

Introduction to catalogue of

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Works on Paper from Rome and Tivoli

written by Elizabeth McGowan in 2018

Return. It seems a truism that once in Rome, and then elsewhere, you spend your life trying to return to Rome. What does it mean to return? What do we seek there?

Ruins, pines, the frenetic swirl of fountains, of people and traffic, the juxtaposition of new and old, the intense stillness of Roman light. We return to find, among the inevitable changes, that which endures in our memory: the ancient buildings, churches, piazzas, markets, and parks that frame and stage the city for its continuing contemporary life. And perhaps the most familiar constant is the light.

In Wendy Artin's hand a watercolor wash defines the outline of a sunlit stone column. It reveals the hard edge of a Corinthian capital's floral scrolls and seems to draw them out into three dimensions, as if revealed by the exactitude of Roman daylight. The sepia tone of the wash instills a sense of timelessness, a sense that nothing has changed since we were last here. The ruins, ruined long ago, persevere, even if our own human lives have changed profoundly in the years we were gone. What does it take to endure? The word itself incorporates not the Latin word for strength, but for hardness. Wendy is able to capture the durability of Roman brick, and marble, and travertine revealed by Roman light, it seems, with the flick of a fine brush. How does she do it? The realness of her ruins somehow seems like a trick, a *trompe l'oeil*.

And then there are the pines, the umbrella pines that formed backdrops in our memories of Rome during the years that we were away. In Wendy's pictures they crowd the background of a scene of the Roman Forum, where straight cylinders of columns support horizontal lintels, and ribbed domes top churches made up of stacked cubes. The irregular masses of the trees' dark pine branches flow into each other and cascade in a ragged diagonal behind the upright architecture. They seem caught up in muffled hilarity, sneaking behind columns, or scattering like cats at a loud noise. Wendy creates those spreading dark tree tops with a stain of dark color that seems to absorb Roman light to the same degree that her pictures' stone piers reflect it. Branches like the v-shaped arms of caryatids support the arching mass of blurry dark needles. The pale wash at the edge of a treetop suggests an afterimage of movement, of trees in the wind. They seem animate, and perhaps more so when they appear as the supporting cast behind ancient stone ruins. In Wendy's watercolors the present and the past are juxtaposed: dark uneven treetop masses absorb, and hard-edged enduring temples and domes reflect, and are defined by, Rome's constant flood of light.

Wendy saves colors for ephemera: graffiti, stickers and posters on a brick wall, and groceries. Not just any groceries, but plums, cabbages and artichokes from the daily green market outside her apartment in Trastevere. Pale pinks and greens make up the tight buds of early spring peonies, while long eggplants shine with deep purple skins, and dark purple and green form an artichoke. We have seen her paint an artichoke. Her amazing hand pulls water, pigment, and light across textured white paper. The leaves and stalk and ribs appear and disappear, and reappear, as if conjured. But we know they're not conjured. They are painted by Wendy Artin, who has mastered Roman light through watercolor, and is able to convey that feeling of light and shadow so particular to Rome, its ruins, its trees, and even its artichokes. When we leave Rome this time we'll carry with us the sense of light from our time here for a while. But when it fades we'll be reminded of how that light defines, reflects, makes concrete, or is absorbed when we look at Wendy's paintings.

Elizabeth McGowan
Professor of Art
Chair of Art History
Williams College