



MANHATTAN ALIVE

Left: *Haunted by Your Last, Last Goodbye*. Below: *Lime Green Modified*. Titles of works, the artist says, emerge during the painting, then change in the process.

an inexpensive hostelry (now gone) exclusively for merchant seamen. Make up the name of a ship, he was advised, and he'd get in. And so Hollywood artist Tom Christopher presented himself as a deckhand from a Liberian tramp freighter and got a room.

The next day he began knocking on doors, one finally opening at *The Wall Street Journal*, which used freelance artists to create its signature "wood block" portraits of the personalities in their stories. The pay was \$100 per portrait. Most artists did one or two wood blocks a week. Tom went back to his hostel

room and finished ten in one day. Nurtured on sunshine and orange groves, Tom initially regarded Manhattan's canyons as "awful, gray, and sullen." But that view evolved. He started to notice Yellow Cabs and buses with billboards, lighted signs in throbbing colors urging action, account execs in jet-black cool, orange jumpsuited sanitation men cleaning up after some parade, kamikaze bicycle messengers in Day-Glo Martian wear pedaling against traffic, and how sunrise and sunset glistened on and electrified the wall of blue, silver, and gold skyscrapers towering over the East River.

At some point, the artist from LaLa Land began to see New York City's true palette. And the result, as I would soon discover, was profound.

With the meal done and the ladies retired to the kitchen, I asked Tom if it might be possible to see his work. We went outside, crossed a bridge over the goldfish

pond, and climbed stairs to his studio above the garage. He flipped on the light, and we entered a broad, open, high-ceilinged space with skylights and paint splattered everywhere.

Near the door was a large canvas on an easel. I walked around it, looked, and was immediately struck by a riot of reds, blacks, yellows, blues, and oranges ablaze on a bright white background. The image was that of a city street, familiar, but rendered visually in a way I'd never seen. I can't explain how or why, but I knew I was looking at Manhattan. The scene was crowded, kaleidoscopic, energized; its characters hurried. In a word, it was New York alive and on the move. And it was fabulous.

Then Tom began pulling out other canvases stacked in the corner, each one continuing the theme, each more vibrant, invigorated, and colorful than the next. Here were the cyclists, the pedestrians, the high-rises, bus riders, cop cars, flags, and cabs. He had been working around the clock to complete an upcoming one-man show in Germany,



NYC'S ARTIST LAUREATE

Right: *Always Was Bit of a Dreamer*. Below: Dawn and Tom relaxing in their southwestern-themed home—a place to get away and recharge his visual batteries.

Tom's wife, Dawn, and my wife, Tamara, had met and hit it off in an aerobics class. Naturally, they wanted to share their happy bond with their significant others. And so one day I found myself steering the family Caravan, warily, to the Christophers' South Salem address.

In my experience, close friendships formed by one's mate do not guarantee the same between respective spouses. Tamara told me that Dawn's husband, Tom Christopher, was a professional artist. Intriguing. Fine art was a subject I knew little about, the contemporary stuff even less. Would I spoil my wife's friendship? The pressure was on.

Dawn welcomed us at the door, her blond curls and big smile radiating Manhattan Beach, but her accent putting her closer to Manhattan Island. Standing behind her was Tom—trim, tall, strong, with a hearty handshake and a quick laugh.

Within, the house was high ceilinged, with a prominent stone fireplace separating the living room and dining room. I gazed about for a clue to his artistry. The décor was southwestern, complete with a sturdy ranch-house dining table, Buffalo Bill poster, tattoo art, a rack of steer horns, and old saloon wheels of fortune. A cowboy artist, maybe?

