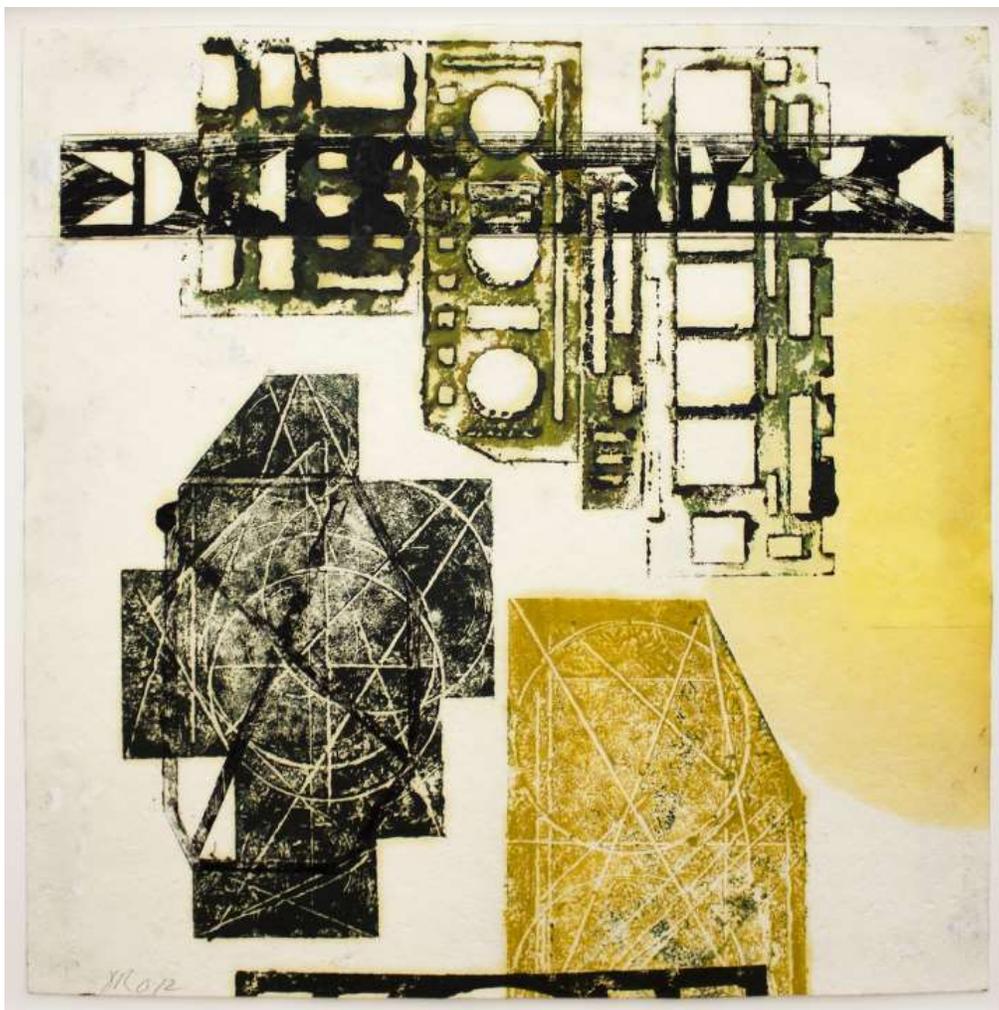


# HYPERALLERGIC

## Ancient Tools for a New Way of Seeing

This is what very good artists are supposed to do: use the past to bring about the present — in David Rabinowitch's case, a visionary one.

By Jonathan Goodman | February 9, 2019



David Rabinowitch, "Untitled (Périgord Construction of Vision)" (2012), wax, crayon, graphite, oil, and oil based ink on paper, 26 x 26 inches (all images courtesy Peter Blum Gallery)

David Rabinowitch was born in Toronto, but since 1972 he has been living in New York, where his artistic output, mostly sculpture and works on paper, has been the source of admiration for those who appreciate craft and the transmission of cultural knowledge in art.

His *Périgord Construction of Vision Drawings*, the series currently on show at the Peter Blum Gallery, on the edge of Chinatown, derives from Rabinowitch's extended experience in the Périgord region in southern France; he has been visiting the Romanesque churches in abundance

there, and has used their physical plan as a source of information — but not as an architectural design to be copied directly, even if these inspired, highly expressive works on paper seem to echo the floor plans of particular buildings.

What happens instead is a body of work that comes near to a religious experience, as effectuated by Rabinowitch's more than considerable skill. Unlike so much art made today, which is regularly overshadowed by the wounds of personal experience (identity art), the artist is determined to render a point of view that has next to nothing to do with his personal life. Instead, the *Périgord Construction of Vision Drawings* take historical culture as their starting point, in a way that foregoes anything we might know about the artist — except for the remarkable achievement of his hand.

