

PANORAMIC DRAWINGS ■ Using Line to Show **Volume**

SPRING 2016

# Drawing

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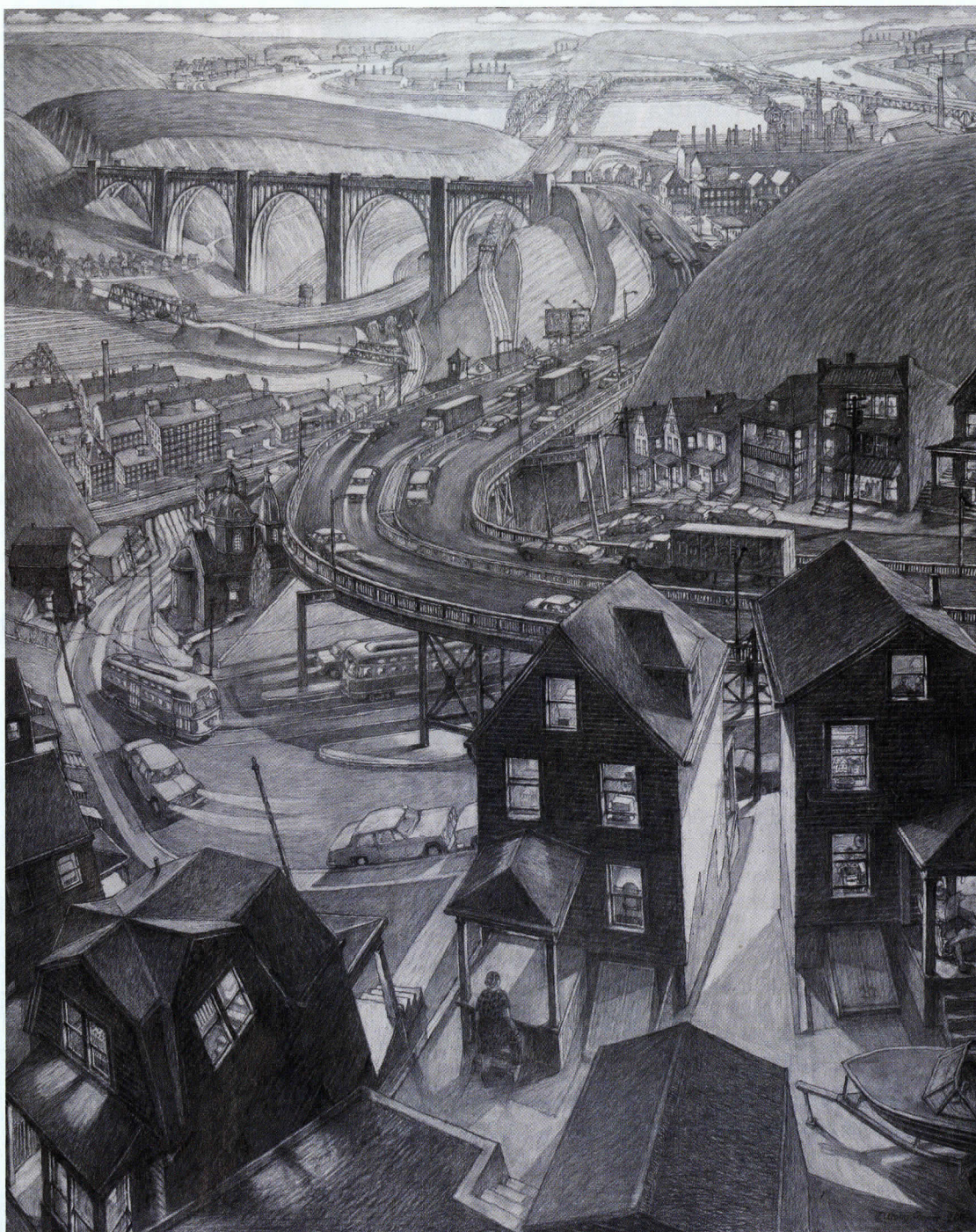
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# SEEING IT ALL

The Wild Rides of  
Douglas Cooper



## Back of Route 30

2015, charcoal on paper  
mounted on board,  
60 x 48.

A Pittsburgh artist happily plays with perspective in order to show us cities, bridges and roads from all angles.

