



© Joseph Sweeney, 1988
 (Photo did not appear in the original article)

● JOE SWEENEY

Joe Sweeney has become known in contemporary realist art circles for his stunning depictions of the landscapes of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware. He has a sharp eye for the beauty of nature,

which he finds in quiet and tranquil scenes showing nature existing in deepest harmony with man. The world for him is a vital and inherently physical place; it is one in which the elements, the forces of nature, seem to manifest themselves in benevolent, and in many instances, highly cultivated forms. As shown in this group of recent landscapes, Sweeney's vision is one that is capable of elevating the quiet drama of nature into a lyrical spectacle, one with profound transcendental overtones of the wholeness of life.

A recurrent theme for Sweeney is the Schuylkill River, which runs through Philadelphia's Fairmount Park. Among his favorite variations are the boathouses built along the river and the rowers who practice there.

Temple Boathouse and *Prize Winners*, both 1988, are revealing of how Sweeney turns his observations of the passing scene into compositions with a majestic timelessness about them. In each of these pastels, he captures the sheer exuberance that comes with being in the great outdoors. The absorption of the rowers in their activity is mirrored by the contemplative air of these images. The panoramic format helps to underscore the rhythmical balance and equilibrium that prevails in the formal relationship of figures to settings. In these works, a moment is stretched into an idealized infinity, as the startling, intense colors of the pastels amplify commonplace impressions. *Drifting*, 1989, another of the pastels featuring a group of single rowers in the river, makes bold use of black in defining tonal structures and thereby adding substance to appearances. In *Yellow Shell*, 1988, one of the small oils displayed here, Sweeney seizes upon the ways in which light illuminates shapes and structures in nature, drawing forth an energy that is reproduced in the work's shimmering surface.

—Ronny Cohen