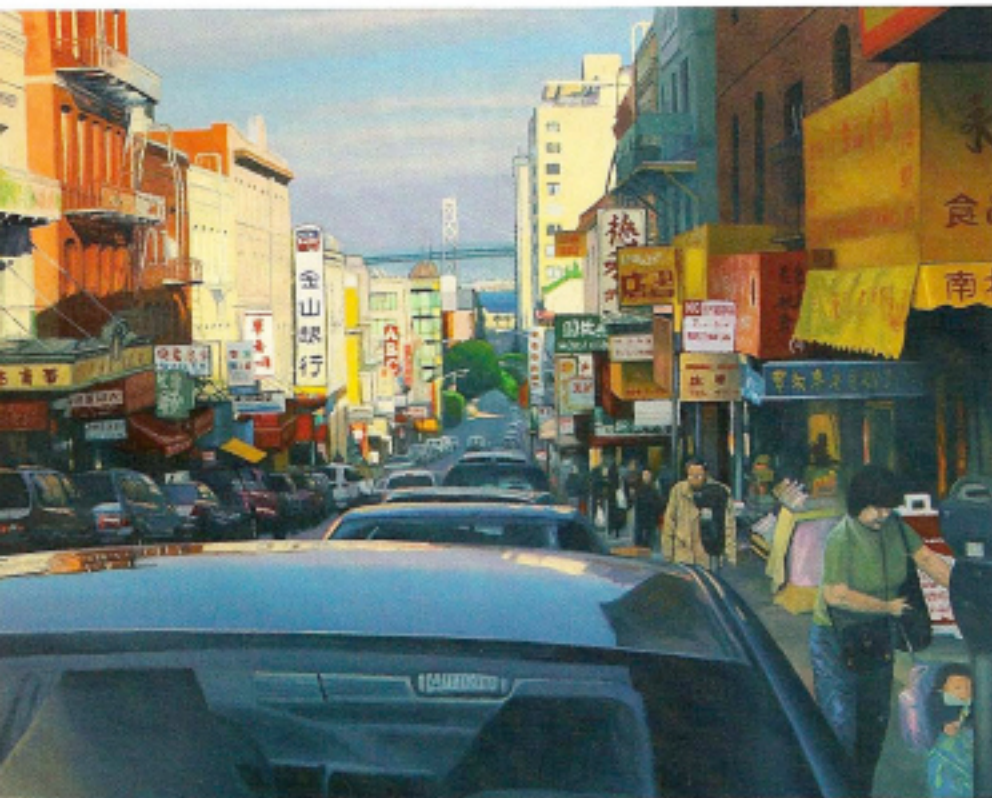


AN URBAN Jungle

Texas artist **David Leonard**
paints the streets of New York
and other cities

BY BONNIE GANGELHOFF



MING'S ASCENT, OIL, 28 X 36.

IT'S A SUNNY afternoon in New York City, and artist David Leonard is sitting in a park on the banks of the Hudson River. From afar he can see one of his favorite structures—the art deco-inspired Empire State Building. Although Leonard grew up in a small, rural town in central New York and today lives in Austin, TX, he relishes painting the big cities of the Northeast, especially New York.

He visits the city several times a year to gather photo reference material, he says. The occasion for this trip is the opening of his solo show at George Billis Gallery in Chelsea, where seven of his quintessential cityscapes are currently on view. The gallery, which Leonard joined in 2006, specializes in urban scenes.

Owner George Billis says the Texas-based painter brings something unique to the artistic table. "David's paintings are colorful and lush. And they show a great use of paint. He really captures the vibrancy of New York City," Billis says. "I don't mean the claustrophobic nature, but the true, day-to-day life of the city. For example, he puts cars and people into his scenes, which some of my other artists don't always do." Billis summarizes Leonard's visual voice this way: "He conveys a bright-eyed lust for the city as if he is seeing it through the eyes of an awe-struck tourist."

Indeed, in pieces like *SUPERMODEL* and *UP BROADWAY*, the viewer is pulled into Manhattan's teeming avenues, jammed with people and cars that all seem to be rushing to some important destination—a model on her way to an interview at The Ford Agency, a Wall Street broker going to a Knicks game at Madison Square Garden, a taxi cab headed to Times Square.