Such a process is not deliberately archaic so much as it is cradled by tradition, both in a formal and a conceptual sense. If we have come to a point where personal expressiveness is valued above all else, we should be grateful for Rabinowitch's selfless dedication to a historical presentation memorable for its piety and anonymous construction.



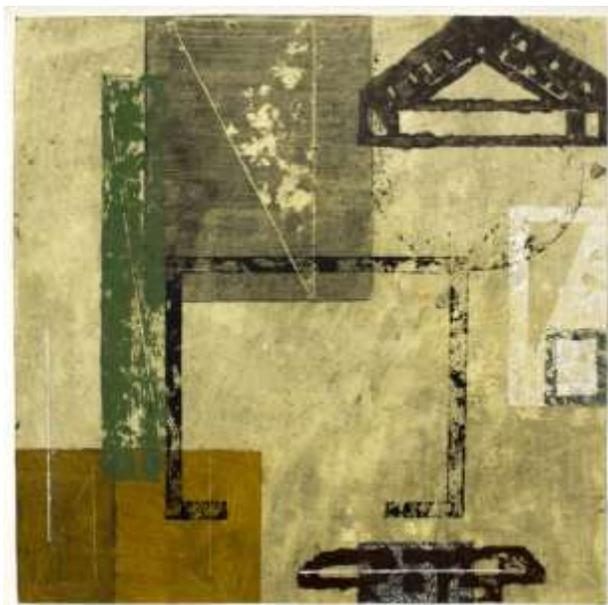
David Rabinowitch, "Untitled (Périgord Construction of Vision)" (2015), beeswax, crayon, oil and oil based ink on paper, 17 x 13 inches

The feelings of devotion in these works on paper is intense, even as they repudiate overly proprietary relations between the artist and his imagery. It is clear, I think, that Rabinowitch had no conscious idea of the implications awaiting him in taking such a stance; like any artist, he did what he did without worrying too much about the consequences. That the artist would devote himself to such an undertaking is moving, whether the emotion is implicit or formally transparent.

Given our exquisite awareness of modern and contemporary art history, it is interesting to confront work whose impetus comes from ecclesiastical architecture in the Romanesque style, which was predominant in central and southern France from the 9th to the 12th centuries. But we must remember that Rabinowitch is not a scholar; rather he is an exploratory artist seeking inspiration and a source for original imagery. Brilliantly, he turns a very specific architectural period into a contemporary art language, without sacrificing either.

In “Untitled (Périgord Construction of Vision)” (2015), the work is composed of several different materials: wax, crayon, oil, and oil-based ink. It consists of a circular band with small parallelograms cut into its ringed shape. The yellow background has a small number of triangles outlined on it; the feeling is at once old and new, abstract and figurative. The title treats the work as an abstraction, based on Rabinowitch’s experience but not entirely beholden to it. This work, with its enigmatic circles and triangles, is relatively direct and simple; others are more intricately presented.

Another example from the series, untitled and completed in 2013, strikes me as the best in the show. Its background is a light olive green; on the left side, there are three dark-colored rectangles. In the upper right, we see a black, roof-like structure and, on the lower right, a flat, black table-top structure, while in the middle there are two straight bandings, one white and one black, suggestive of the outline of a building. The relations between the forms are inexact but intuitively convincing.



David Rabinowitch, “Untitled (Périgord Construction of Vision)” (2013), wax, graphite, oil and oil based ink on paper, 19 x 19 inches

The work in this show is especially appealing if we think about the today's generally moribund state of painterly abstraction, whose emotional exuberance might be addictive to people seeking a catharsis. But a catharsis can only last so long; its intensity is matched by the brevity of its duration. In contrast, it can be said that Rabinowitch is an artist who slowly but surely builds a paradigm, two-dimensional to be sure, in which ancient constructions are put in place to effect a very contemporary visual reality.

