

DANIEL HAUBEN
A Bronx Artist



IS JOURNALISTIC INTEGRITY
WORTH A BROKEN NOSE?

A Bronx History:
MORRISANIA

bronx

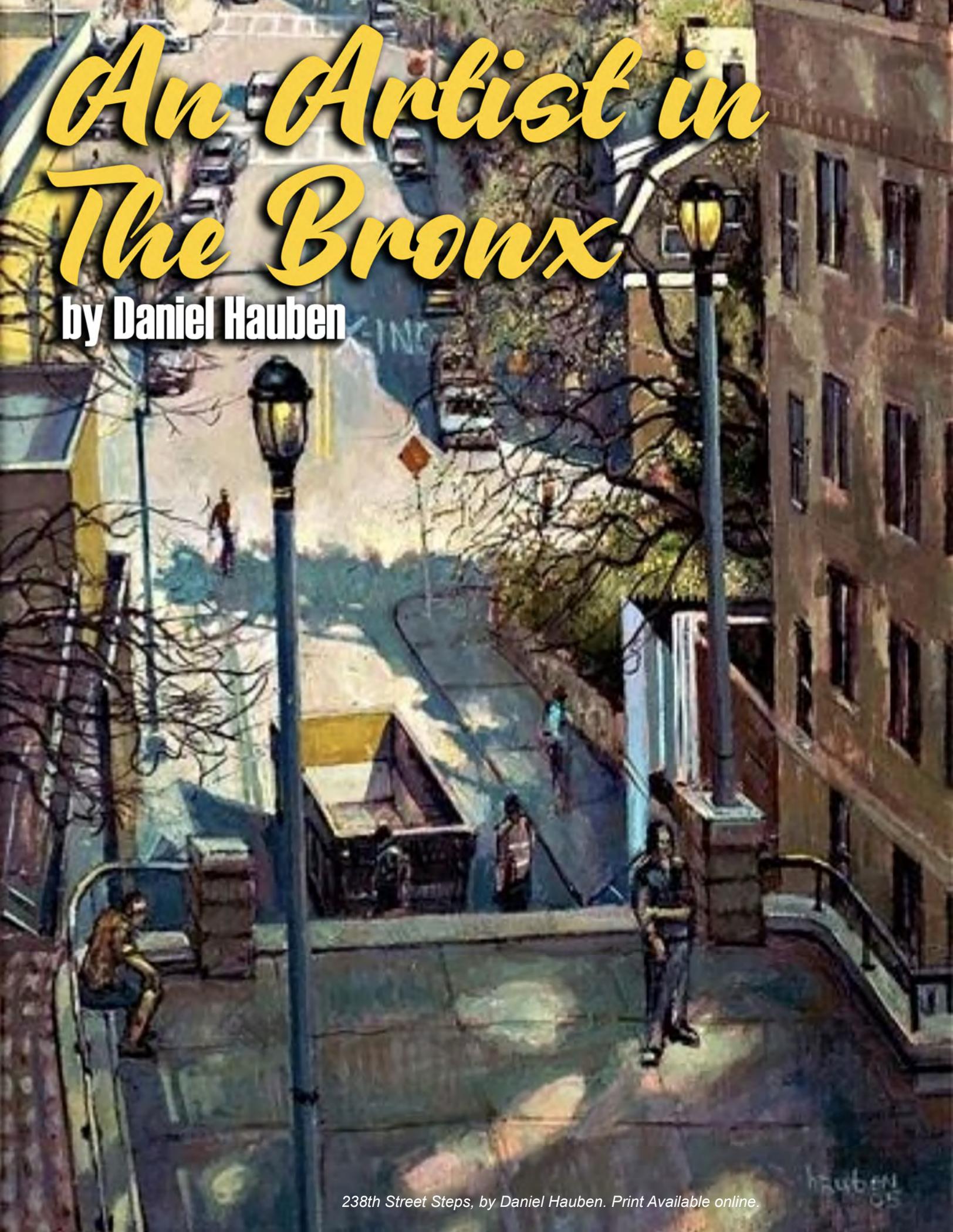
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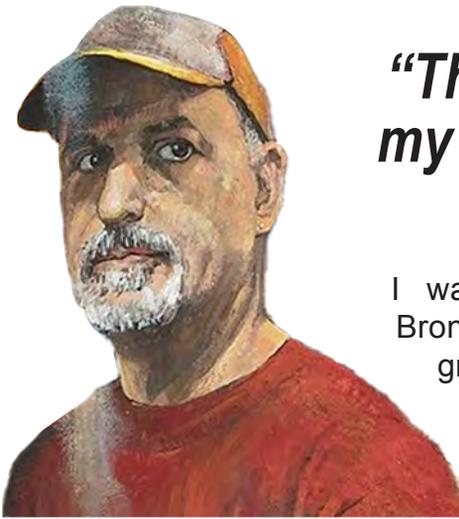
*Under Burnside Station.
Photo courtesy Daniel Hauben.*

An Artist in The Bronx

by Daniel Hauben



Hauben
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“This is a description of the evolution of my creative process and how it has been influenced by my environment.”

