

# art of the



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# city

by Jenny Meyer

## Skyscrapers, stop signs and street scenes

In the heyday of landscape painting, there was romance in the air. Nineteenth-century artists like Camille Corot, Joseph Turner and Thomas Cole packed up their easels and ventured into the countryside to capture the grandiosity, power and mystery of the natural world. Fast forward 150 years and those rolling hills and roiling seas have been supplanted by stop signs, skyscrapers and street scenes. The city is everywhere in contemporary art—including realist cityscape paintings, high-tech photographs and other projects that redecorate the drab metropolitan milieu. For today's urbanites driven to self-expression, inspiration is everywhere.

### THE GALLERIST

Hyland Mather, owner/curator of Andenken Gallery in Denver, points out that “art history has always produced painters who are interested in the towns and cities of the times. In the late 1400s the Limbourg Brothers painted ‘castlescapes’ and ‘villagescapes.’ Pieter Bruegel in the 1500s Toulouse Lautrec and his Parisian nightlife work in the 1800s ... the list goes on and on.”

Today, Mather has his eye on contemporary cityscape painter, Evan Hecox, and New York graffiti artist, KAWS. One of Hecox's chief concepts is *urban optimism*. “He depicts objects that most people would not consider beautiful at first glance,” says Mather. “Things like dumpsters, crushed cans, cigarette butts, broken-down signs and busy streets.”

KAWS takes an interactive approach to his work, physically altering the urban landscape that surrounds him. “He's done amazing work with the New York City bus station kiosks,” says Mather. “He has a key that unlocks the kiosks. He removes the advertisement inside, does one of his paintings mixed in with the advertising, slips it back in the kiosk and locks it up again.”

### THE PHOTOGRAPHER

As a commercial photographer and photojournalist, Larry Laszlo has spent most of his life in urban environments. Drawn to the gathering masses of the city, Laszlo began a project years ago to document the people, food and atmosphere of public markets. “As a small child I remember my grandmother taking me shopping in those places,” says Laszlo. “Whenever I traveled on commercial shoots, I always sought out the local public markets. I talked to the merchants, snacked on the local victuals and, of course, I took pictures. After years of this sort of activity, I realized I had an interesting body of work—something I should expand and develop.”

Laszlo focuses on year-round, permanent, mostly indoor markets that have existed in the same locations for decades, or even centuries. He's found 25-30 of them thus far, in large American cities like Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Boston, Cleveland and Atlanta, as well as across Europe. “In our country, we've lost many of these places to supermarkets and megastores,” Laszlo says. “In the rest of the world, there is hardly a town that doesn't have its public market—or perhaps several—playing a vital role in the foodways of the community.”

### THE PAINTER

Following in the footsteps of early landscape painters and the Impressionists, Daniel Hauben creates most of his realist cityscape paintings *en plein air*. He has spent the last 25 years capturing life in the Bronx, setting up his easel on sidewalks and playgrounds, and under elevated subway trains. “I'm a landscape painter,” Hauben says. “It just so happens that my landscapes are encrusted with the Bronx.”

Life in *plein air* can be challenging, but Hauben enjoys the reactions and comments from passersby. “People in the Bronx have no sense of personal space,” he says. “They're always getting between me and my canvas.” Hauben also fields a lot of requests from strangers to be included in his pictures.

Hauben finds a plethora of themes worth exploring in the urban landscape of the Bronx. There is the age-old dichotomy of man versus nature, as well as more contemporary concerns about the global impact of cities and humanity's role as careful steward of the natural world. “What I love about cities,” says Hauben, “are the layers, the sense of history, and the surprising juxtapositions. As a painter, I have the rare opportunity to step back for a moment and take it all in.”



No Place Like Home by Daniel Hauben, oil on canvas