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BREAKAWAY

Running the Show

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS BUSINESSMAN

Entrepreneurial spirit—and scenes of frenetic New York—prove a profitable mix

By Jeffrey A. Tannenbaum

THE HAMLET of South Salem, N.Y., sits in the quiet upper reaches of Westchester County, psychic light-years from the bedlam of mid-town Manhattan some 50 miles away. At his South Salem home, artist Tom Christopher might easily turn out acrylic paintings of the lush woods outside, or his family's swimming pool, or the handsome horses and jodhpur-clad riders that sometimes trot by.

Fat chance. Incongruously, what Mr. Christopher typically paints, five days a week in the loft above his garage, are bustling Times Square scenes. Many are crowded with brightly hued buses, taxis and bicycle messengers—all seeming to race through the canvases.

This is the art that Mr. Christopher prefers to produce—and finds he can sell. So he mentally tunes out the swimming pool, the woods, the horses and all the other pleasures of exurbia. Instead, with the aid of snapshots and sketches made in Gotham, he conjures up the anxieties, threats and dangers there. Eschewing pretty, soothing pictures, he self-consciously prefers messy ones with clashing colors and palpable tension. "I don't aim to please," he says. (Even his practice of signing most works on the back, not the front, annoys some collectors.)

The result is such striking—some say unsettling—works as "Flatiron Building Squeeze," in which a bicycle messenger narrowly maneuvers between automobiles; "Times Square Canyon," in which pedestrians wait to cross a busy street, and "Skater," in which a bold roller skater chases a cab and a bus. Retail prices for those and other Christophers range from $5,000 to $18,000, depending strictly on size.

At age 47, two decades after emerging from art school, Mr. Christopher has achieved a comfortable income. Besides producing "fine," or gallery, art, he takes on commercial jobs, such as art for brochures and calendars to promote the Staples Inc. office-supply chain.

All told, the pretax earnings from his work exceeded $180,000 last year, the artist says; the figure represents revenue of $375,000, less deductible costs. The money, he says, is the main source of support for himself; Dawn, 35, his wife for a decade; sons Mackey, eight, and Evan, five, and an Australian shepherd, sometimes-snappy Ginger.

"Tom actually makes a living as a painter, and that's unusual," says Rebecca Senior, a vice president of David Findlay Galleries Inc., New York, the principal pipeline for Mr. Christopher's work. "Most artists have to do something else on the side." She adds: "Tom's not just getting by; he's doing fine."

"From the day you leave art school, you are a small business," Mr. Christopher says. "You have to build a brand name people recognize. You have to produce something people want to collect and buy." But finding his niche took a long time.

A Californian by birth, Mr. Christopher says he became fascinated by art at age eight, when he began drawing funny faces with watercolors. He honed his technique at the commercially oriented Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, Calif., emerging with a B.F.A. degree in 1976. "I never wanted to be trendy; I just wanted to make a living and do good work," he says.

STAND AT DISNEYLAND

He began by setting up a stand at Disneyland, drawing quick pencil-and-watercolor portraits of patrons for a few dollars a pop. He also obtained free-lance jobs, drawing cars for Motor Trend magazine, for instance, and making courtroom drawings for use on television. But these initiatives together were producing only about $20,000 a year in earnings, the artist recalls.

Aiming for more, he moved in 1980 to New York, where he shared a two-bedroom apartment in the borough of Queens with his sister. For work, he obtained free-lance jobs from, among others, The Wall Street Journal's graphics department. "I had a miserable flat and no car," he recalls. "Luckily, I wasn't married. I didn't have a lot of money."

He sold himself aggressively, marching unannounced into the office of the art director at People magazine, for instance. Soon he had an assignment to draw a re-enactment of the Patricia Hearst kidnapping for People. (He tied up his sister and had a friend stuff her into a trash can, where she posed as Ms. Hearst.) "You have to make your own luck at this stuff," Mr. Christopher says. "You have to get over the fear of making a fool of yourself. You can't be afraid of showing your work to people."

In between assignments, he tried his hand at paintings for galleries. Tired of drawing people, he turned to portraying hammers, staplers, screwdrivers and other tools; he says he could make scissors look like birds in flight. In 1984, after tapping Mr. Christopher as the last-minute replacement for an artist who had dropped out of a show, a gallery in Manhattan's East Village began displaying the paintings. The paintings were priced between $400 and $800, he recalls. Each time one sold, Mr. Christopher received half of the proceeds.

