

## Shapes from Fog: *Clairton, From the Hill* by Craig McPherson, a Recent Acquisition



December 4, 2019 By: Sarah Hall, Chief Curator, Director of Collections

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A new addition to our permanent collection is currently on view in the Jacobean Room at the rear of The Frick Art Museum, as part of a display of objects we are calling Art + History, in which we take a look at several works by contemporary artists in the context of our historic collection. Today, I'm focusing my attention on Craig McPherson's drawing *Clairton, From the Hill*. There's a strong connection between us and McPherson, and a strong connection between his subject matter and our history.



CRAIG MCPHERSON

American, b. 1948

*Clairton, From the Hill*, 2006. 36" x 29"

Graphite on paper

Frick Art & Historical Center 2019.1.1

Purchased at 2019 Collectors' Dinner

Part of McPherson's steel series, begun during visits to his wife's family in Braddock and developed over about twenty years, the drawing depicts Clairton Coke Works, the largest coke works in operation in the U.S. It was opened in 1901 by Henry Clay Frick as part of the St. Clair Steel Company.

*Clairton, From the Hill* is one of McPherson's large format, tonal pencil drawings, which he describes as evolving "very

slowly, like shapes emerging from fog.” (He estimates that he spent three to four months working on this drawing.) Although the drawing possesses an almost precisionist clarity, McPherson has packed the composition full of both engrossing observed detail—tire tracks in the snow, tiny cars and trucks, train cars, and glowing lamps—and beautiful passages of drawing—in the smoke plumes, snowy backdrop, and tiny bushes—where it feels like the graphite is simply magically conjured on paper.



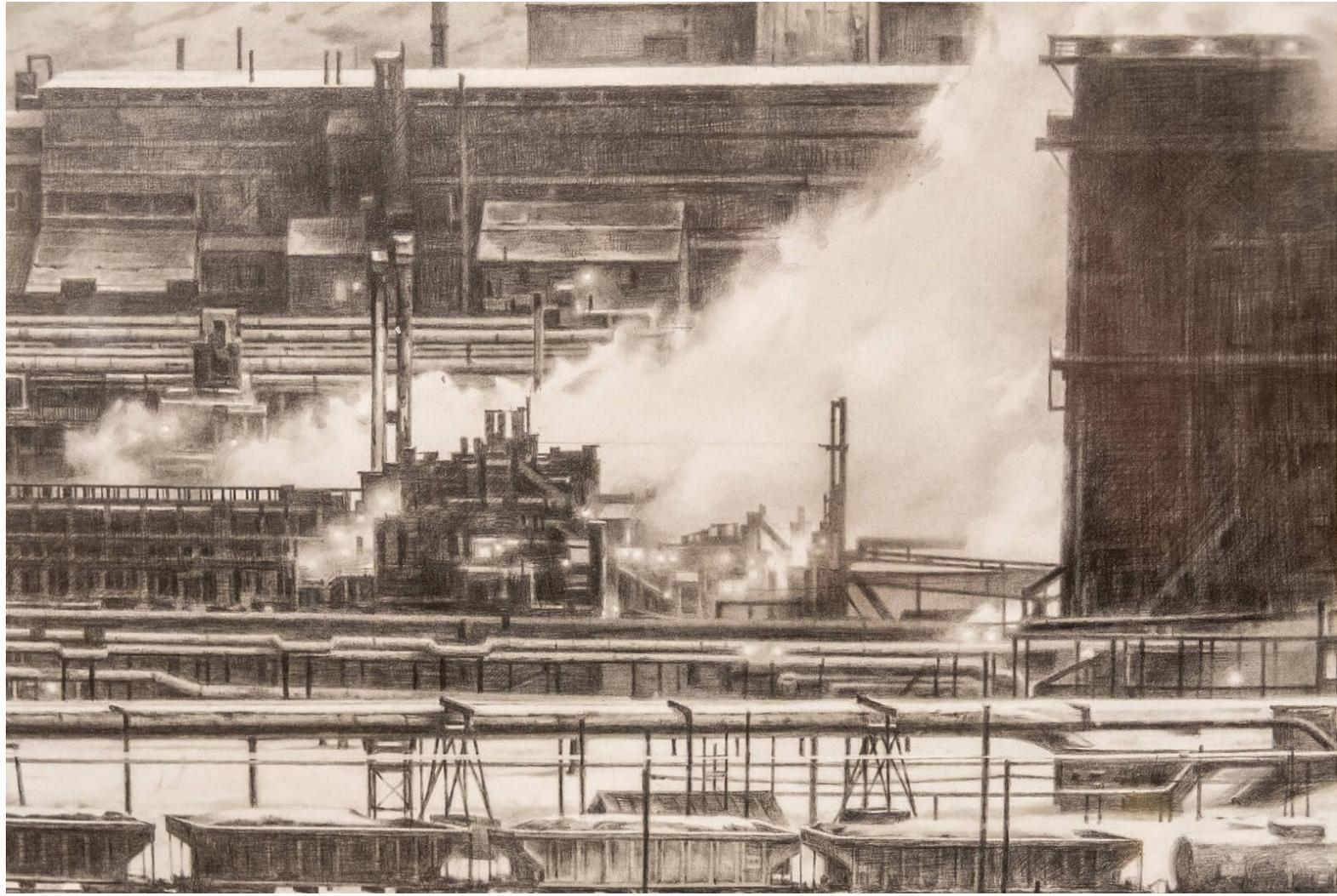
McPherson’s name should be familiar to long-time Frick visitors. We staged a monographic exhibition of his work in 2008 as part of our celebration of Pittsburgh’s 250th anniversary. At that time, I had the privilege of working closely

with him on the exhibition development, installation, and catalogue. As I worked with him, my admiration for his talent grew, as did my appreciation for his discipline and world view as an artist. I was thrilled to acquire this large-scale drawing from the exhibition for the Frick's collection. It is one of the largest and most detailed drawings from his series of industrial Pittsburgh subjects.



McPherson's graphite drawings are exceptionally beautiful. We've all used pencils, and for most of us, it's hard to imagine a pencil creating such an astonishingly complex and exquisite drawing. Here are some things to think about while you look at this drawing (but do be sure to come in and look at it in person, digital files on your computer screen won't do this large and subtle drawing justice):

- Take a moment to appreciate the distinctive composition of foreground, middle ground and background.
- It's full of fascinating geometry—McPherson says he likes distance from his subject because it creates different, less predictable spatial relationships, and that is clearly evident in this drawing.
- What kind of choices has the artist made?
- What does this expansive view do for the viewer?
- Do you think this is pure documentation, or has the artist made some alterations to the view?
- What is our relationship to industry? How do you feel about industrial landscapes?



In her review of the 2008 exhibition, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* writer Mary Thomas singled out this drawing:

"Graphite drawings such as *Clairton, From the Hill* are breathtakingly precise. McPherson's range of tone—articulating snow and steam, shadow and smoke, with equal dexterity and definition—comes from a mastery of technique, a respect for craftsmanship, and mostly, an act of will. They are, upon close examination, unbelievably exquisite."

The Art + History display is on view at The Frick Art Museum for a limited time. Admission to the Frick's permanent collection is always free. Plan your visit to see this incredible drawing and other striking works of art by clicking [here](#).