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ART

IN the midst of this great big chill in the art business—one in which several galleries, some less than a year old, have already shut down, and in which many others are rumored to be closing—a recent Bennington College graduate named Matthew Marks has opened shop on Madison Avenue. It's a good-looking, pristine space on the fourth floor of an old-fashioned, five-story edifice whose most notable occupant is Wittenborn, the venerable art-book purveyors. The address—No. 1018, between 78th and 79th Streets—is in fact commonly referred to as the Wittenborn Building, which no doubt helps make it an ideal setting for the dapper young Marks, who has made his reputation as a private dealer of tony works on paper, and whose optimistic and hushed new enterprise seems, indeed, to bear the stamp of success à la nineties.

The gallery's first show (through May 4) is of artists' sketchbooks—intimate stuff that doesn't warmly invite criticism. Lying flat in spare cases are an intriguing and varied assortment of cahiers, notepads, workbooks, and folders that were once the very private property of some twenty-four artists, whose names suggest an impressive if rather clubbish agenda spanning Abstract Expressionism to the present, with Louise Bourgeois taking her frequent missionary's position as lone matriarch.

Because the pages of the books are periodically turned, this show changes. Francesco Clemente's sketched self-portrait, for example, was a knockout at the opening, but a week's passing produced a somewhat saccharine Madonna and Child. Some of the books on view are very like adolescent written journals, with doodles and splotches, while others suggest unexpectedly scientific approaches. Many, however, are true mirrors of the artists' full-blown work. John Chamberlain's crushed and doctored cigarette packs are wonderful, witty studies for his big crushed sculptures. Schematic drawings by the Bartleby-like Robert Ryman—known also for his paintings' exquisitely subtle and precise hardware supports—are in a manila office folder labelled "Old Fasteners." Lucian Freud's drawings are brilliant, caustic, and nastily bawdy.

The up-and-coming Richmond Burton's are sumptuously tactile, and as thoroughly refined and airtight as his paintings. Myron Stout's melancholy, moonstruck abstractions are the most starkly romantic of the lot. Rounded and shaded—Old Masterly, in fact—they are hauntingly, almost tragically complete. They have that magic, lonesome aura of work made for no one but oneself, of work made at night.