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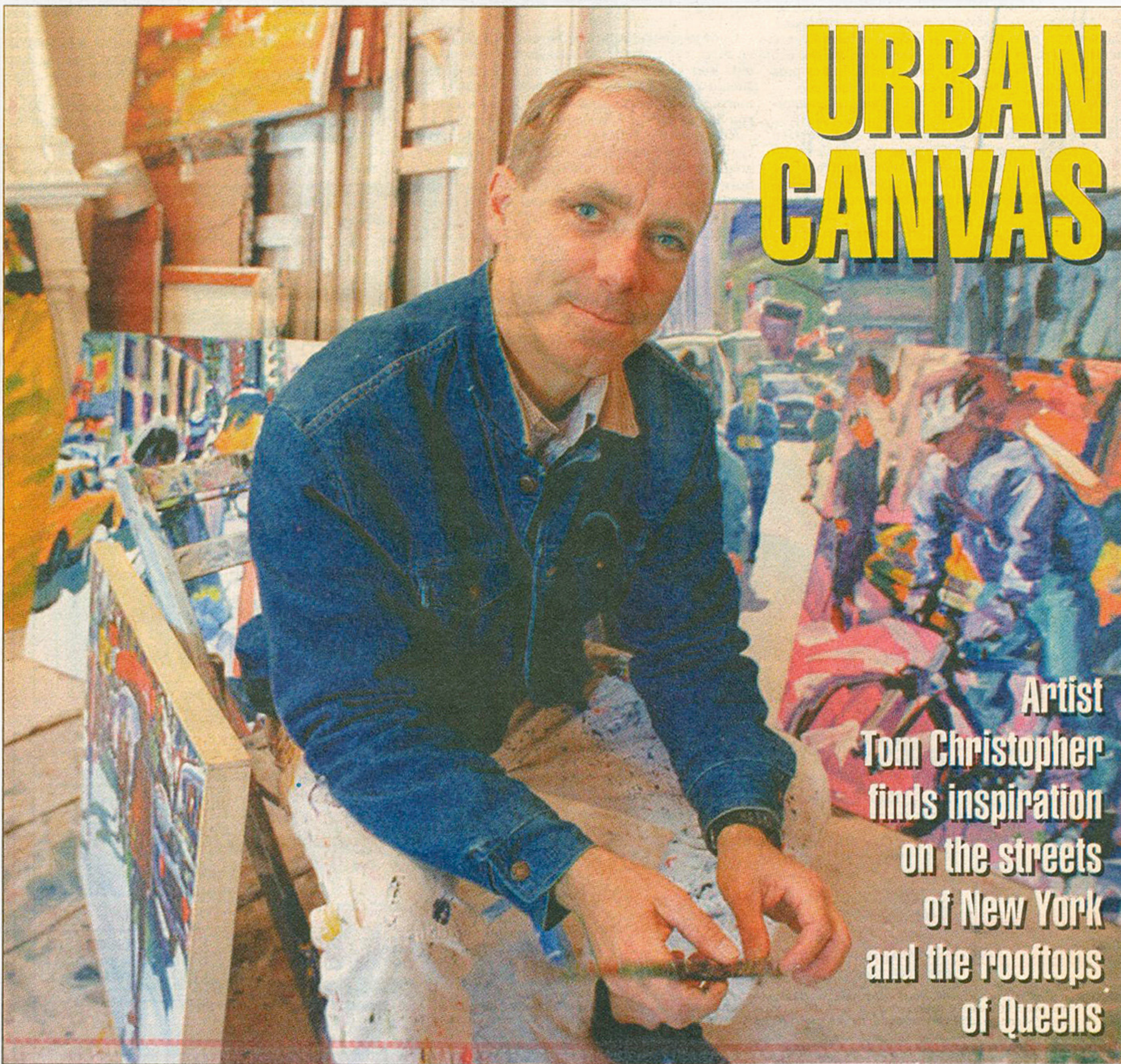
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Newsday

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URBAN CANVAS

Artist
Tom Christopher
finds inspiration
on the streets
of New York
and the rooftops
of Queens

Christopher in his studio in Long Island City.