I was born in The Bronx, however, my grandfather operated a pushcart on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. My father and his four brothers went into the same business: selling fruits and vegetables, lady's bloomers, Christmas trees, and a variety of other items. In 1933, my father's family moved from Manhattan to the Crotona Park section of The Bronx. This was viewed as a move to the “country,” and it was, compared to the Lower East Side, which at that time had the greatest population density on the planet.

I was fortunate to be the youngest of five children. I say this because my two oldest siblings fulfilled the family quota of over-achieving, upwardly mobile offspring. By the time I came around, it was a new world. America was moving out of the Sinatra generation of the fifties and into the Beatles generation of the sixties. My parents were much more relaxed raising me than they had been with my siblings; they somehow had absorbed the “live and let live” mantra of the era. They didn't make too much of a fuss when I decided to quit Hebrew school, and then subsequently high school (feeling uninspired by either), and stubbornly determined to do what I wanted to do, and not what any teacher required of me.

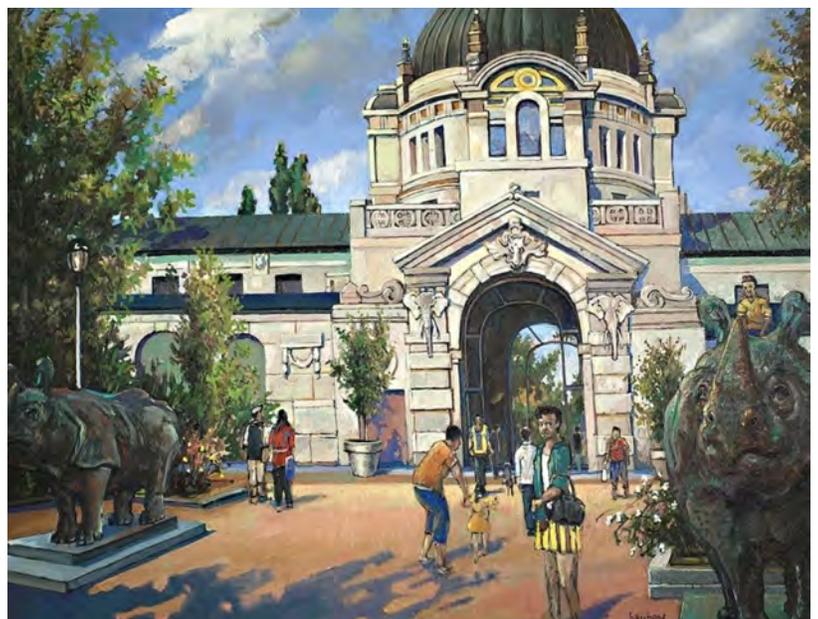
My father was way ahead of his time; he didn't seem to make a distinction between his vision and mine, and he saw the art business in much the same way as he saw the produce business. When I was fifteen years old, my father said to me “So, you like to paint. I think we should find someone who can help us.” He picked up the phone and called the Metropolitan, the Guggenheim, and the Whitney museums

with the idea of making appointments for someone there to look at my artwork. That's the kind of man he was. (Astonishingly, this small act led directly to my solo exhibition at the Bronx Museum of the Arts almost twenty years later.)

I inherited my father's work ethic, and some of the directness with which he approached everything. At the age of eighteen, while I was working the graveyard shift at the Bronx General Post Office, I had an epiphany: if I could channel the amount of time and energy I was expending every night tapping out zip codes on the sorting machine, into making art...what might I accomplish? For years thereafter, I was my own boss, keeping a daily record of the number of hours I spent painting.

YOU CAN TAKE THE BOY OUT OF THE BRONX, BUT...

After quitting the post office in 1975, I moved to Newton, Massachusetts (a suburb of Boston). And lived in a big Victorian house with my brother Eddie and seven others. I had never lived outside the city, or in a house (never mind one with



Bronx Zoo Center, by Daniel Hauben. [Print Available online.](#)



Arthur Avenue Retail Market, by Daniel Hauben. [Print Available online.](#)

a pool and a meditation room)! It was while I was in Boston that I started my first serious (six foot) painting. Ironically, the image was the view from my parent's terrace in the Kingsbridge Heights section of The Bronx. It was based on a magic marker drawing I'd done when I was 16 years old. I worked on this painting for four years, finally completing it from that very same terrace after moving back to the Bronx.

