
'John Button's New York'

Fischbach Gallery
24 West 57th Street
Through Oct. 5

When John Button died of heart disease at the age of 53 in 1982, New York City lost one of the painters who was best able to portray it in terms of an unemphatic but penetrating poetry. He could do other places, too — among them Philadelphia, Paris, Venice and Hollywood, not to mention the Redwood National Park in California (he was born and raised in the San Francisco area) — but what he prized above all was the moment at which, as he once wrote, "after a dip, the road leaps high into the air on a huge causeway and all of Manhattan comes into view, broadside."

But it is clear from his present show at the Fischbach Gallery that when painting and drawing in New York he did not go out for the big splashy all-inclusive panoramas that often tempt the new arrival. He worked with the Manhattan sky as his accomplice. Whether with the laundered blue of high noon or the strange goings-on at nightfall, that sky was omnipresent.

In "Con Edison" of 1966, the three tall and slender chimneys take an unwonted sweetness from the sky, as well as an echo of the French tricolor. It was also a characteristic of Button at his best that he could work with just a tiny, sprinkled skyline of apartment houses, leaving the sky to do most of the work.

But when he came down to street level, as in "Garage Space" of 1963, there was magic in his way of placing a precisely observed and solitary shopper on her way home. No one could tell from most of his paintings that he was one of the funniest people around, and also one of the most variously educated. But even in the pencil drawings that he made in the last months of his life, a special way of seeing manifested itself.

JOHN RUSSELL