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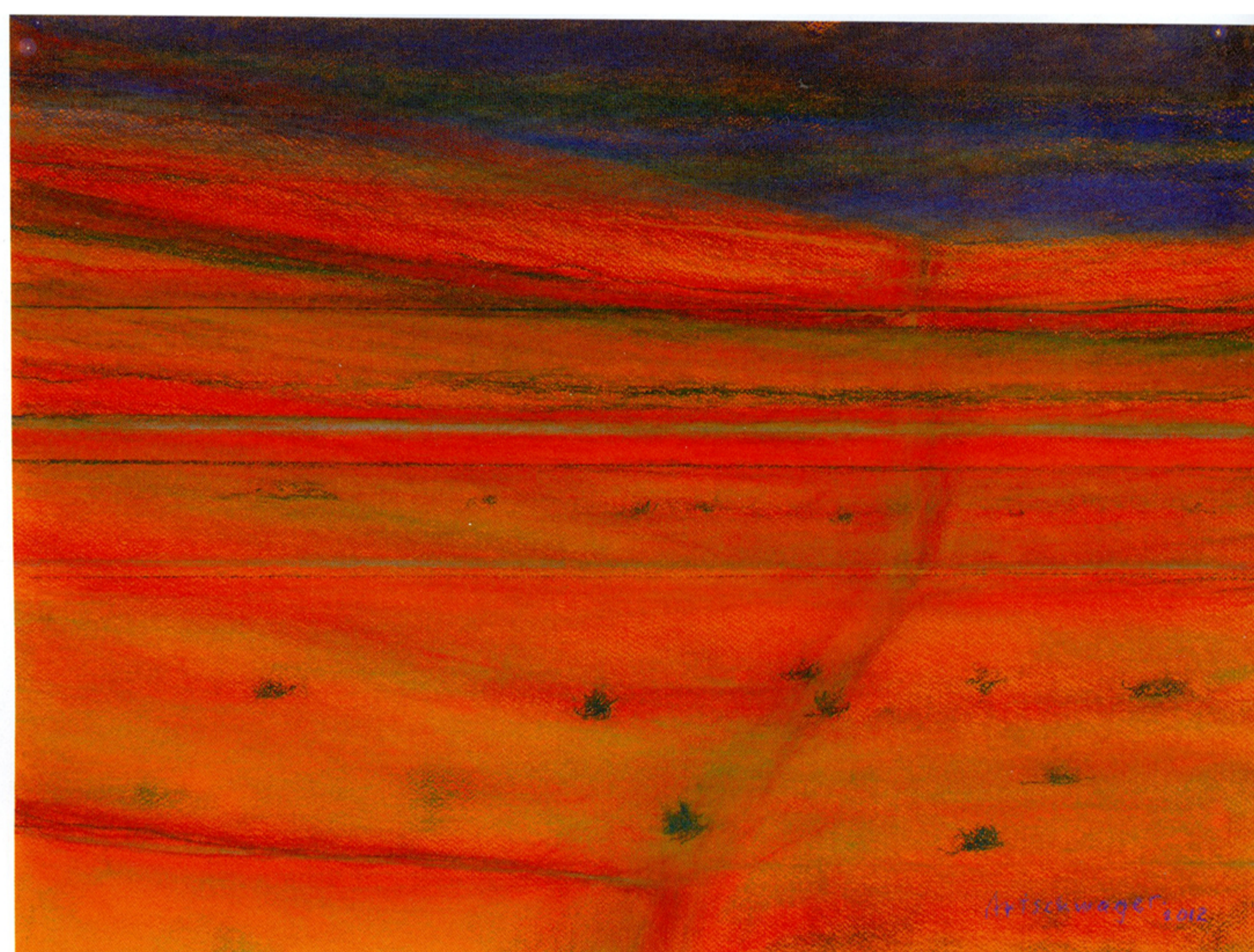
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# Art in America

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## Artschwagerian

by Alexi Worth

RICHARD ARTSCHWAGER, who died Feb. 9, changed my life. But the change had nothing to do with his sculptures or paintings, nor with meeting the man himself—though he was an interesting sideways talker, full of candid answers to questions I hadn't asked. What did the trick was his drawings, a big stack of them, which the art dealer David Nolan placed on a table for me one day in the spring of 2008. "You might," he suggested lightly, "want to have a look at these."

