

Tom Christopher — Public Eye

By James Balestrieri

Sponsored by the American Consulate in Germany and with the endorsement of New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, new paintings by Tom Christopher will be exhibited at Galerie Barbara von Stechow in Frankfurt, Germany, through June 3.

Tom Christopher has his eye on the city, his finger on its throbbing rhythms. His daylight noir paintings chronicle the allure of New York: its beauty, color, activity. But the figures that people his canvases belie the surface glamour, reciting their dreams and losses in self-referential and self-absorbed loops.

The titles of Christopher's paintings, eavesdroppings caught as they fall, are immediate avenues into these city characters. Christopher's career as a courtroom artist honed his capacity for empathy; he taps into essential moments and gestures. A day can turn on a dime; his art catches that turn. He lets his drawing show. The pencil lines map the real—unseen—city where the streets are a sticky web of prospects that become mirages, promises that merely tease. Splashes of color mimic the frenzy of the city: there's no time to go back, no studio in which to stand back and make sense of one's sketches in classical stateliness.

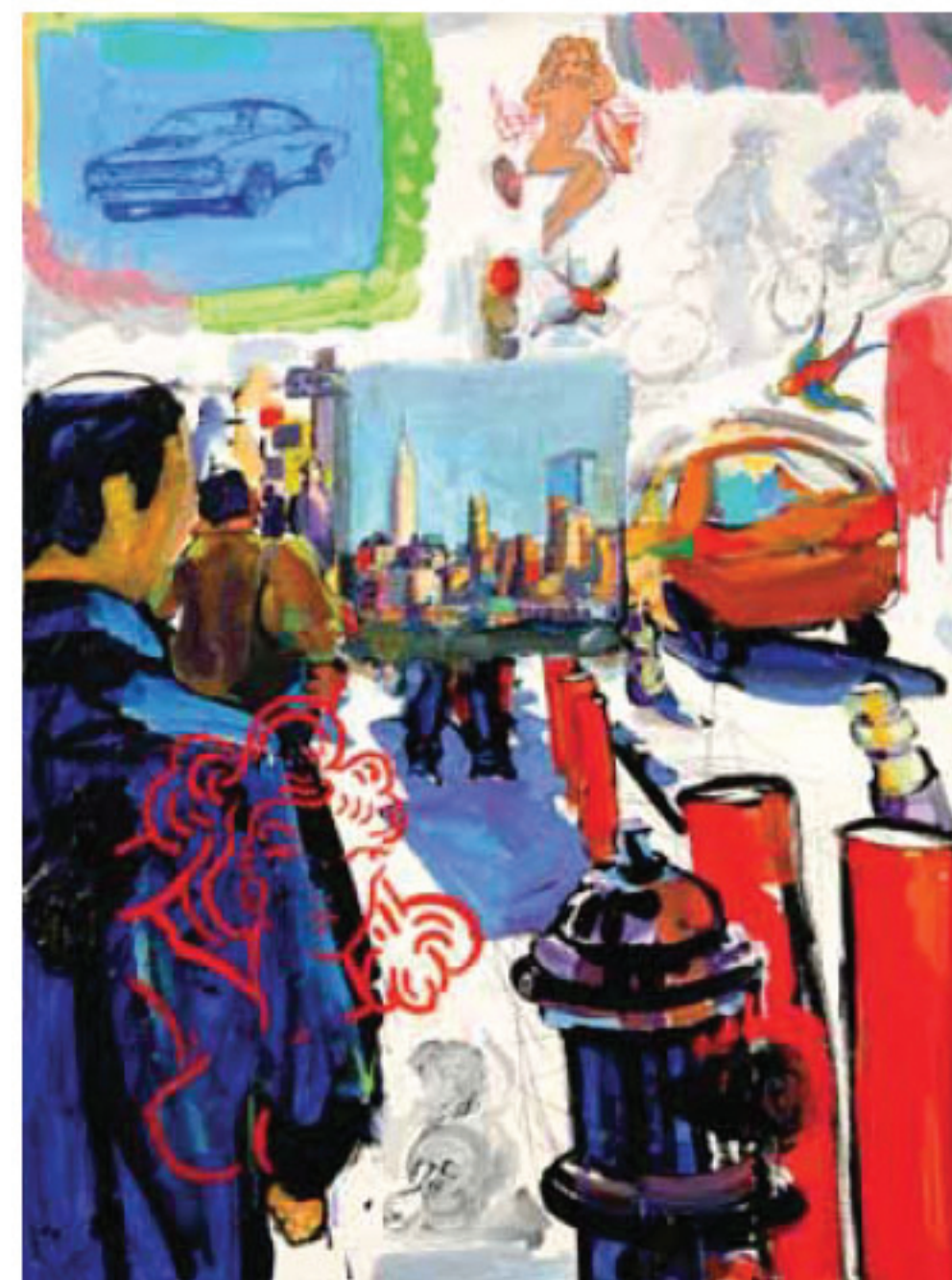
Once upon a time, only a nut would walk around ranting aloud about nothing to no one. Now every mouth gapes into a cell. Thumbs fly. No one looks up. The city has stolen madness from the mad, sadness from the sad.

Bike messengers glide through Christopher's paintings, centaurs—half man, half cab—behind the times, quaint, atom-bombed shadow stencils fast fading from New York 2.0, not the old cool New York—Bangkok crazy now. A blizzard of bits of information compete, claim, crave.

