

"When I first came to New York I lived in a Battery Park merchant marine hotel. There was no restaurant or bar, and you had to eat before 5 p.m. I walked around a lot at night, and dusk had the longest shadows, the most bizarre golden light I'd ever seen. I like the pedestrian here who's kind of testing the waters—is it safe to cross 'the street?' he seems to be thinking."

**Battery Park
Sunset,
acrylic on
canvas,
36x48 inches**



MOTION PICTURES

**The active ingredients
of New York City**

If primary colors were music, Tom Christopher would be the whole brass section of the band. The painter's passion for red, blue and yellow, especially yellow, sounds the rhythm of his life. It's about knowing how a body in motion tends to stay in motion, about interpreting the energy of his world with color and light and shade.

That his world is New York City, of course, only feeds Christopher's joyful noise. He needs the city like a duck needs a pond. Even a temporary move back to his native California a few years ago could not break him of his habit. "I was still painting New York street scenes in California," he says.

It's quintessentially New York, the body-in-motion thing. And, it seems, equally integral to the artist—to Christopher, the action of painting the city's bicycle messengers, taxis and business-suited curb-leapers is more important than the finished product. "The activity I like," he says, "is solving the problems or not solving them, painting it out and learning from it and going on to the next one."

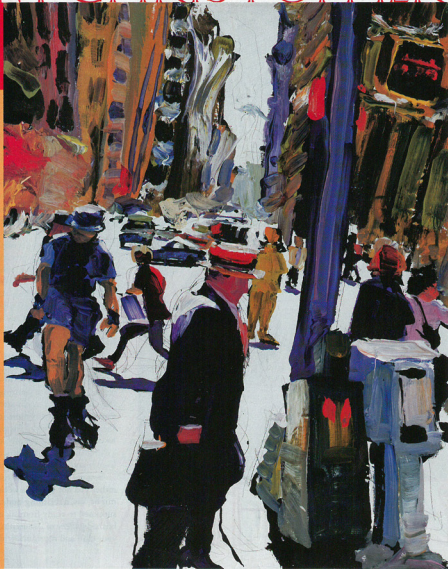
You get the feeling Christopher would rather you not view his work as you might, say, a reclining nude that you're supposed to study from six angles in the hushed gallery of a museum, stroking your chin and murmuring about the deft

TOM CHRISTOPHER

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Stramble, acrylic on canvas, 28x22 inches

"You see these guys in the summer, old-time New Yorkers with straw hats, guys who would sit down and have a seltzer at the deli, guys who look like they just walked out of the Brill Building. In the background here is the newer version of him, the guy on Rollerblades. Then there's the woman behind who really has to hustle across the street if she's going to make it. You can see the power in her left leg and in her attitude."



use of ochre and subtle shading. "My goal," Christopher offers, "is to get people to stop and look at their surroundings. You walk around and you're so preoccupied just hauling from work to job to home to car.... It's nice just to stop and look."

As of last month, people in Times Square stopped "hauling" long enough to look at Christopher's latest creation, a mural on 53rd Street between Broadway and Eighth Avenue—what the New York Times calls the largest hand-painted street art in Manhattan.

Like the city that inspires him, Christopher works fast, photographing or sketching the street scenes that unfold in front of him, he says, "to impart attitude... it's interesting to give people personalities—a person crossing a street with a tentative gait; others lumbering with dinosaur walks and another guy walking across the street like a giraffe." Vehicles, too, he says, "can be hopping, jack-rabbitting along, or lumbering like a big brontosaurus."

He works in acrylic because—surprise!—it's fast, pliable, washable and you can paint over it. "Most artists paint slowly, deliberately, craftsmanlike and build up slowly. I don't do that," Chris-

topher explains. "I do a lot of sketching and try to do a painting in a day or two. Lots of sketching goes into that beforehand because you can't stop and think about how a shoulder's formed, how the shadow looks—you have to just know that...."

"I don't like to think too much about painting," he says of his topilot technique that evolved from an Art Center College of Design education in Pasadena,

for work from the time he first moved to New York in 1980. "I was staying at the Edison Hotel in Times Square. I looked out at 2 in the morning, and it was snowing and there were a million people running around. I thought, 'This is just too good.'"

"It just seemed really exciting. In L.A. I was always stuck on the freeway somewhere. I love L.A., I was brought up there, but as far as an art



Tom Christopher, second from right, mentors local art students in creating a massive mural in New York's Times Square.