Story on Page 5

Newsday Photo / Ken Sawchuk

BY NANCY A. RUHLING
STAFF WRITER

THE TRIBOROUGH Bridge forms the backdrop for the modest block, where rowhouses live next door to old factories, worn-out warehouses and down-in-the-mouth housing projects. People sit and yack on their stoops, the stages where the dramas of their daily lives are played out. The knife-sharpener goes door to door, the seltzer man makes his rounds, the doughnut man in the silver truck rings his bell.

This is Long Island City, industry city, land of the working-class Joe, not hip Soho, not avant-garde Chelsea, not even shabby-chic Williamsburg, for God's sake, and it's probably the last place in the world you'd expect an artist to work, and that's just why Tom Christopher likes it.

After all, when Californian Christopher, who with his lean, athletic build, neon-blue eyes and blond hair looks like a surfer, moved into his turn-of-the-century shoebox studio more than a decade ago, he didn't know that Long Island City was inhabited by those more familiar with painting houses than painting canvases.

"New York was a culture shock for me," he says. "But when I went across the 59th Street Bridge, it was the most thrilling experience. It struck me that Long Island City, with all its old factories with their big signs on their roofs like the Swingline stapler and the Eagle Electric's giant switches and plugs, would have been the place where all the bad guys would have taken Batman when they abducted him. I loved it."

Although Christopher, 44, started out painting giant likenesses of tools just like the ones on those rooftops and making drawings and courtroom illustrations for newspapers and magazines, he immediately was captivated by the "tension, speed and energy of the city" and started painting what have become his signature works: bright, bold expressionistic street scenes of Manhattan with all its glitz, grit and grit. Like the flashing neon signs of Times Square, Christopher's works, which depict what he sees as the "seamless movement of bikes, cabs, people" scream, "New York, New York."

Not only are his works on permanent view at Madison Avenue's prestigious David Findlay gallery, but one also has made it all the way to City Hall, where it is on public display.

Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, a photo buff, is particularly drawn to the snapshot-like spontaneity of Christopher's black-and-white works such as "Beuys on Lexington," which the artist gave to the city.

"Tom Christopher captures New York City in a very special way," Giuliani says. "I'm impressed with his work, and it expresses a great deal of what New York City is all about — vibrant, busy and alive."

To capture the vibrancy of the city, Christopher hunts for images that are "visually stunning but with elements of danger." Thus, his canvases are peopled with his favorite Manhattan characters: a disheveled homeless man muttering as he shuffles across a busy intersection; a group of shady types hanging out on a street corner; an in-a-hurry cabby, foot on the gas, hand on the horn, playing bumper cars in bumper-to-bumper traffic.

Although Christopher is best known in the art world for his Manhattan paintings, in his own neighborhood, his other works have made a far more lasting impression. For instance, there was the time during the Patty Hearst trial that he was asked to paint illustrations of her kidnapping.

"I had just moved in and I didn't even have blinds on the windows," he says, "and there I was on Christmas Eve, using my sister in her bathrobe with her hands tied behind her back as a stand-in for Patty so my friend could take a photo so I could use it as reference for the illustration. All the lights in my place were blazing, and all the neighbors saw everything. And they never forgot it."