His business got even better when, for artistic rather than monetary reasons, he began to turn out scenes of New York. "I had gotten my fill of painting objects," he says. "How many hammers can you paint?" So he made photographs and rough sketches of street scenes, at first in the Wall Street area's canyons and later in Times Square. Then, in his living room in a house he had bought in Queens, he began producing acrylic paintings based on the sketches and snapshots. "You paint because you have an inner need to paint something," he says. "Your heart has to be in it."

He tried to make a name for himself, any way he could. In 1990, this included a two-month stint creating—without pay—an outdoor mural 110 feet long and 10.5 feet high, named "Floating I-Beam," that brightened his neighborhood in Queens. "In a fine-art career you end up doing a lot of work free, just to get it out there," Mr. Christopher says.

GIFT FOR PROMOTION

The mural later was destroyed, but Mr. Christopher's name began to get "out there." In 1992, an art show at the Roger Smith Hotel in Manhattan included three Christopher paintings—displayed alongside works by such celebrated artists as Robert Rauschenberg and the late Mr. Warhol. The show was focused on New York City scenes. Another artist—whom Mr. Christopher had met through a collector who'd bought paintings from both—had recommended Mr. Christopher's work to the show's organizer, Molly Barnes.

To promote himself, Mr. Christopher mailed out hundreds of copies of a publicity release about the show. "Not only was he a good painter, but he also had the energy to get things done," says Ms. Barnes, the owner of a Santa Monica, Calif., art gallery.

Tom Christopher, and two of his paintings: "Messenger: Times Square," above, and "Backlight," bottom left.

To his delight, Mr. Christopher's sales picked up in 1993 when USAir's in-flight magazine—one target of his mailing—featured his art on the cover. Soon he got a Madison Avenue gallery in New York to take one of the Wall Street paintings. "It sold within a week," he says. "Then the gallery asked me for more."

Alas, the joy was short-lived: The New York art market softened, the gallery fell on hard times (and eventually closed). Meanwhile, a discouraged Mr. Christopher sold his house, packed up his family and moved in 1995 to San Jose, Calif. "That was a pretty dark time," he recalls. He stayed in San Jose—which he now derides as "an artistic black hole that sucks the life out of you"—until 1997, when he moved to South Salem.

But all the while he kept painting the Big Apple, and his career rebounded beginning in 1996, when he persuaded another New York outlet to sell his paintings on consignment. (That means the artist gets paid only if a work sells; then he splits the proceeds with the gallery, usually 50-50 in Mr. Christopher's experience.)

Then, Mr. Christopher finally got a decisive break when the ever-larger David Findlay Galleries, on a high-toned stretch of Madison Avenue, agreed to exhibit his work. "Lots of people buy art for the prestige," Mr. Christopher says. "Madison Avenue is known for having great galleries. I finally had a good showcase for putting my work up."

Indeed, for a 1998 single-artist show, "New York in Motion," the gallery displayed 56 Christopher paintings, many even brighter and more frenetic than the 47 Christophers at a comparable 1997 show, "The Streets of New York." "The paintings are definitely not for everyone," concedes Rick Novakovich, another Findlay vice president. "Some people experience a kind of vertigo or motion sickness from them. They don't like them at all. There's overstimulation, almost."

But many people love them. James Grant, a 44-year-old British-born author of thrillers ("Killing Floor," "Tripwire," "Die Trying," all written under the nom de plume Lee Child), says he is thrilled by the two Christopher works that he and his wife bought for their Pound Ridge, N.Y., home.

First, they bought a $5,000 painting ("Heading Into 42nd") of a bicycle messenger in Times Square. Then they paid $13,000 for "Empire State II," a skyline scene. "The artist's technique is sensational," Mr. Grant opines. "He paints with wild abandon. It looks like he does it almost carelessly, but it's incredibly precise."

Equally deliberate are Mr. Christopher's marketing efforts. He constantly calls on galleries, agents and others—including journalists—who might help advance his career. He has avoided what Ms. Morgan, his agent, calls "the Van Gogh syndrome" (after the Dutch master Vincent van Gogh), which she describes as the tendency of many artists to plug away in obscurity, avoiding marketing efforts. "Tom's not just some unfriendly artiste sitting in a corner," she says.