BY JOHN A. PARKS

**T**he drawings of Douglas Cooper plunge us into a wild spatial ride of shifting viewpoints, tilted perspectives and frenetic movement. Urban scenes unfold in an overwhelming cascade of information as they reveal elaborate accounts of buildings, bridges, street plans and vehicles. The richness of this vision is supplemented with historical additions—in some views the artist includes buildings and artifacts that are long gone. Cooper's drawings show us more than we could ever see from a single viewpoint at a single moment in time, his spatial distortions working to clarify information and make it accessible. The results are dizzying and highly entertaining, but they also constitute a profound attempt to connect with and display the world as the artist experiences it.

## DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

Cooper's struggle to find a form to communicate this vision began early in his career. It started with a drawing class given by the sculptor Kent Bloomer while Cooper was studying architecture at Carnegie Mellon University, in Pittsburgh. "He asked that in one drawing we draw everything inside and everything outside the studio in which we were sitting," Cooper says. "As we pursued this fundamentally impossible assignment, he referred us consistently to the work of proto-Renaissance masters such as Lorenzetti and Giotto. The sense of viewing in multiple directions that remains in my work to this day comes from there."

These ideas took Cooper back to a much earlier experience of drawing. "I had a childhood argument with my best friend about how to best draw airplanes," recalls the artist. "I'd drawn mine in perspective, and he'd drawn his in a composite view. I trace two central issues in my work back to that argument. The first derives from my own drawing of the airplane: an interest in a sense of presence—the viewer feels present in the scene. This has led to my use of accelerated perspective in foregrounds. The second issue derives from my friend's drawing: an interest in showing all that there is to see and find. This has led to my using decelerated perspective in middle grounds."

The artist explains that an *accelerated perspective* is one that is experienced when close to a structure, where the perspective lines slope away from the viewer at steep angles. A *decelerated perspective* is one experienced at some distance from an object and results in more flattened angles. Cooper combines the two in order to convey as much information as possible about his scene. "I tend to locate the viewer in the foreground by accelerating its perspective," he says. "Then I tend to lift up the middle ground in a more map-like portrayal, decelerating the perspective. Then I flatten the background, seeing it in elevation."

The artist says that the different spatial handling in foreground, middle ground and background reflects questions the viewer naturally asks as the eye moves through these three zones. The foreground addresses the question "Where am I?" The middle ground addresses the questions "Where will I go?" and "What will I see?" The background provides answers to "Where will I arrive? What is the destination?"

The result of this synthesis is that the viewer feels located in multiple places at once. *Eldridge Street* (page 57), for instance, in the foreground thrusts the viewer into a neighborhood street seen in steep perspective. In the middle ground the Manhattan Bridge and its approach are tilted up toward us, providing a flattened view

**Eldridge Street**

2014, charcoal on paper  
mounted on board, 60 x 48.

that enables us to make sense of the bridge's geography and placement. In the far background the view assumes a lower angle.

Cooper notes that he will often include multiple vanishing points within the foreground, even when drawing two buildings that are close together. "If I move the vanishing point I get you to look at both alternately," he says. "The convergence of lines does not agree, and this also gives a feel of acceleration." Although this strategy employs an optical device, Cooper insists that his drawings are not about optics per se. "It's more about the experience of a viewer who is moving his head and body."

## EMBRACING ANACHRONISM

A further sort of distortion is achieved when Cooper includes a historical building or other landmark that no longer exists in an otherwise present-day view. For instance, his view from Coogan's Bluff, in New York City (page 58), includes the Polo Grounds, a ball-park demolished in the 1960s. Cooper regards this as an appropriate attempt to convey our experience of a place. "It is a fact of urban life, and life in the world generally, that places do not only mean what they now are," he says. "They mean what they are but also what they were. Who can walk along Coogan's Bluff having lived there in the 1950s without thinking of the Polo Grounds? More in civic murals than in these drawings, I have sought out temporal anomalies—not for reasons of nostalgia but for meaning."

The artist is likewise willing to adjust a view to accommodate information that might otherwise be obscured. *Rainbow Room* (page 59), a view of Rockefeller Center, not only restores the old RCA sign—removed in 1969—but removes a number of towers that would have obscured the view to the Queensboro Bridge.

Another feature of Cooper's draw-

ings is their sense of movement, a feeling that lines of force are carrying us in various directions. The buildings and bridges seem animated rather than static. "I am quite conscious of this," says the artist. "It comes in large measure from an element of my teaching in which I have long used exercises from the well-known drawing teacher Kimon Nicolaïdes, who wrote *The Natural Way to Draw*. The most important effect his take on drawing has had on my work has come through his *cross-contour* exercise. He thought of contour not only as the domain of the eye—as a set of overlapping edges that the eye might follow from afar—but equally as the domain of the hand, moving along a surface. After teaching Nicolaïdes' exercises to students year after year, I have found my hand and charcoal strokes following the downward rush of Pittsburgh's slopes or the turning runs of New York bridge viaducts."