Because he didn't grow up in Manhat-



THE BOARD OF TRADE,
OIL, 33 X 42.

tan, Leonard theorizes that he has a special advantage in painting the city. Each time he visits, he brings a fresh eye to the City That Never Sleeps. Since he lives in Texas, however, the obvious question is: Why paint New York City? Leonard has a ready answer. He explains that at one point in his career he did try painting cityscapes in the South, but places such as Dallas and Austin lacked the density he desired. The Sunbelt metropolises are sprawling, spacious places compared to northeastern cities. "Cities like New York have more complex compositions because they were built pre-car," Leonard explains. "Most everything in the South is built for cars."

From the streets of New York Leonard can extract a high-energy collage of movement, colors, and shapes—billboards intersect with fire escapes, movie marquees

are juxtaposed against skyscrapers. "I'm always striving to straddle the abstract and realistic so that the paintings work on both levels," he says. The denser, more compact cities offer more raw materials that allow him to walk between both artistic worlds.

At first it comes as somewhat of a surprise to learn that one of Leonard's favorite artists is the late Italian painter



DOSSIER

REPRESENTATION

Norwood Flynn Gallery, Dallas, TX; Davis Gallery, Austin, TX; Julie Baker Fine Art, Nevada City, CA; Mason Murer Fine Art, Atlanta, GA; George Billis Gallery, New York, NY; www.davidleonardpaintings.com.

UPCOMING SHOWS

Group show, George Billis Gallery, through August 14.
Group show, Davis Gallery, through August 28.
Group show, Mason Murer Fine Art, October 8–November 13.



CALVIN'S JEANS, OIL, 28 X 33.

"I'm always striving to **straddle the abstract and realistic** so that the paintings work on both levels."

Giorgio Morandi, who is best known for his still lifes. But on closer inspection it makes sense, because Morandi's tableaux, which often feature bottles and vases, are realistic but at the same time simple explorations of forms and colors in the same fashion as Leonard's urbanscapes.

While Leonard paints New York City regularly—and, on occasion, Philadelphia, Boston, and San Francisco—living in Austin suits him well. The laid-back city has provided him with the opportunity to pursue his art at his own pace without the pressures of a more intense environment. "What I like about Austin

is that it's easygoing and people are very accepting of what's out of the norm, such as being an artist," he says.

Leonard moved to Austin in 1993 with a former girlfriend who was accepted to graduate school there. He quickly scouted out a small studio in an artists' co-operative and joined a supportive cadre of like-minded souls. For about six years, he focused on creating a substantial body of work. In 1999 a gallery in Boston offered him his first solo show, where he sold a good portion of his paintings. "It was very exciting, but I realized it had taken me years to get ready for that show," Leonard



FLATIRON, OIL, 36 X 48.

recalls. "After that realization, I knew I had to take my artwork more seriously, to work harder and devote more time to becoming a full-time artist someday."