Several years ago, when Mr. Christopher met Alex Shear, a fanatical collector of pop-culture objects, he admired Mr. Shear's flair for gaining attention and soon offered him a painting in exchange for marketing assistance. Mr. Shear, verbally painting Mr. Christopher as a chronicler of New York's rebirth, helped him get the photo session with the mayor. Just in seeking such help, Mr. Christopher went further than do many other artists. Indeed, "As an artist, he's more entrepreneurial than most businesspeople in a lot of fields," Mr. Shear says.

Quiet persistence helps too. Not even Ms. Morgan, who solicits and negotiates contracts for Mr. Christopher's commissioned jobs, responded favorably the first time he called. Rather, he says, she changed her mind and called him years later, after further contacts, when he was generally better known.

When he finally did connect with Ms. Morgan, there was a quick payoff. She got him a job in 1997 overseeing a big mural for Roseland, a celebrated Manhattan dancing venue. Mr. Christopher took in about $14,000, after the agent's fee, but says the real reward was in visibility. "It's like having a free billboard for my work in Times Square," he says.

For all his efforts, Mr. Christopher is, of necessity, still rather passive in crucial respects. For instance, he has little to say in setting prices for his paintings. "If you play hardball about finances, it just won't work with these guys," he says of gallery owners. "They say we're lucky to be selling anything."

In the U.S., he now sells gallery art exclusively through Findlay. The alliance is crucial to his business, but how secure is it? Gallery owner Lindsay Findlay likens the arrangement to a marriage, saying she'll remain faithful to any artist who doesn't cheat on her, by going around the gallery and selling art directly to collectors. Mindful of Ms. Findlay's sensitivity on this point, Mr. Christopher says he now refers even neighbors to the gallery when they want a painting. (His commissioned work for businesses doesn't bother the gallery.)

BEYOND THE SEA

Though happy with Findlay, the artist also is trying to expand his overseas sales, now about 10% of his gallery-related business. He currently works with Galerie Tanenaga, Tokyo, and Galerie Barbara von Stechow, Frankfurt.

Despite all of his initiatives, Mr. Christopher says his art is foremost in his mind, money secondary. Not long ago, he accepted an over-$5,000 job to paint a still-life picture of two salad-oil bottles for use in ads, but backed out because the sponsor was insisting that he paint not only in pointillist style—foreign to him—but with muted colors. "It would have paid nicely," he says, "but it just wasn't for me."

With a distinctive style and a growing reputation, Mr. Christopher is much more upbeat than a few years ago. "I'm in a place where I'm semi-happy," he says. "I want to keep pushing my art. I think I've still only scratched the surface of New York City." He adds: "As long as I keep painting good paintings, I figure the business will be fine at this point." ■

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A COMFORTABLE PLACE

Clean-cut, energetic, and talkative, Mr. Christopher agrees that he has found a comfortable place in the crowded art world. "I'm not a Jasper Johns and I'm not an Andy Warhol," he says with good humor. "But I'm not on the children's birthday-party circuit doing face painting, either. I'm somewhere right in the middle."

To be sure, Mr. Christopher's fortunes could still swing down. If a recession hits or the stock market crashes, fine paintings will be harder to sell. If New York loses its regained luster, he'll fast be out of fashion. "I got lucky," he says. "If it were Detroit I loved to paint, I'd still be scratching out a living."

He says his priority is art first, not money. Still, in a field where many practitioners lack business discipline, Mr. Christopher has deftly built a home-based business. Like many entrepreneurs in less-creative fields, he sticks to a lucrative niche, cultivates strategic alliances and constantly looks for new ways to make his name known. "He brings the same energy that's in his paintings to the task of selling them," says Vicki Morgan, his agent for commercial assignments.

For example, Mr. Christopher lobbied hard to design an expressionist Absolut Vodka ad ("Absolut Christopher")—work he says was low-paid but high-profile. He also sought and won commissions to design posters for New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority and created several outdoor murals. He gave a painting—a Lexington Avenue street scene—to New York's City Hall, winning a photo session with Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. And to ensure that the Museum of the City of New York would display his work, he gave that private-sector historical museum a painting, too.

PORTRAIT BY JOHN PATRICK NAUGHTON