## PLANNING AND PENCILING

To achieve such highly elaborate works, Cooper necessarily embarks on considerable research and planning. His recent exhibition at Hirschl and Adler, in New York City, focused on views of New York's bridges and found him following multiple approaches to assembling the required material. "Sometimes I go on-site and sometimes I collect photographs via Google Earth to document the particulars of a bridge," says Cooper. "Then I pause to gather a sense of the bridge's gesture. Does it leap in the manner of the Pulaski Skyway? Does it emerge from the ground in the manner of the A train crossing the 125<sup>th</sup> St. Valley? Does it snake in the manner of the F train crossing the Gowanus Canal? These issues I resolve on transparent paper."

Working with overlays, usually on 11"-x-17" tracing paper, the artist gradually assembles his image. This allows him to adjust features of individual

## MATERIALS

### CHARCOAL

- soft vine charcoal sticks from Winsor & Newton or Grumbacher

### PAPER

- 100%-rag Barrier paper

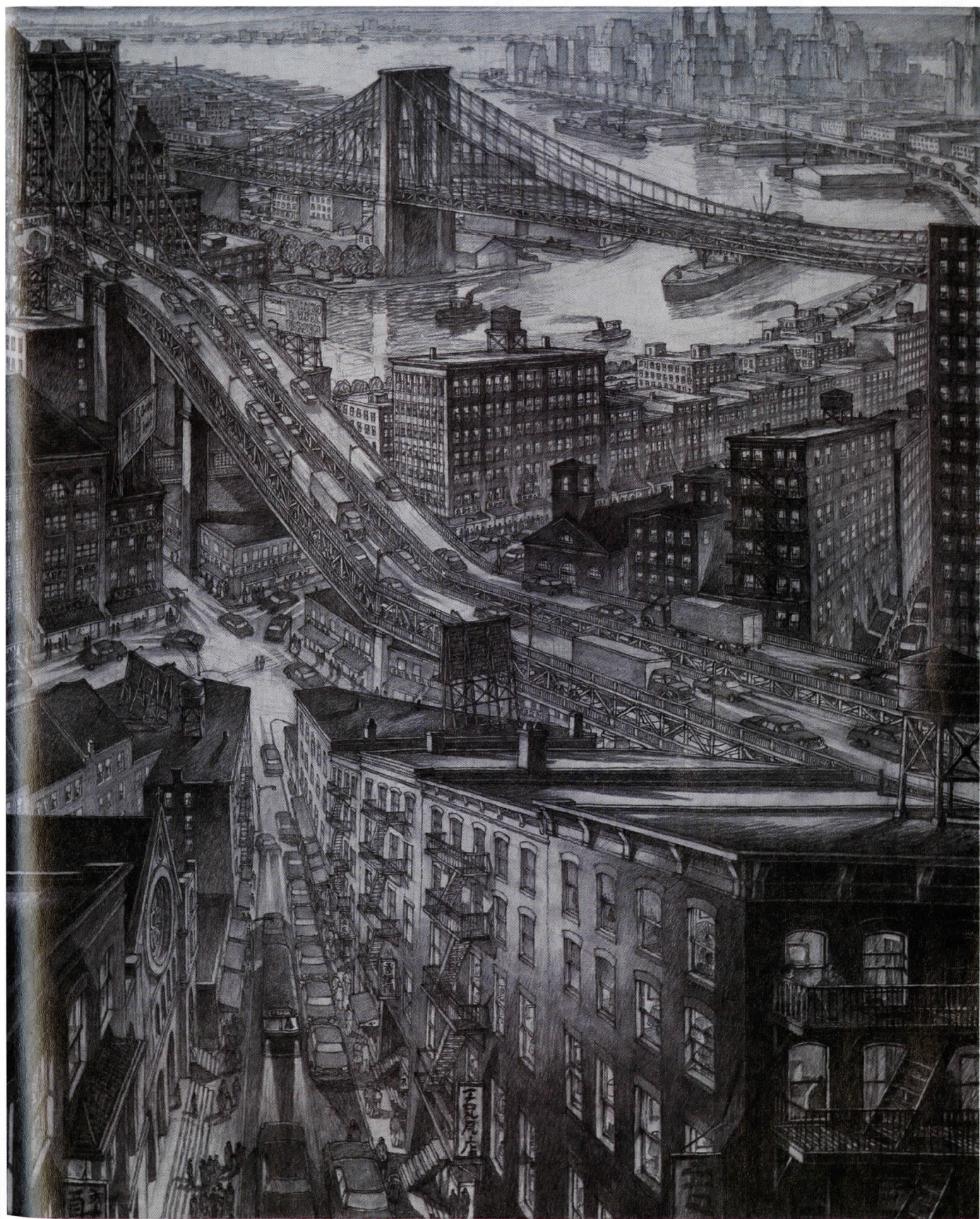
### SUBSTRATE

- medium-density fiberboard, sealed with B-I-N water-based primer/sealer

### OTHER

- charcoal sanding block
- Krylon spray fixative
- Liquitex Gloss Medium & Varnish
- Liquitex Soluvar Varnish