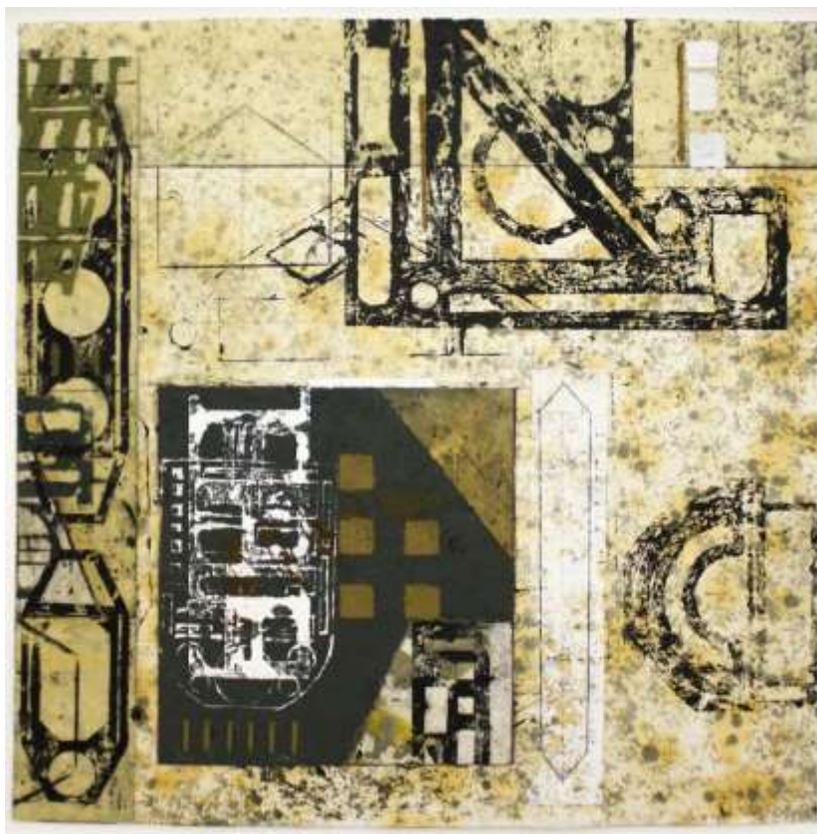
But this is what very good artists are supposed to do: use the past to bring about the present — in Rabinowitch's case, a visionary one. Visionary art is often understood as having sprung, fully formed, from the artist's head, but the truth is that Rabinowitch is a remarkable craftsman who painstakingly constructs his imagery. As a result, another merger exists; the artist uses traditional tools to communicate a new way of seeing.

In art, William Blake is a great example of such a maker; in poetry, we can speak of Percy Bysshe Shelley and William Butler Yeats. All three artists used their access to older culture to build visual and intellectual towers of thought that remain profoundly impressive today.

Stylistically, Rabinowitch cannot be closely tied to these particular examples, but he exists in the midst of a group of artists for whom conventional ideas have failed — and rather than pluck a future esthetic out of the air, out of what has not taken place, he has looked back toward the historical past. That his inspiration here comes from an established Catholicism (we assume from a time when the religion maintained a genuine integrity) strengthens and structures the paintings he has made so well.

In another untitled work on paper, also from 2012, we can see Rabinowitch again reaching a high distinction in craft and vision. The field of the composition is dominated by three major structures: on the bottom, a yellow polygon upon which white lines and circles, like some sort of architectural plan, has been drawn; on left, a complex array of overlapping rectangular black shapes, also with a white design reminiscent of a floor plan; and last, at the top, a series of three dark, vertical templates with openings in all three, which are intersected by a narrower horizontal template, also with openings. There is also a vague yellow patch spilling in from the right side of the composition.

How can this work, like the rest in the show, be justified as truly accomplished? We used to value technical skill by itself, but we must now rely on an intuitive insight informing us that the entirety is greater than the some of the parts. In this work, the parts themselves resonate historically in powerful ways. Culturally, we live in a time when the present moment alone is cultivated; art students cite contemporary artists as influences more than anyone from the past. This has severely diminished our capacity to borrow insights — important ones — that have originated before us. But the bohemian culture behind such an attitude has shown itself to be problematic; the work that begins with Warhol as an influence is necessarily aligned with a superficial present. Something deeper is needed.



David Rabinowitch, “Untitled (Périgord Construction of Vision)” (2012), beeswax, crayon, graphite, oil, oil based ink and collage on paper, 26 x 26 inches

A third untitled work on paper, from 2012 again, is dominated by ghosts of an architectural template — at least that is what they seem to be. In this composition, four templates, each of with openings that do a lot to reduce their mass, occur on top of a variegated white-and-yellow ground. Its historical support informs and structures it, like the rest of the series, in ways that add weight and depth to a sensibility that has been oriented toward deep feeling from the start.

We should not, perhaps, make too much of the past in Rabinowitch’s art, which has been transformed by his hand, compelling the viewer to read it as genuinely new. But what happens previously in culture usually deeply affects what is now being made.

Given the contemporary penchant for an ongoing immediacy, a permanent present tense, work like Rabinowitch’s appears particularly apt for those of us looking for something more than diversion. Perhaps the need to edify is gone, but at a time when young artists are recording their success by tallying the number of hits they receive on Instagram, the traditional legacies Rabinowitch is plumbing can only strengthen his seriousness of purpose. They prove that highly original paintings can still be made through an awareness of the past — a way of looking at things that, sadly, seems to be fading away.

David Rabinowitch: Périgord Construction of Vision Drawings *continues at Peter Blum Gallery (176 Grand Street, Little Italy, Manhattan) through March 9.*