I wasn't so sure. This was back when I was still doing a fair amount of freelance writing, and I had agreed impulsively, late one night at a party, to write something about Artschwager without really knowing what I thought about him. As I started leafing through the drawings, my anxiety grew. There was a diagram of a strange sort of buckle or clasp. Then a World War II soldier. Then a pastel landscape in bright oversweet color. The

pile was like a shuffled deck of cards—jumbled, heterogeneous, nonsensical. How could anyone write about this?

Twenty minutes later, I felt different. Not only was there a pattern, there was even a story. Around 1960, Artschwager had stopped drawing. A few years later he started again, literally from scratch. The earliest sheets were almost blank, one or two thick charcoal lines with mock-clinical titles like *Study of Line*. Next were images of small puckerings and tearings, imaginary damage to pristine sheets of paper. Then magnifications of paper fibers, followed by the beautiful fire drawings, images of paper's antithesis (done in charcoal, of course). They were the reveries of a materialist, thinking about the stuff in his hands. In the decades that followed, Artschwager proceeded to draw tables and chairs, light fixtures, rooms,



his attention expanding outward like the wandering gaze of a child. The subjects grew steadily more various, finally reaching a nostalgic plateau with remembered landscapes of New Mexico, where he grew up.

None of the drawings were masterpieces of touch or draftsmanship. They didn't put me in a state of infected fascination the way, say, Arshile Gorky's drawings do. They were lean, succinct drawings, leaving lots of white paper: thinking drawings. A few of them were drawn from life, or from photographs. The majority, though, and especially the ones I liked best, were clearly invented, mind-made—not too far from being cartoons, but with an extra sense of weight and light. Even the sparest projected unmistakable pleasure in charcoal itself, its smoky tactility, its airy middle tones. I felt a funny connection to the mind behind them—more affinity than admiration. Back in my studio, I found myself imagining what Artschwager would think. Not Artschwager the real person, but the mind behind those drawings. I imagined him leaning against a wall, not saying anything, just watching what I was doing.

When did I begin using nylon mesh instead of canvas? When did I develop my addiction to the airbrush color that is marketed as "Smoke?" For months I had been growing dissatisfied with the way I was making paintings, but with Artschwager in the house, changes quietly accelerated. I never thought I would give up flake white, the most seductive of all materials. But I did (goodbye to Robert Doak, the crankiest, best, most interesting flake-maker in Brooklyn!). Soon I found myself working in an entirely new way. I had always spent most of my studio time redrawing. Now I began working directly from the drawings, cutting them into stencils and spraying over their edges. The effect offered a rudimentary illusionism, like handmade flash photography. Each shape was crisp and bright, a reverse silhouette outlined by dark peripheral mist. There wasn't any more interior modeling; instead, I could layer shapes to build flat depth. The process itself was exhilarating and frustrating. The transition took two years, and they felt long. At the end, though, I had more than just a studio full of new paintings; I had a new sense of room. My subject matter hadn't changed much, but the paintings freshly looked handmade and mind-made—cartoonlike, but with an extra sense of weight and light.

By this time, my essay long since published, I had forgotten about the imaginary visitor in my studio. I was thinking about other things that inspired me: David Smith's spray drawings, Elizabeth Murray's last paintings. Then one day I found myself working on a side project, a little mesh painting of an artist at work. He's smoking, looking at his easel, where there's a drawing of the back of his own head. I thought of him as Gerberman, a fictional character I had used in earlier paintings. But this Gerberman had a mustache—where had that come from? He looked leaner too, not quite familiar—not really Gerberman at all. Wait, I thought to myself; I know who that is. That's Richard Artschwager. ○