OPPOSITE PAGE

**Coogan's Bluff**

2014, charcoal on paper  
mounted on board, 60 x 48.

RIGHT

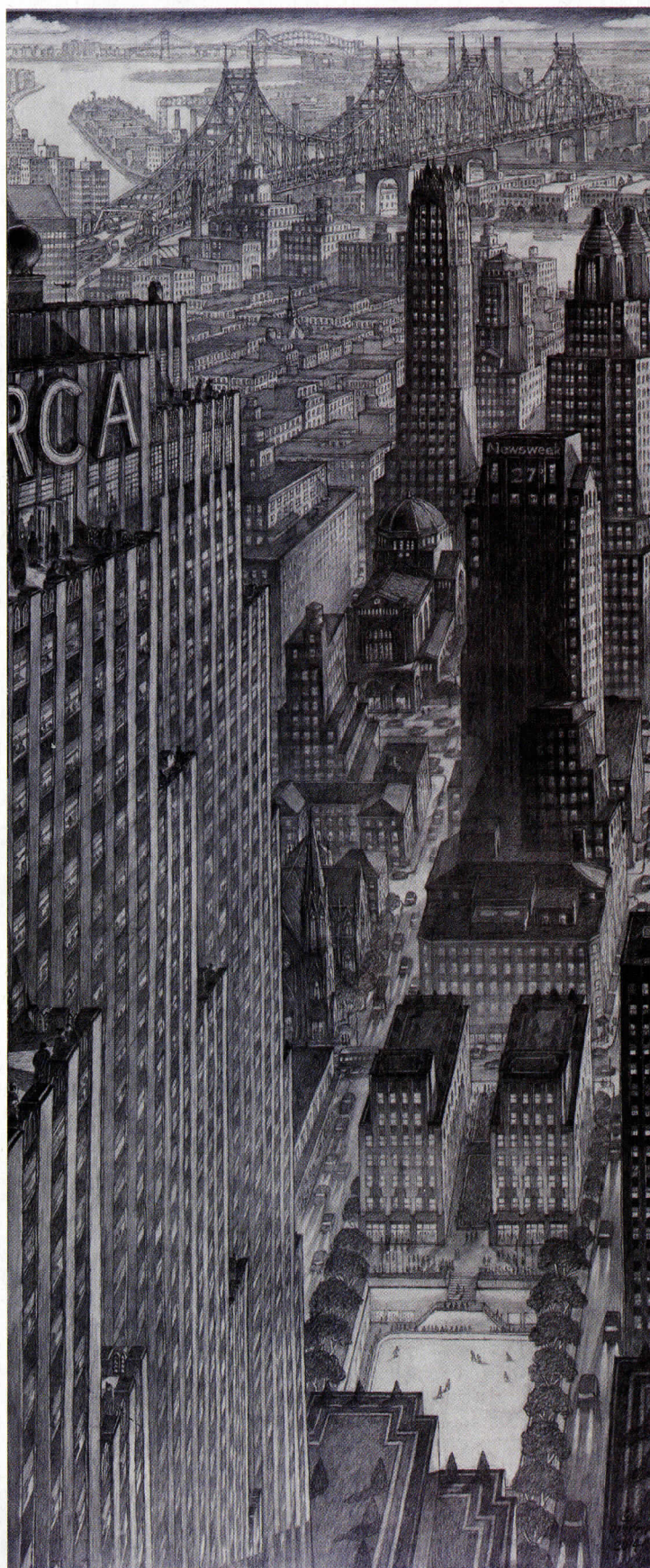
**Rainbow Room**

2014, charcoal on paper  
mounted on board, 72 x 30.

elements and move them around. Sometimes he puts his sketches into Photoshop, where he can easily resize elements and manipulate perspectives. The artist also points out that some buildings are more recognizable from certain angles, which can affect his compositional decisions. "I don't have any set strategy other than asking, 'Does it feel right? Does it look good? Does it arouse my sense of the memory of the place? Does it reflect my sense of the relationships that I've recognized in the place and want to bring out?'"

