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Craig McPherson and Pittsburgh Industry

Since the 1970s, when a National Endowment for the Arts project took him to the “tough little smelter town” of Anaconda, Mont., Craig McPherson has been fascinated by industrial and urban themes. He renders them in a realist style that is both detailed and atmospheric, powerfully capturing the unusual beauties typical of these sprawling sites.

For more than two decades, McPherson, who first visited Pittsburgh in 1982, has been inspired by the immense structures in a region synonymous with steel. Continuing the tradition of the many historical artists who have taken this industry as their major subject, he has portrayed the dramatic spectacle of heavy manufacturing, and recalls vividly the first time he saw the flames and sparks of a mill in full production light the sky a brilliant orange on a cold winter night. McPherson discovered in the mills “a wealth of

images for someone with a fondness for gritty industrial scenes, expansive vistas, and river views.” The “scale and drama” of Pittsburgh’s complexes have long defined its distinctive character, and his landscapes are deeply grounded in the paintings and prints of artists who portrayed the city earlier in the 20th century, including Otto Kuhler, Aaron Harry Gorson, and Joseph Pennell (McPherson was not familiar with these artists when he first began his series).

Working in a range of media, including mezzotint, pastel, graphite, and oil (many of his works are executed on paper), McPherson captures the varied moods of steel, studying the complexes where it is produced at different times of day and in different seasons. His subjects have included the Edgar Thomson works, one of the most famous of the numerous complexes that once lined the Monongahela River. He has also rendered the quenching towers of the coke works at Clairton

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Craig McPherson, Edgar Thomson # 3, 2001, pastel on linen, 66 × 86 in., private collection.

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