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ART VIEW/John Russell

Where Little Nothings Turn Into Big Somethings

RIGHT NOW, THE ARTIST'S sketchbook is all over town — at “The Drawings of Anthony van Dyck” at the Pierpont Morgan Library (through April 21), in “Eugène Delacroix,” which opens to the public on Wednesday (through June 16) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and in an innovative exhibition of contemporary “Artists’ Sketchbooks” at the Matthew Marks Gallery on the Upper East Side (through May 4).

And why not? The sketchbook is fundamental to art. For the artist, it functions as accomplice, confidant and co-conspirator. It doubles and trebles as diary, commonplace book and idea bank. And it is a forcing house in which little nothings, set down in a sketchbook, may one day reappear elsewhere as big somethings.

The sketchbook keeps pace with the artist, moment by moment and year by year. When called on to do so, it stays on duty all day and all night, never complaining. It is there to remind, to console and to preserve. It is the looking glass in which a whole lifetime can be called up for consultation. How can we wonder that the artist is rare who can get along without a sketchbook?

For the biographer, likewise, the sketchbook can function as a letter to posterity that has been waiting for the right person to come along and read it. In that context, Degas is a great example, and it is good news that the Morgan Library recently acquired one of his early sketchbooks, done in Rome. It is with Degas as it is with Cézanne — the sketchbooks are indispensable.

One of the great events of the international art world in the mid-1980's was the revelation of the number, the scope, the quality and the historical importance of the sketchbooks in the Picasso estate. Picasso in his sketchbooks was the archetypal diarist. Not only did he put in everything, but when he was all done with the book in question he most often put it away, and went on to the next one. Only rarely does he seem to have looked back.

For this and other reasons it was an awesome experience to go through those sketchbooks, page by page. One of those privileged to do so was a young man called Matthew Marks, who was working at the Pace Gallery in Manhattan when a large group of the sketchbooks was being made ready for a traveling exhibition.

During nearly two years of close work on

the Picasso sketchbooks, he became more and more curious as to the role of the sketchbook in our own day. Would the artists whom he wanted to investigate be open to the idea? What if they saw it as an invasion of privacy? Or would they simply not have any sketchbooks?

No mean persuader, Mr. Marks set to work. One by one, the artists or their heirs said yes. And so it is that the inaugural show in his gallery at 1014 Madison Avenue is of artists' sketchbooks, from Jackson Pollock in 1939 to 1942 and David Smith in 1952 to Louise Bourgeois, Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly, Richard Serra, Carl Andre, Brice Marden, Francesco Clemente and quite a few others. (Nothing is for sale, by the way.)

It makes a fascinating display. Sometimes an informed guess would be proved correct. Once we know that Richard Serra went to Egypt in 1989, it should not surprise us that he tackled the Pyramids in Giza with a stick of charcoal on paper and gave them a simplified but overpowering strength that fairly leaps off the page.

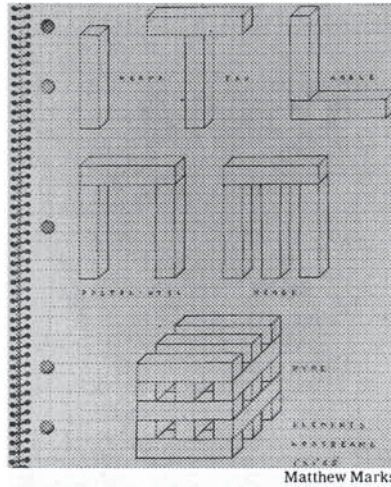
Once we have learned to see many of Robert Ryman's paintings as a duet for metal fasteners, on the one hand, and paint on canvas on the other, we might have foreseen that his sketchbooks would be full of notes about fasteners, and rivets, and the comparative thickness of this or that strip of metal. Those notes have an obsessional quality that is com-

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Matthew Marks

A Clemente sketch—doing anything he wants with the human gaze



Matthew Marks

A page from Carl Andre's
 "Graph Book" (1959-60)

Artists' Sketches

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peeling.

For some years now it has been clear that Francesco Clemente can do anything he wants with the human gaze. But even so we may be startled by the apparent ease and the power of emotional reference that he brings to the face that looks out at us from his sketchbook.

There are also sketchbooks that are in every sense a "portrait of the artist as a young man." In one of them, Ellsworth Kelly, still in his 20's, is seen working in Sanary, in the south of France, on color chords of the kind that were to give him a permanent place in the history of art.

In the other, Carl Andre, every day of 24 years old, is already in complete command of both the material (the wood beam, measuring 1 foot by 1 foot by 5 feet) and the simplified but monumental forms that bring sculpture to a point of ultimate and sturdy reduction.



And then there is a sketchbook by John Chamberlain in which the ideas suddenly jump into the third dimension and sit around outside the edges of the book. "These too are sketches," the artist seems to say, as tiny twists of cigarette packs (Gauloise, Camel, Lucky Strike) take on an unmistakable Chamberlain look. We even feel that when our backs are turned they might flatten themselves out and scramble back inside the book.

This is in every way an imaginative exhibition. It is also a lot of fun. In many cases, by the way, the pages on view will be changed every Wednesday. □