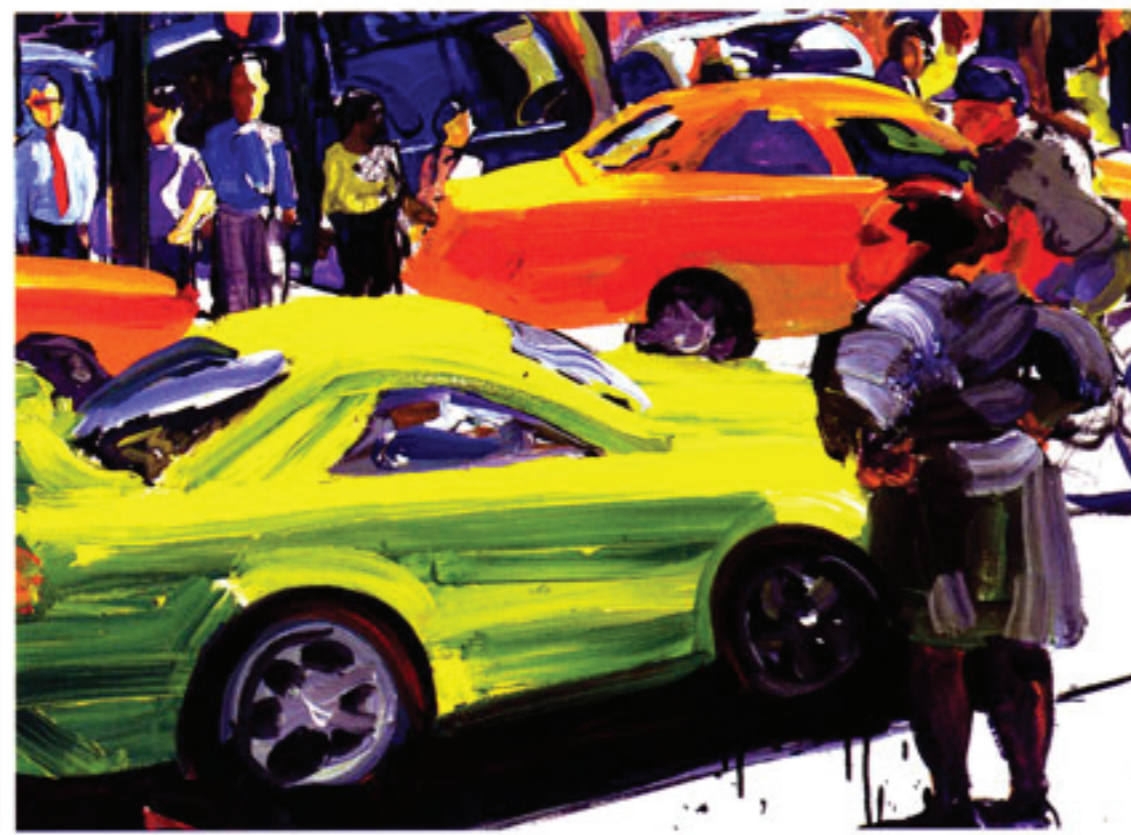
"Is any of this stuff your work?" I asked.

"Good God, no!" he responded, horrified. "That's all in my studio. I need to get completely away from it, to kind of recharge my visual batteries."

As I came to learn, Tom Christopher was a Beach Boys—pedigree native Californian—muscle cars, skateboards, body surfing, the works. And he can paint just about anything,

and has. Trained at the Art Center College in Pasadena, he has sketched portraits of mouse-eared visitors to Disneyland, designed graphics for the Los Angeles Olympics, illustrated stories for *Reader's Digest*, *People*, and *Fortune* magazines, sculpted an oversized hammer for the Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City, and even painted an out-sized image of the new 7X tri-jet for Falcon Jet's new hangar in New Jersey.

When he first came to New York in 1981, he had no job, little money, and no place to sleep. A helpful stranger told him to go directly to The Seaman's Church Institute,



HIS N.Y.C. IMAGES ARE PRIZED IN GERMANY AND JAPAN. HIS SHOW LAST FALL IN PARIS WAS A SELLOUT. PROPHETS AND ARTISTS ARE TRADITIONALLY IGNORED AT HOME, BUT HAPPILY, TOM CHRISTOPHER IS AN EXCEPTION TO THAT RULE.



where his Big Apple images are as prized as they are in Japan and France. His show last fall in Paris was a sellout.

Prophets and artists are traditionally ignored at home, but happily, Tom Christopher is an exception to that rule. His work is regularly displayed at major galleries in New York City and hangs in such high-profile venues as the boardroom of The New York Times, New York City Hall, and the Museum of the City of New York. In 1997, he was commissioned to paint a streetscape mural on the rear wall of the Roseland Ballroom. At 30 by 230 feet, it is one of the largest such presentations ever.

Even closer to home, Tom recently painted murals for the Front Street Cellar, his wife's wine shop at the former Croton Falls railway station.

Dining with the Christophers at our home one evening, I mentioned that my boys had become paintball fans. Tom was immediately interested. We stepped out on

the back deck, and I handed him a Tippman 98 Custom, fully charged with carbon dioxide, its ammo hopper brimful of marbled paintballs. Tom started blasting away at a nearby maple and underwent a kind of epiphany as the bark turned pink. (The biodegradable "paint" washes away with water, in case you're wondering.)

A few days later, we were invited to bring our weaponry to South Salem and battle it out with the newly armed denizens of Fort Christopher. We have returned often. These scrimages, which have involved up to 20 people, generally follow the same plan: adults against kids. The latter shoot and run much more rapidly; the former ignore all the rules, and none more so than our host.

In a recent shoot-out, one of the children pointed to a grown-up whose jacket was splattered with paint. There was green and yellow goo oozing down his head, and one of the eye pieces on his face mask was obliterated with pink.

"Hey," the boy said, "that guy's been hit a lot. How come he's still shooting?" He had a point. By the rules, the guy was toast.

"Oh, that's my dad," Tom's son Mackey said dismissively. "He cheats."

The battle done, the Chief of Cheats sauntered back to his pack of warriors, high-fiving his victorious band of middle-aged brothers. Smiling broadly, his jacket and stubble-top noggin festooned with streaks and splatters of yellow, green, red, and other hues, he seemed not so much an unrepentant transgressor as a living, laughing canvas.

Tom Christopher had crossed over; he had become a work of art. And never was a man so happy. **W**

A new show of Tom Christopher's paintings opened on April 30 at the David Findlay Gallery, 984 Madison Avenue, New York City 10021. Phone: (212) 249-2909. View his work online at: www.artnet.com/artist/4037/Tom_Christopher.html