Once he is satisfied with his composition the artist lays out the drawing in pencil. "Finally, with vine charcoal, I render light and surface," he says, noting that he sharpens his charcoal continually using a sanding block. "A technique I have used for years is to darken frontal surfaces and lighten longitudinal surfaces. I find it yields a sense of the flow of light across surfaces and creates a sense of mystery that is almost cinematic—think of film noir, in which the faces are dark in front and light on their sides."

Cooper's line is varied in weight and retains a sensitivity and warmth that imbues his mechanical and architectural structures with considerable life. He says that he relishes the slightly crooked form of vine charcoal sticks and the element of unpredictability that comes with using them. He holds the stick across multiple fingertips to get more wrist action than he would with a traditional pen





**Crossing the Gowanus on the F Train**

2014, charcoal on paper mounted on board, 48 x 36.



grip. The artist also uses the eraser as a positive drawing tool. "I like to lay in a middle-dark tone and then work an eraser into it," he says. "I use it for the textural feel of movement that it brings. By working marks into a surface I can re-create the feel of light creeping along a surface."

Cooper does not push his darks to a complete black, and because of the considerable amount of charcoal dust he generates, his lights are rarely a pure white. The narrowing of contrast that results from this approach helps to unify the work and to create its unique sense of atmosphere and place.

When Cooper has finished a piece he leaves it sitting around for a week or so before fixing it. "I like to have chance encounters with it for a while just to see if anything strikes me as needing adjustment," he says. Eventually he uses Krylon fixative fairly heavily to seal the piece. Many of his recent drawings have been framed behind glass, but Cooper says he prefers to leave the surface exposed—an approach that has grown from the artist's production of many large-scale murals.

For his murals, Cooper completes a drawing on paper and glues it onto medium-density fiberboard sealed with a water-based primer. The drawing is then fixed with Krylon and painted with up to six coats of Liquitex Gloss Medium & Varnish applied with a brush. Cooper says that if the fixative coat is heavy enough the brushing of the medium does not

affect the charcoal. Once everything is dry he adds a coat of Liquitex Soluvar Varnish, after which the drawing is fully protected and waterproof. "Someone can spill a glass of wine on it and it can be simply wiped off," he says.

## COHESIVE VISIONS

What is most remarkable in looking at a finished drawing by Cooper is how his various strategies of spatial distortion, multiple viewpoints, sense of movement, anachronistic additions and tonal drama work together to create a single, cohesive vision. In *Crossing the Gowanus on the F Train*, for instance, we are shown the railway bridge over the Gowanus Canal, a heavily industrialized part of Brooklyn. The image is dominated by the S-shaped bridge, which rushes away from us with a loopy and exaggerated movement. The foreground of the drawing uses Cooper's signature downward-moving accelerated perspective, which draws us into the buildings and streets under the bridge. The "Kentile Floors" sign is a historical landmark that is now gone. Deeper in space our viewpoint becomes higher, allowing us to see down onto the bridge and the various industrial buildings and equipment that throng the canal banks. In the far distance the buildings of Downtown Brooklyn are seen from a lower viewpoint and appear flat against the sky. Throughout the drawing the artist has darkened the surfaces facing the viewer, giving the work a slightly brooding feel that is entirely in line with the intense and gritty environment it depicts.

The artist provides a wealth of detail for our delectation, such as the complex girder frameworks for the Kentile sign and the knowing architectural renderings. All the forms are rendered with a clarity and directness that makes them easy to comprehend. We experience a pleasant sense that might almost be omnipotence, a feeling that we are seeing everything that's worth knowing about the scene in front of us. It's gratifying, absorbing and great fun. No small achievement. ♦

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

**Douglas Cooper** studied architecture at Carnegie Mellon University, in Pittsburgh. He practiced architecture for a short time before devoting himself to drawing. In addition to numerous gallery exhibitions he has completed a number of large-scale murals, including a 200-foot mural for Carnegie Mellon University Center. He is the author of two books on drawing: *Steel Shadows: Murals and Drawings of Pittsburgh* (University of Pittsburgh Press) and *Drawing and Perceiving: Real-World Drawing for Students of Architecture and Design* (Wiley), now in its fourth edition. His work is represented by Hirschl and Adler Modern, in New York City, and Concept Art Gallery, in Pittsburgh. He lives in Pittsburgh and teaches drawing at Carnegie Mellon University. For more information, visit [andrew.cmu.edu/user/dcooper](http://andrew.cmu.edu/user/dcooper).



