



## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### THE CREATIVE LIFE

*Monet had his water lilies, and Tom Christopher has Times Square.*

**A** CRITICAL moment in Tom Christopher's artistic development occurred five years ago. He was sitting morosely in a sculpture park in Long Island City, from which a piece of his—an oversized bronze hammer embedded in four hundred pounds of concrete—had just been stolen. Teen-agers in backward baseball caps were loading cinder blocks into an old Pontiac Tempest, getting ready to sink the car in the East River. A station wagon towing a pushcart pulled up, and a man got out and dumped stale doughnuts on the ground. A pack of feral dogs descended on the doughnuts. Some people dressed in nice clothes stooped at the water's edge, cooked something on a small fire they'd built, and launched paper boats. "Everybody was completely oblivious of everybody else," Christopher says. "Suddenly I thought, This is just too good. This is the place for me."

Christopher looks like a tall, trim forty-six-year-old college sophomore. He wears plaid shirts, bluejeans, and black sneakers that are spattered with paint. His career has been so complicated that the David Findlay gallery—which is currently exhibiting several dozen of his paintings in a one-man show called "New York in Motion"—

had to leave some of the best parts of his résumé out of its brochure. After art school, in California, he supported himself briefly by painting instant portraits of tourists at Disneyland. ("The hardest thing was people who had wispy mustaches but you couldn't tell if they were men or women. So I would save the mustaches for last and keep asking these leading questions.") He painted scenes of the kidnapping of Patty Hearst for *People*, and he worked as a courtroom artist during the murder trial of Jean Harris. ("The jurors went to church together one Sunday, and I had five minutes to paint them all. It was terrible. I had eyes in the middle of foreheads.") Christopher and his wife got fed up with New York a few years ago and moved to San Jose. But then he realized that all he really wanted to paint was Manhattan street scenes, so they moved back. On most days, he stands for hours on various street corners near Times Square and observes the tide of odd-ball humanity that washes relentlessly past.

"There's this undercurrent of criminals, transients, and nuts," he says happily. "It's like looking at a beach scene and thinking, Oh, this is beautiful. But if you know there was a shark attack the day before, it's even better."

Christopher's pictures—which he executes in broad, fast, loopy strokes of boldly pigmented acrylic—are studies in light, shadow, motion, and human character. He is a realist with a strong sense of humor and a mildly hallucinogenic notion of perspective. Certain favorite themes recur: taxicabs, bicycle messengers, jumpsuited em-

ployees of the Sanitation Department. He is fond of his mistakes. Pointing to a streak of red paint that slants across the window of a taxicab in a picture called "Big Red Tour Bus on Broadway," he says, "This has no business being here. It fell from up there. But so what?"

Sometimes people who live in New York or are just visiting the city begin to wonder whether they really love New York after all. Christopher's paintings grab these people by the shoulders like a crazy sidewalk evangelist and force them to admit that they do. Arthur Sulzberger, Jr., bought one for the boardroom at the *Times*. Rudolph Giuliani liked one so much that Christopher gave it to the city, and it now hangs in City Hall. A maintenance worker in a hotel where Christopher had a show bought one on the installment plan, mailing a fifty-dollar money order every month. A few years ago, some Japanese businessmen decided that he had captured exactly what they love about the city, and they commissioned twenty-seven paintings of New York for a gallery in Osaka. They wanted one of Times Square, one of a basketball game, and one of some skateboarders. As for the twenty-four others, they said they just didn't care.

—DAVID OWEN