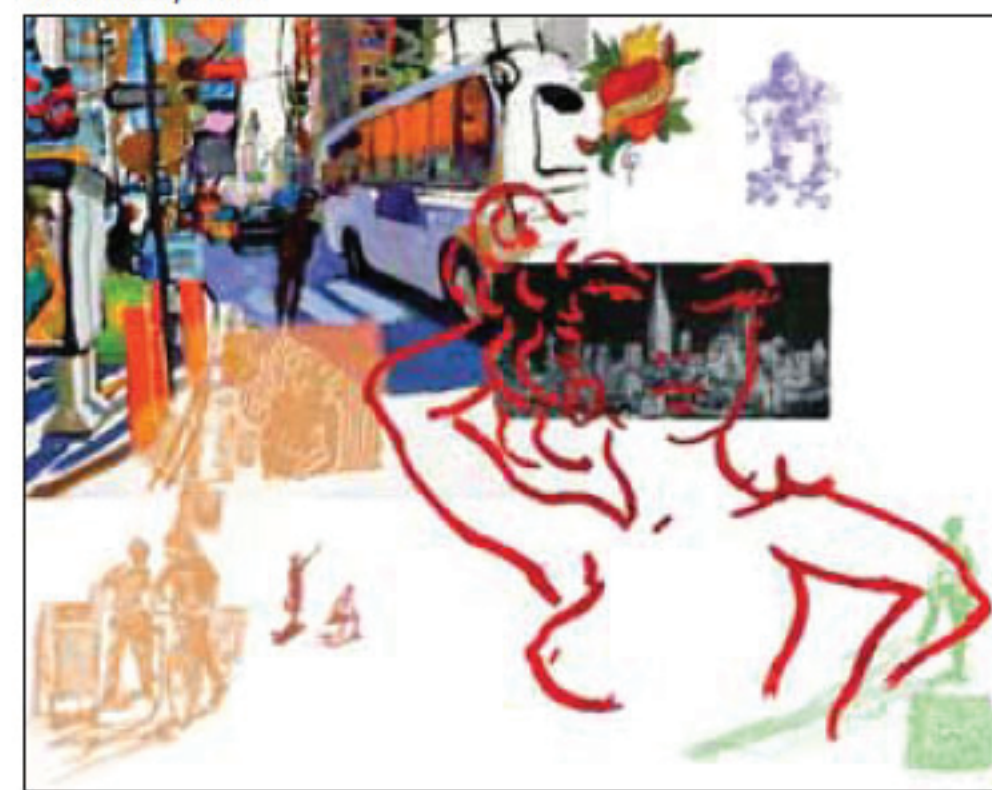
To be true to this brave new city, allegorical bestiary of creatures caught mid-metamorphosis, Christopher turns the latent symbols loose in a gesture toward expressionism. Things that fill us with dread and desire—mythical, archetypal forms—rise to the surface. These panels in Christopher's works are the mind's



Chrysler Building by Day and Night, oil on canvas, 36 x 24"



Man's Ruin, Dear John Letters and The Magnetic Draw of the Big City, oil on canvas, 48 x 36"



All She Left, A Lipstick Drawing on the Bathroom Mirror, serigraph, ed. of 46, 2012, 32 x 44"

attempt to take a screenshot, hold onto that face framed in the window of a speeding car, remember that dream—in a hive of unceasing activity.

"Night and day, why is it so, that this longing for you follows—wherever I go? /In the roaring traffic's boom, in the silence of my lonely room..." — Cole Porter

A new interest in the tattoo—indelible painting on skin, tribal, nostalgic, impulsive—marks the artist's latest works. In a new serigraph, *All She Left, A Lipstick Drawing on the Bathroom Mirror*, the red outline of a temptress drifts across a rearview mirror negative of the city. The Empire State Building, in this brief conjunction, is her nose. She and the city are one. In disparate scenes that float around and across the canvas, a skateboarder leaps, joyous in a gravity-defying moment while others walk or sit, their long shadows weighted with doubt, guilt, despair.

In *Man's Ruin, Dear John Letters and The Magnetic Draw of the Big City*, the stencil of a similar femme fatale drifts once more, this time across a man's back. Birds of paradise, echoing the bike messengers, bear news. In the distance, the Empire State Building hovers, confined in a picture-postcard rectangle, while a '70s muscle car, in a thought bubble, implies younger days or a dream of a quick getaway. At top center, a blonde—like a Renaissance putti gone wrong—sits on a martini glass. A ribbon of music behind her sings a siren song. Is heartbreak imminent, or has it already happened? Is "when?" relevant or relative? The physics of the heart does not submit to formulas.

A red double-decker tour bus takes in the sights in *Chrysler Building by Day and Night*, oblivious to the swirl of oblivion. The Chrysler Building is a white skeleton against a black sky, a knife slash, the torn truth behind the tourist scene you see from the safety of the bus. In an oval below the Chrysler, a black-and-white film noir scene plays out—the grim antihero finishes his story, the girl listens in horror, her hand raised as if the car is about to crash, as if death is the only exit. Here, the femme fatales and messenger birds are washed in white and blue, yesterday's billboards obliterated. A pirate's head floats, dirk between his teeth—here be dragons—and a tattoo menagerie cavorts at bottom left, like scratch art or a black light poster. Fate. The bike messenger wheels off, as if the painting in its entirety is itself a delivery.

You approach Christopher's paintings as you would a size 48 torpedo standing sentinel at a dark door. You enter at your own risk. Sign the waiver in invisible ink, or blood, or both. You open your eyes, blink, and roll your own bones. ●

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