

Last Clock on Fifth Avenue

1996

TOM CHRISTOPHER (b. 1952)
Acrylic, with pencil, on canvas,
30 × 40
Signed and dated on verso: T.
Christopher, '96
Gift of the artist, 98.81.1



TOM CHRISTOPHER'S five-year stint as a courtroom artist under pressure to depict the drama of criminal trials ably prepared him for his next sustained enterprise: capturing "snatches" of New York City's kinetic streetscapes on canvas. "I try to take it all in quickly—the seamless movement of cabs, buses, bike messengers," noted Christopher, a transplanted Californian, in a 1998 interview.¹

It was New York's brash compound of speed, tension, and technicolor flux, so forcefully felt in the high-traffic neighborhoods of midtown and lower Manhattan, that ultimately persuaded Christopher to desert the West Coast, where he had been juggling several art-related jobs, and pursue New York as a central subject in the 1980s. Equipped with a camera for gathering on-location impressions, and ensconced in a leased studio in industrial Long Island City, he began to incubate ideas for his vivid, relentlessly energetic urban paintings. After a brief return to San Jose, California, in the early 1990s, Christopher returned to settle in New York a few years later. With an outsider's attentiveness to qualities that distinguish Manhattan's "aesthetics" from those of other metropolises, he broadened his compositional interests to include light as a vital force in his painted cityscapes. Admitting to having originally found New York "awful, gray and sullen," Christopher was now intrigued

by its crisp glare of northern light, especially in the spring and autumn, and by the power of that radiance to glue together disparate elements in the street; that is, to sculpt form while disguising detail.

Last Clock on Fifth Avenue compresses all of Christopher's painterly concerns with the contemporary cityscape into a single tableau, its title paying tribute to a holdover from New York's timekeeping past. The featured clock—actually one of three remaining on the avenue from the turn of the century, when businesses and hotels installed such freestanding fixtures as a public service as well as to advertise their locations—stands on the west side of Fifth Avenue between 44th and 45th Streets. Necessities in an era that predated the universally available "dollar watch," most of these time-management totems fell victim to lapsed maintenance when their parent properties changed hands and to worries about safety as vehicular collisions with them grew more frequent.²

Tilted in a perspective that has been termed hallucinogenic, the clock cues viewers to the playful qualities, ranging from subtle to exultant, that are a hallmark of Christopher's street scenes. Buildings bend inward or jut out from New York's methodical grid in slightly odd angles. Generic pedestrians bob along brightly lit sidewalks and weave past disembodied shadows, never quite certain about

risks ahead in the oncoming crowds or in the city's volatile asphalt zones, where stoplights are cautionary at best. The blinding floodlight of a fall mid-afternoon seems palpable, heightened by Christopher's intentional use of his white primed canvas, intensifying the sensation of brightness while creating a shifting dialogue between positive and negative shapes along Fifth Avenue's diagonal swath.³ His palette is also deceptive. Favoring bold, saturated Day-Glo pigments that on first impression seem natural to the late twentieth-century city, the composition, when dissected, reveals its underlying patchwork of lavenders, burnt oranges, teals, and other unexpected hues. (The artist credits his inventive colorism to the influences of German Expressionists Emil Nolde, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff and to the Bay Area figure painters he studied closely in California.) The end effect is of a city never fixed, containing stunning visuality and dissonance that often compromise the act of reading its specific messages. Pencil lines, appearing as frenetic scribbles on the canvas surface between and underneath Christopher's broad, active brushwork, indicate the narrative possibilities constantly developing, if never fully realized, on New York's streets.

Christopher's California art training (including studies at Sonoma State University and the Art Center College in Pasadena) and diverse employment experiences (his résumé notes graphic work for NBC Studios in Burbank, poster designs for the Los Angeles Olympics, and tourist portraits painted at Disneyland in Anaheim, among other pursuits)⁴ have been put to good use in the carnivalesque urban terrain that is presently his fertile creative ground. In the 1990s he has taught at the Parsons School of Design, exhibited his New York cityscapes in numerous gallery and museum venues both locally and abroad, and received important commissions from clients ranging from the *New York Times* to the Times Square Business Improvement District. For the latter, in 1997, he executed his largest New York streetscape to date: an exuberant and throbbing 30-by-230-foot mural of Times Square on the side of the renowned Roseland Ballroom at Broadway and 53rd Street.