Calif., and years of portrait work. "I react to light, color, composition—real classical stuff," he says. "I like a little bit of grit, like, 'Gee, is this messenger going to slam into me? This truck is coming right at me, isn't it? Boy, that cab better move over!' It's what he calls the "anxiety of the city."

Gorged with robust color, extremes of light and shadow and perpetual motion, Christopher has stoked this appetite

career, it's in New York. I don't think New York is a more cultivated art market," he adds, "it's just bigger." So, for this color-motion junkie, New York provides an unlimited market for raw material.

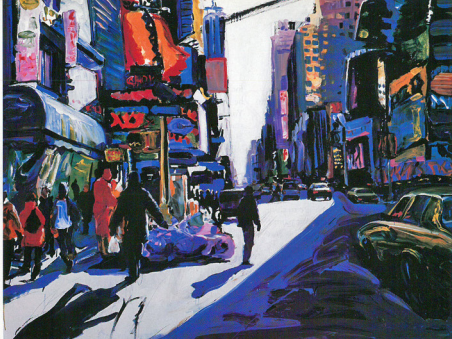
Still, it took Christopher a while to become a canny consumer. "When I first moved here I thought the light was horrible, and gray," he confides. "It took four or five years before I started noticing



Sunday by Madison Square Garden, acrylic on canvas, 36x36 inches

"I'm struck by how empty this normally busy street is. And I like the deep perspective that looks like railroad tracks. When it's so uncharacteristically uncrowded you can appreciate the perspective better. Finding deep space in New York is unusual."

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"In this end-of-the-day scene there is lots of blue, deep shadow and an island of strong, white contrast. That's the knife-edge, cutting light of New York. It even shimmers through the X-rated movie theater signs.

Vista Broadway,
acrylic on canvas,
48x60 inches

The tall guy casting a shadow actually is parallel to the guy on the right, who is way too small for that scene—sometimes I exaggerate, stretching or condensing elements of the scene. In this one I also like the neon reflected in the cab."

"This is a new painting for the Japanese show this month. The people are chopped off, and

Empire State Building,
acrylic on canvas,
30x40 inches.



it's the first time I've ever painted like that. The white-haired guy in front is like an old barrister with an office in the Lincoln Building with his name written in reverse in the glass."

TOM CHRISTOPHER

this crisp, northern light. It's not the golden sun of the West, the sparkling, bouncy, happy light of California. In New York it's contrasted, like a laser beam coming around corners. Buildings cast severe, knife-edged shadows that really define and sculpturally carve things. Then you have these islands of white, like in the center of a street, a seamless movement of bikes and messengers and cabs and buses. It's everything an artist wants. It just took a long time for it to sink in."

Christopher, whose paintings sell for \$5,000-\$12,500, is represented by New York's David Findlay Galleries. His work hangs in the city's municipal offices and at Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. headquarters in Rockefeller Center, among other prominent sites. He regularly shows not only in New York, but often on the West Coast. This month he's showing at the prestigious Galerie Tamemaga in Osaka, Japan, a gig for which he spent much of the summer creating 27 new works.

It's a good thing he works fast, because he has had other obligations recently—specifically, the Times Square Business Improvement District commissioned him to create the huge work—225 feet by 23 feet—on the exterior back wall of the venerable Roseland Ballroom, across from the stage entrance to the Ed Sullivan Theater where "The Late Show with David Letterman" is taped.

Not only is the artist enthusiastic about the enormity of the project,

but also about the opportunity to work as mentor to five students from the local High School of Graphic Arts. Of his depiction of the increasingly spruced-up Times Square neighborhood, Christopher says, "This is exciting because it's all New York City imagery. Lots of bluish-purple shadows, cadmium yellow Crown Victoria cabs—you just can't get it bright enough. I feel like I'm on top of my game."

—Ellen Alperstein

"The paint drips here are not planned, but I keep my eyes open for an accident, and when it happens, a blob here, a drip there, it really adds to the work. You can't throw it on because it looks fake. I also like the sketch lines, the pencil lines that show my first fumbling attempts at forming a figure. I like that feeling... at a play I like to sit off to the side, watching what's happening behind the scenes. I like to see how things are made."

Big Red Tour Bus on Broadway,
acrylic on canvas,
48x48 inches