Initially, my plan had been to move from the bitter cold of Boston to the welcome warmth of New Orleans. My friend Mijo, who lived half the year in New Orleans, assured me that I could live there as an artist, paying cheap rent and painting outside on the streets of the French Quarter. Sadly, Mijo got sick and soon died of AIDS, and left without a plan, I moved back in with my parents in The Bronx.

BACK TO SCHOOL...

I figured the best way to focus on my art would be to go back to art school. I was awarded a full scholarship to the School of Visual Arts. By day, I was either in school, studying figure drawing and art history, or out painting in a city park, but by night I was journeying into, and painting surreal psychedelic mindscapes. My teachers told me I was "all over the place" and that I should stick to painting just city or landscapes, or surrealistic imagery.

For some reason, I thought that since this was art school, I ought to listen to what the teachers said. So I made my choice: I would focus all my attention on the cityscapes, and only occasionally allow myself to work some more imaginative ideas into them. As a teacher now myself, and an experienced painter, I wish I hadn't listened to these people's advice. I counsel my students to follow wherever their muses may lead. It has taken me almost twenty years to allow myself to be guided once again by my natural inclination to simultaneously explore in my artwork both the world around me and that of my imagination. I believe that my most exciting paintings spring from precisely the point where my intuitive right-brain, dreamscape reality meets up with (what I consider to be) the equally surrealistic every-day world all around. Needless to say, all these years of painting The Bronx has made me feel connected with the latter in a multitude of ways.

THE BRONX AS INSPIRATION

One of my earliest memories is of staring out the second-story window of our living room in Hillside Homes (now Eastchester Heights, watching for the first glimpse of my father MIKE rounding the block as he came home from work. I was intrigued with thoughts of what might be going on behind the closed curtains and half-drawn blinds of all the windows facing me around the courtyard. I must have

been captivated as well by the geometric patterns created by the interlinking bricks, windows, fire escapes, and cross-hatching antennae, for my Bronx paintings have always been built upon an underlying grid-like foundation. It was not just the physical structure of the city that impressed itself upon me, however. I vividly recall as well, the children's high-pitched voices as they played hopscotch and Ringalevio in that same courtyard, with the sunlight reflecting golden from the top windows, surrounded by the Ginko trees whose leaves became so yellow in Autumn. It may be a revelation to those who don't know The Bronx as I do, but the sun's light illumines and brings beauty even to the inner city - as does the energy and life force of the people who live here. Possibly because we would soon be moving, when I was eight years old, my parents allowed me to paint a mural on the wall of my bedroom. I painted a city scene complete with skyscrapers, cars and trucks, a big tree with a squirrel on a branch, and someone walking a dog. I shared the room with my brother, and the heads of our two beds came out from the wall with the mural. Using towels as capes, my friends and I would jump from bed to bed pretending we were Supermen flying through the city.

In 1965, when I was nine, we moved up in the world - from the second story Hillside Homes apartment on the fringes of the northeast Bronx, to a ninth-floor apartment in the newly constructed

Cannon Heights, high on a hill overlooking Kingsbridge. The view was far-reaching and inspiring. With our apartments littered with abandoned cardboard boxes and all manner of detritus from the move, my new friend David, and I were soon pre-occupied with gathering materials in order to construct a miniature town in my bedroom. We drew a street plan on the cardboard, upon which were placed houses and stores made from shoe boxes, Styrofoam containers and margarine tubs, with windows and doors cut out of them. During the following "formative" years, we developed The Town, (now populated with Wishniks and Rat Finks straight out of local vending machines), in increasingly complex and creative ways. At its zenith, The Town boasted a stream of running water, electric lights, underground, multi-storied dwellings with Plexiglas windows, realistically landscaped hill-sides, and a population of plastic characters living together in peace and harmony quite a bit more successfully than their human counterparts.

As I grew and matured as an artist, the creative outlet I gravitated toward was painting. I consider it a gift, to be able to devote as much time as I do, tuning into our world, observing and processing what I see and translating it into paint. When passers-by encounter me painting on the street, they are often perplexed by my choice of The Bronx as subject matter. When someone stops to spend a few moments watching me paint, quite often they will say, "You know, I pass this spot every day but I never really looked at it before."

It is my job to make people stop and look. But my paintings are not just replications of the world. As they evolve and coalesce through the filter of my experiences growing up in The Bronx, they (like the mural and The Town that preceded them) metamorphose into worlds of their own, worlds that contain both visual reality and a spark of the everyday surrealism that adds spice to our life in The Bronx. ■



Poe crossing The Grand Concourse, by Daniel Hauben. [Print Available online.](#)