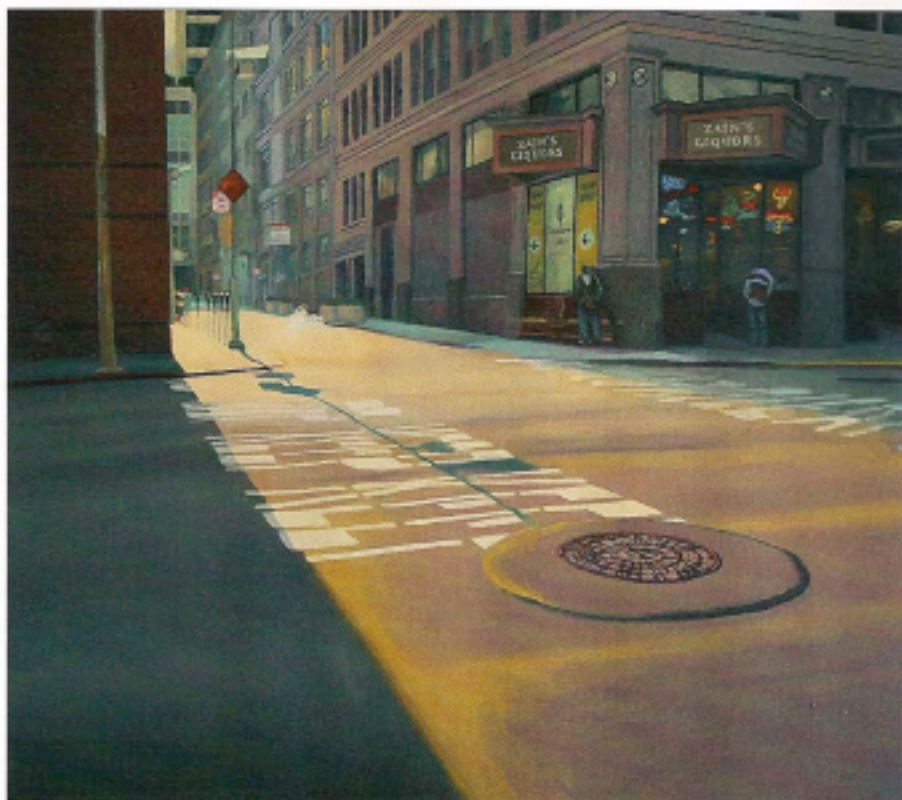
Looking back, he recalls that it was a long haul from his first brush with art as a high school student attending the New York State Summer School of the Arts to having his first gallery show. After graduating with a fine arts degree from Rochester Institute of Technology in 1985, he worked a variety of jobs to support his art, everything from busing tables to renovating kitchens. Finally, in 2004, he reached his goal of becoming a full-time fine artist.

OVER THE YEARS his work has become more focused and deliberate, he says. "I used to work on a piece over a long period of time with photo sources that I just happened to have," Leonard explains. "Now I deliberately go to places in the city to look for specific images, angles, vantage points, and light. Early on it was more haphazard."

While one of Leonard's missions is to have his paintings work on both abstract and realistic levels, he also wants viewers to add their own interpretations of what the modern-day city symbolizes. For Leonard, the structures in his paintings—his

primary subjects—are what he calls "the 21st-century working man's monuments. They represent our culture's dedication to production and consumption," he observes. "If you think about us in this time and place, you see how different we are than when we were an agricultural society. Now most of the work we do takes place in offices. Our way of life is reflected in these buildings. They are not only monuments to our way of life, they are also functional places where people make a living."

Leonard says he is always on a quest to capture scenes where the manmade has inundated the natural environment. In



THIRSTY SCHOLAR, OIL, 28 X 33.



SUPERMODEL, OIL, 28 X 33.

many ways, his work is akin to the Ashcan School of painters, a group of young American artists who painted urban scenes at the beginning of the 20th century. These artists—Edward Hopper, George Bellows, and Robert Henri, for example—were considered revolutionary at the time because they captured not only the energy of the city but also the grittiness. Like Leonard, they portrayed spontaneous moments in the everyday life of a metropolis.

Another reason Leonard wants to paint the city as he sees it today is because the urban landscape can change in an instant. That point came home to him in 2001. In April of that year he was in New York on his usual photo safari hunting for reference material. The World Trade Center hadn't really piqued his artistic imagination before—at least not like the Chrysler Building or the Empire State Building. But on this particular day he was driving across the George Washington Bridge when he caught a glimpse of the Twin Towers. He remembers suddenly embracing the image of the buildings, and he later he walked back across the bridge to shoot a series of photographs.

By early September 2001 he had just finished the painting and was debating whether to leave the American flags that flew in front the buildings in the final composition. Then came September 11, and Leonard made the decision to leave the flags in the scene. It seemed appropriate, he says: "The flag carried more weight than before. It was symbolic." The painting also reminded him how a skyline can change overnight, how buildings can be so quickly be leveled by man or by acts of God, such as earthquakes.

"Hopefully many of the views we see today will be here tomorrow. But we don't know for sure," says Leonard. "Twenty years from now cities and people will look different. What people are wearing and carrying will be different. But viewers can look at my paintings and see the way this landscape looked during my time. They can see, for example, that people wore jeans and carried plastic bags in the early 21st century. This is what our cities and people looked like. I'm documenting this time and place." ♦

Bonnie Gangloff is the senior editor at *Southwest Art*.



UP BROADWAY, OIL, 33 X 28.