

## ARTS & LETTERS

### **Painting the City Red, Etc.**

By JOHN GOODRICH  
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What happens when an courtroom sketch artist applies his lightning-quick rendering skills to the streets of New York City? In the case of Tom Christopher, the result is "Metropolis," an exhibition in the lobby of the Condé Nast Building of wildly exuberant images of taxis, buses, and bicyclists careening down city streets.

The 55-year-old Mr. Christopher, known to many as New York's "unofficial artist in residence," is in fact no newcomer to Times Square, having painted the area and other city locations for more than 20 years. His enormous, 230-foot-long mural graced the wall of the Roseland Ballroom on nearby 53rd Street between 1998 and 2004, while his easel-sized paintings reside in the Museum of the City of New York, City Hall, and the boardroom of the New York Times.

The 30 paintings and prints in "Metropolis" (all dated 2007) show a sure and supple modeling that can be credited to his early experiences as a Disneyland portrait painter and a Wall Street Journal courtroom artist. These skills, however, now serve a full-tilt, funky attack. Densely packed splashes of deep, brushy violets, tomato-reds, and acid greens and yellows become pedestrians and vehicles streaming through the street-canyons of Manhattan, with billboards and signs competing for every inch of space above. The artist consciously includes the most exotic of street phenomena — sanitation workers in yellow-trimmed suits, construction cones of flaming orange — and locates ordinary objects in striking perspectives, framing an up-close stoplight, for instance, with a distant gap of buildings. These days Mr. Christopher paints in his upstate studio, working from his own photographs and on-the-spot sketches, yet he preserves a perpetually breathless style, with looping pencil marks appearing as both underdrawing and on top of layers of built up paint, and dollops of paint often dribbled or splattered across surfaces as finishing touches.

The installation includes a dozen serigraph monotypes that take a somewhat different tack, superimposing multiple outlines of these scenes over more painterly landscapes and cityscapes. If the paintings represent a flood of sensations, the prints shimmer with shifting veils of details.

Sometimes harmonies of color lend his scenes an evocative gravity. In the previously mentioned painting, subtle color pressures neatly capture the weight of taxis nestled on a deeply shadowed street, their yellow bodies gleaming darkly under a brilliant sliver of sky. In "Autumn for the Giver's," pedestrians lean palpably into the sunlight, while billows of steam, singularly bright, punctuate the glowering sky.

Nowadays, ofcourse, distinctions between high and low art are increasingly blurred, and it may be that Mr. Christopher, like Warhol, intends to illuminate the ironies of our stylish shorthands. Such an approach may in fact suit the context of the installation, which hangs down the wall from an array of large posters of GQ covers featuring "The 50 Most Stylish Men in the last 50 Years."

Even when Mr. Christopher celebrates only his own energy the results can be more interesting than the real thing — the urban cacophony that awaits just outside the lobby doors. The artist's best work shows he is capable of not just mementos of New York's energy, but also probing encounters with it.

Until November 19 (4 Times Square. For inquiries: J. N. Bartfield Galleries, 212-245-8890).