to communicate something important to me to you.”

Even today, the openness of Camhy’s views is rare in studio education, which may partly explain why her book — long out of print — has become so collectible. This openness can be seen clearly in Camhy’s own artworks, which range widely in media, manner, and subject. She is best known for deft drawings of nude models, who — whether they are male or female, old or young, fit or flabby, living or sculpted — are presented with unblinking honesty and total respect. Even when genitalia or breasts are elaborated, Camhy always sidesteps the eroticism or vulgarity that can distract viewers of other artists’ nudes.

MANY AVENUES EXPLORED

In light of her familiarity with anatomy, it is hardly surprising that Camhy is also an expert portraitist, able to capture both the physicality of sitters and the psychological insights that make their likeness breathe.

Yet her oeuvre extends beyond people, with particular success in the depiction of skies studded with clouds, stars, and even galaxies, and of landscapes in the Hudson River Valley — including that General Motors assembly plant Camhy once spotted from the bridge. Still another concentration is still life, some almost surrealist in their melancholy

of those who have taught or supervised her is glittering and includes Caesar Borgia, Harvey Dinnerstein, Thomas Fogarty, Eliot Goldfinger, Daniel Greene, Robert Beverly Hale, Ted Seth Jacobs, Ethel Katz, David A. Leffel, Thomas Locker, Odd Nerdrum, Charles Reid, and Burton Silverman. The superb drawings that Camhy produced under some of these teachers could not be overlooked, and by the mid 1990s she was invited to teach her fellow students.

PAINTING WITH HER PENCIL

Although she also paints in oils and occasionally sculpts, drawing is at the center of Camhy’s practice: “In the computer age,” she notes, “there is something pure about the beauty of an image created with a simple pencil.” What amounts to her manifesto on this subject, *Art of the Pencil: A Revolutionary Look at Drawing, Painting, and the Pencil*, was published by Watson-Guption in 1997. In this step-by-step manual, Camhy shows her artist-readers how to bring painterly tonal and textural effects to their drawings in graphite, colored pencils, charcoal, pastels, and other chalk-based and wax media.

Although Camhy acknowledges in her book the crucial contributions made by such historical masters

LIGHT AND ILLUSION — METAPHOR
2005, GRAPHITE ON BLACK PAPER, 33 x 54 IN.
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST





MARTY'S FATHER
2002, PENCIL ON PAPER, 30 x 40 IN.
PRIVATE COLLECTION

More of her achievements in this arena will be seen soon in the exhibition *The Luster of Silver: Contemporary Metalpoint Drawings*, on view from June 28 through September 13 at the Evansville Museum of Art in Indiana. (A version of this show was presented at Savannah's Telfair Museum of Art in 2006.)

Still more of Camhy's work can be enjoyed on March 7, when she and most of the artists working at 526 West 26th Street in Chelsea will open their studio doors to the public. And later this year, a chapter about her art will appear in the new book *Classical Drawing*, produced by Sterling Publications

in conjunction with The Art Students League of New York. In all cases, details can be found on Camhy's website.

arrangement of skulls, animal skeletons, or broken dolls. Whether she is working from observation or imagination, Camhy's choices of subject or composition always hint at her presence: We never see the motif as if through a camera, but rather through her passionate and frankly unconventional eye.

Camhy reveres the ancient technique of metalpoint, in which artists draw with a stylus containing a pointed tip of silver, gold, brass, platinum, copper, or aluminum. Once the mark is made, it is difficult to alter, and thus these drawings have traditionally been smaller in size and meticulously linear in effect. In keeping with her belief in the interdependency of drawing and painting, Camhy is fascinated with the soft, atmospheric gradations of tone that silverpoint can produce in large-scale, painterly images. This is evident in her much-acclaimed depiction of a nude boy, *Innocence*, which measures 46 by 35 inches.

The diversity of Camhy's oeuvre reflects not only her longstanding interdisciplinarity, but also her belief — as an educator no less than as an artist — that “if you focus on the success or failure of each piece of work you create, it will get in the way of learning.” Indeed, her accomplishments in so many formats underscore Camhy's lifelong love of learning, even as they stem from it. ■

MATTHIAS ANDERSON is a contributing writer to *Fine Art Connoisseur*.

ROAD SERIES — EVENING FOG
2004, GRAPHITE ON BLACK PAPER, 30 x 70 IN.
COLLECTION MR. AND MRS. JEFFREY ZWIRN

