

Grab a Slice - Nancy A. Ruhling



Tom Christopher

Tom Christopher, New York City's unofficial artist in residence, paints bold, brash cityscapes.

Nancy A. Ruhling: Why did you decide to exhibit your in-your-face paintings that depict the seamier side of the city in the Embassy I Theater, the gathering spot of the 1920s elite?

Tom Christopher: The contrast is important. Contrasts are what New York City and my paintings are all about. I paint folks that most people shun—the bike messengers, the handout guys, the Orangemen who pick up the trash—and now they are in this marbled and crystal-chandeliered high-society building, which has been turned into a carnival-like place, so I've put them on the same level with the elite. It's one of the oddest spaces in the city, which makes it the perfect place to show my work. Where else can you find a cheesy photo booth and a place to put a penny in and get it flattened right next to Viacom and Conde Nast?

IAR: Unlike your other paintings, which only have short titles, these have quotations from famous authors like Jack Kerouac and F. Scott Fitzgerald and are displayed in the theater's movie boxes. Why did you do this?

TC: I think of my work as cinematic and it goes with Kerouac's idea of a continuous story. You can pick up *On the Road*, put it down for days and come back to it and it's like you are going 90 miles per hour again. I can walk in Times Square and hang out and the show starts all over again. I picked the quotes from some of my favorite authors who wrote about New York. I picked the quotes first and then I paired them with the paintings.

IAR: Taken together, what story do these eight paintings tell?

TC: Each painting tells a different story and when you put them together you get a slice of the Big Apple—a slice of the millions of stories that make this city memorable and great.

IAR: Where do you get your ideas?

TC: I consider myself a journalist. Early in my career I used to do courtroom drawings for *The Wall Street Journal* and *People* magazine. I had to capture the scene quickly and responsibly in a drawing. That's what I try to do in Times Square. I come with sketchbook and Canon digital camera and I snoop. I stand on street corners and I follow people around and I look for scenes just like the photographer Weegee did. Lately, I've been keeping my ears open, too, because I'm trying to do what Kerouac did, to get a narrative going. What he did in writing I'm trying to do in painting.

IAR: Does this mean your work is taking a new direction?

TC: I've been painting scenes of New York City, including Times Square, for more than two decades. As it has changed, so has my work. Right now, the city seems more torqued up, less relaxed and you can see that in my work—there's more of an edge, even louder clashing colors. Also, I'm looking more for stories now, I'm trying to involve what people are thinking and that's why I like the idea of using quotes. On one of the paintings, there is an Orangeman, he's an African immigrant and the F. Scott Fitzgerald quote I chose shows that he's having a beautifully poetic, elegant thought, not something you think of when you see a guy putting trash in a violet plastic bag.

IAR: What kind of reaction do you want this exhibit to provoke?

TC: I want people to walk out of the theater and take another look at Times Square so they can see things as I do, whether they are tourists or New Yorkers. In a typical gallery show, only 2,000 to 3,000 people see my work. Here, 1.7 million people—tourists, immigrants, businessmen—will walk through in the course of a year. Times Square is not totally "Disneyfied." You still see grifters and people who are totally insane—just the other day I watched the cops talk down a Chinese guy who had climbed up one of the street poles—and there are all the moving neon lights that are so wicked cool.