

Artist Tom Christopher's Energized Paintings Remind Us Of A Busy Pre-COVID-19 New York City



Patrick Hanlon [Follow](#)

May 4 · 6 min read ★



No one has painted the soul, aspiration and determination of New Yorkers so convincingly as Tom Christopher

York City's Times Square area are hollow now. At any other time, the trench that runs between Seventh Avenue and Broadway would be stomped over by fifty thousand people day and night. But because of coronavirus and quarantine, as we all know, everyone is missing.

No tourists. No Broadway stars. No media millionaires, UPS delivery persons. No naked cowboy, Disney-inspired costumes or other goblins.

The busy city of New York has been the profile of Tom Christopher who is not even from New York, which makes the best kind of New Yorker. Christopher's paintings, as you may know, hang in the New York City Historical Society, The Museum of The City of New York, New York's City Hall and, for a time, his thirty-foot by 230-foot mural of Times Square was in Times Square itself, a mirror for passers-by. Christopher even had a pop-up installation with fellow artist Andy Hammerstein grandson of Broadway lyricist Oscar Hammerstein. A bucket list project if there ever was one.



The thickest body of Christopher's work is New York City's street life — mainly the clogged aorta of Times Square. His images are best when the streets are gridlocked and people struggle across spongy asphalt. Christopher's brush turns the sun-glare off the street hot white and people are frozen in the moment.



“What Do You Mean, ‘Go To My Happy Place’? It’s Here”

Christopher titles his paintings with snatched sidewalk conversation. Like, “I knew it was Camille. She used to be the hat check girl” or, “Seriously, tell me you did not rent ‘Olga’s House of Shame’ OK?”, and “Let me put it to you this way: I had a fight with a meat grinder and the meat grinder won.”

It is painterly detective work. What Christopher seems to be after is the motive, Who are we? WTF are we all doing here?

His paintings offer clues. Times Square is a clue all by itself. The stooped woman schlepping her bag in midday heat is a clue. The paused bike messenger is a clue. The slumped guy trying to make it up Broadway in mid-afternoon sun is another clue. It would take a Midtown South Precinct detective to figure this out.

Here’s a hint. Many of Tom Christopher’s best collectors are in Germany, Tokyo and Paris. For those seeing New York from a

distance, the New York City grid is a symbol, the buildings are totems, the pedestrians and yellow taxi cabs are magical beings, the bike messengers, limos, Broadway showgirls, tourists and grifters are stirred from Uptown to downtown and from the Hudson River to the East Side. The mix of ordinary office workers walking alongside millionaires, musicians and movie stars is just part of the New York soup. The city is a paradox, a tempest of color, an anxious mix of lights and activity endlessly on the verge of spinning out of control. There is never a mute or a pause button.



What gives Christopher his edge in the midst of our nation's largest city, is that Christopher, a transplant from California, paints cars.

“He excels at painting automobiles,” says art critic Gerry Haggerty. “Christopher’s cars look like those we drive and/or sidestep...the intense hues and fluid look of Christopher’s self-

concocted acrylic is exactly right for the bright, uniform color of his cars' seamless skin." Cars give his paintings of Times Square the sense of streamlined motion.

(Note that the current COVID-19 era photographs of an empty New York City are outrageous not simply because the city is filled with empty streets. But because the great Avenues of Park, Seventh, Fifth and Third are without automobiles; the city is motionless.)

The first two hundred years of New York City images were of oversized sailing ships, oversized buildings and munificent monuments — proof sent back to the Old World as evidence of progress in the New World. Etchings from that time were often street maps depicting factories as landmarks. Paintings of Broadway, Astor House and lower Manhattan showed pedestrians and horse carriages diminished by the buildings around them. Protestant Americans venerated buildings and commerce the way European paintings featured thunderous clouds spilling saints and angels.

Humankind's relationship with its cities is a universal theme. Other great artists have depicted other great cities. George Grosz revealed pre-war Berlin via caricatures. Degas painted Parisian dancers. Reginald Marsh captured 19th century New York City street life and George Bellows painted boxers. They were all distant observers.

Tom Christopher's New Yorkers are not viewed from a bird's eye or from across the street. We meet them face to face. We stand next to them, so close that we can smell their second-day deodorant and going-to-theater perfume as we wait for the light

to change. The swarm of humanity is right in front of us at street level.



Tom Christopher has empathy for crowds. His mother took him to Disneyland the day it opened. He later worked at Disneyland drawing caricatures. Those quick studies carried him into a Los Angeles City courtroom for NBC News, where he served as a sketch artist during the Lee Marvin palimony trial. He also sketched John Lennon's killer, Mark David Chapman, and President Reagan's shooter, John Hinckley.

Christopher's quick, deft lines reveal that experience.

Line and color are the language of any painter, but Tom Christopher can draw. Human emotions are expressed in the slouch of a shoulder, hunched torso, the angle of a woman's head. The brush and pencil technique in his earlier work reveal

raw New York City. Buildings swerve and totter on the sidelines of perspective. Color runs hot over black lines. Hurried lines reveal visual physics: motion, tension, force, velocity. Elbow akimbo, the articulation of a bike messenger's ankle is shorthand slang for the nonstop frantic soul of a city. Yellow taxi cabs are paused for the moment, waiting to roar forward again. Everyone and everything has gotta be somewhere else.



Christopher's colors are a jellybean palette of oranges, greens, blues and purples. His paints are hand-ground by Art Guerra, the East Village alchemist who deals in aqueous pigment concentrates and rare colors. Christopher mixes Hansa yellow and extreme phthalo blue to make permanent light green. His Blue is phthalo blue red. Cadmium orange light. He also uses Rustoleum enamel from Home Depot.

No one has painted the soul or determined fury and aspiration of the mass of people who occupy New York City quite so often or so convincingly as Tom Christopher.

Tom Christopher's work is well-archived in personal collections in New York and around the world. His work hangs at the prestigious The Butler Institute of American Art, Galerie Barbara von Stechow in Frankfurt, Galerie Tamenaga in Tokyo and Paris. He was represented at the famous Upper East Side David Findlay Gallery on Madison Avenue until the art-quake of 2008 and for a time at The Barthfield Gallery on 57th Street until it, too, closed. Now, after an interval, he has found new blood at Laverdin Gallery on Park Avenue.

In a few weeks, the COVID-19 quarantine will be over and the planes and trains will let their passengers loose and the streets of Manhattan will become a cluster of people and cars and bikes again. New York City will look like itself again. It will look just like a Tom Christopher painting.



WRITTEN BY

Patrick Hanlon

Nontraditional, people-first brand evolutionary, author of "Primal Branding," TEDx, YouTube Creator Academy, PRIMAL.LIVE, founder primalbranding.co &Thinktopia®