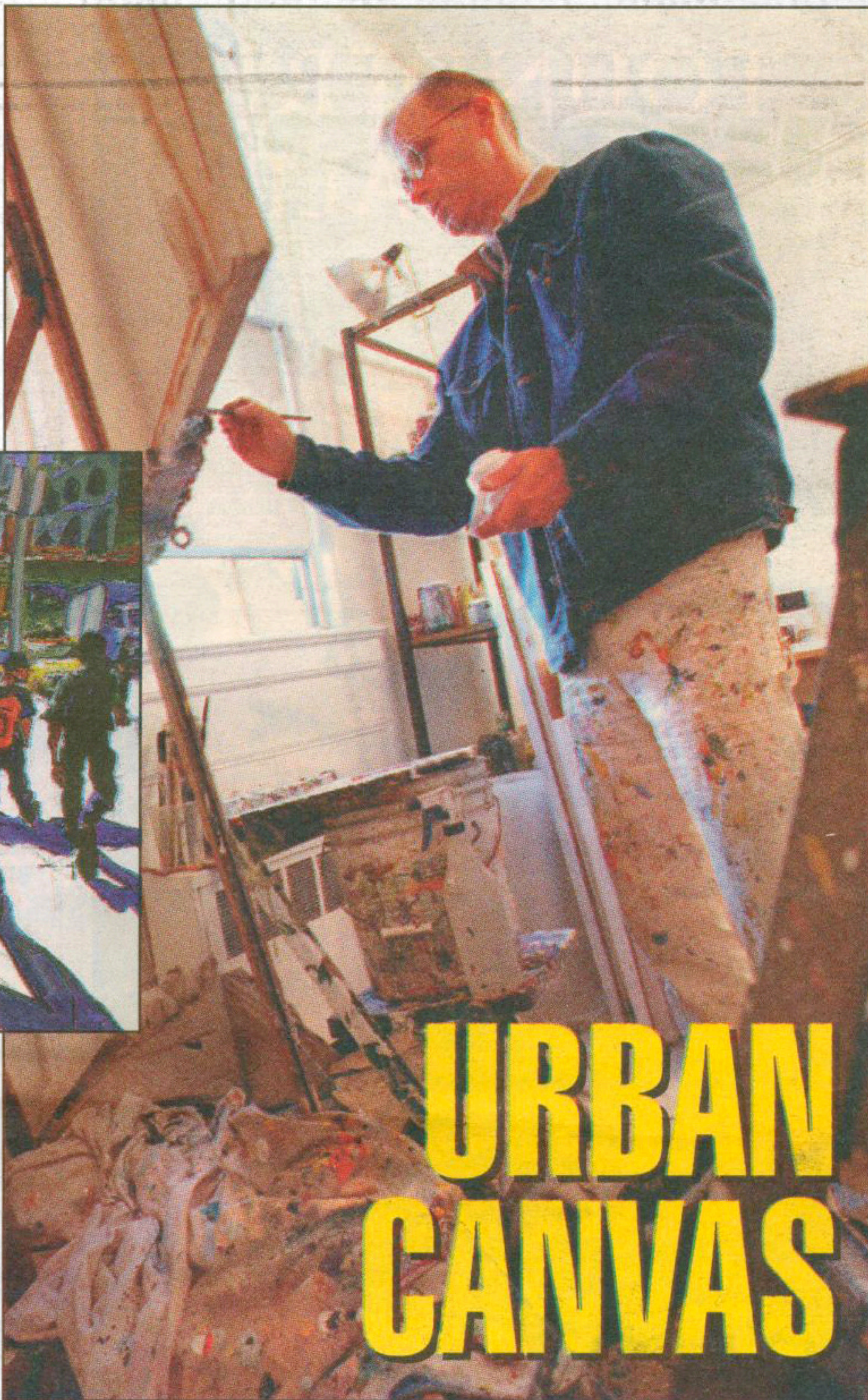
And there was the time he was assigned to draw a truck with a flat, so to get it right he rented a truck, parked it in front of his studio, let the air out of one tire and got up on a ladder to take photos of it. "When I looked up, all the neighbors were peeking out of their windows at me. They all thought I was nuts. It took years before they would accept me," he says and laughs.

"But now we all go out to dinner all the time," he says. "In fact, the night before I met the mayor to give him my painting I was in a bar on Northern Boulevard, and when I told people there, everybody got up and shook my hand and applauded."

When he isn't painting or strolling around Manhattan sketching and taking photos, Christopher often walks to Long Island City's Socrates Sculpture Park, where he has a mammoth mural and a sculpture. There he smokes cigars and "contemplates Hell Gate Bridge and the vast Western-like horizontality of its wide, open spaces," which remind him of California.

But the Big Apple always beckons him back. "New York has really made my career," he says. "I'm obsessed with painting New York City streets. I've tried to do San Francisco and LA, but I just couldn't. . . . When I was with the mayor I kidded him, saying, 'When are you going to run for the presidency? I want to get a painting in the White House.'" •

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URBAN CANVAS

Newsday Photos / Ken Sawchuk

Above right, artist Tom Christopher paints a canvas in his studio on 14th Street in Long Island City, Queens. His works include "Free Film on 42nd Street," above left, and "Paintbrush," below.

