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Palo Alto's Pamela Walsh Gallery shares tales of two cities

'Bay & Borough' explores six artists' reflections on San Francisco and New York City

by **Sheryl Nonnenberg**



With "Manhattan Philosophy," artist Carolyn Meyer highlights New York City's ubiquitous wooden water towers. Courtesy Pamela Walsh Gallery.

Before photography became widespread, artists relied upon their drawing and painting skills to capture the urban landscape. The artist known as Canaletto gave us a detailed account of what 18th-century Venice looked like, while Claude Monet and Henri de Tolouse-Lautrec captured the charm and bustle of 19th-century Paris. The somber scenes of Depression-era New York City are engraved in our consciousness thanks to Edward Hopper and, closer to home, Wayne Thiebaud painted the vertiginous streets of San Francisco.

"Bay & Borough," the current exhibition at Pamela Walsh Gallery, focuses on six contemporary artists whose work is influenced by cities on either side of the country; San Francisco and New York City.

"I work with several artists who paint cityscapes and a couple of them depict both San Francisco and New York. I began thinking about the

differences in their approaches and how interesting it would be to bring these works together in dialogue," said Walsh.

Walsh said that while three of the artists in the show — Andrew Faulkner, Carolyn Meyer and Larry Horowitz, are part of her roster — the other three — Lisa Breslow, Dmitri Cavander and Jenny Wantuch — were invited artists whose work she has admired.

"Each has a distinctive approach to the urban landscape, and I wanted to bring their work into conversation with artists whose perspectives would complement and expand the exhibition," she said.

All of the artists work in oil on canvas or panel and Walsh said that many of the paintings were done specifically for this exhibition. A primary motivation in her choice of theme for the show was to explore how the artists would use their particular skill set to portray a familiar setting.

"What interests me is how artists interpret the underlying geometry, rhythms, and spatial relationships of the urban environment. Through their choices of composition, perspective and abstraction, they transform the familiar into something entirely personal," she said.

In email interviews, the six artists described their relationship to San Francisco and/or New York as well as the particular challenges of depicting the constantly changing cityscape on the stillness of a painted surface.



Larry Horowitz's "Storm Over the Empire State" uses an unusual mid-point perspective to capture a stormy day in New York City. Courtesy Pamela Walsh Gallery

Larry Horowitz said that visiting New York City has been part of his life since he was a teenager. The gallery has shown many of his plein air paintings, mainly landscapes, in the past and he said that he has never been daunted by the complexity of painting a city scene. "I always felt the canyons of the city were just man-made versions of a paintable landscape," he said.

In "Storm Over the Empire State," the artist has taken an unusual perspective – not at street level or from a rooftop — but rather at a mid-point where we can discern the outline of several buildings, rendered in muted shades of orange and brown. The eye is drawn through a city "canyon" to the tall spire of a building, perhaps the Empire State Building. The roiling grey-blue of the sky indicates, as the title suggests, a weather event is imminent.

Lisa Breslow lives and works in New York City and described how she walks almost everywhere she needs to go with a camera in hand. Her chosen locations are places she sees every day but her inspiration is more ethereal.

“What draws me in is a particular quality of light; sunlight creating deep blue shadows on a street, sparkling on a rooftop, or, on a gray day, creating subtle tones in the lake’s reflection,” she said. She works from her photographs and finds that the city is a source of “endless possibilities.”



Breslow has two paintings in the show and both reflect, with a nod to Impressionism, a fleeting glimpse of two familiar scenes: a city street and the lake at Central Park. She works in short, light strokes of color applied in such a way as to create a completely smooth canvas surface. In “Silver Mist,” the viewer can feel the icy coolness of a winter’s day. The artist said, “I love finding moments of beauty and stillness amid the city’s incredible energy.”

Although she is director of the School of Fine Art Painting at the Academy of Art University in San Francisco, Carolyn Meyer paints in both cities.

“Painting in both New York and San Francisco is a contrast of authenticity, in a funny way,” she said. “I live and work here yet I am



Artist Carolyn Meyer is based in San Francisco, but paints both that city and New York. Her use of thickly applied paint in "SF Layer Cake" gives a sense of the verticality of San Francisco streets. Courtesy Pamela Walsh Gallery

drawn to New York ... both cities have a hold on my life with memories and a thousand stories."

Meyer said that she is inspired by the Bay Area Figurative painters Wayne Thiebaud and Richard Diebenkorn. She works by gaining access to buildings or hilltops in both cities. She uses sketches and photographs to aid her work and admits to a stylistic technique that has become her trademark: "a paint application that is unapologetically on overload most of the time."



With paintings such as "Pac Heights," Andrew Faulkner uses an abstract technique to give a sense of the area, rather than a literal depiction. Courtesy Pamela Walsh Gallery

She has 14 paintings in the show and her description of how she achieves texture in her work is not exaggerated. Each painting is heavy with impasto, the process of applying paint so thickly that it stands out from the canvas. In "SF Layer Cake" the verticality of buildings is achieved by stacking chunky blocks of

contrasting colors, bordered by two streets that climb, as the song goes, “halfway to the stars.”

“Manhattan Philosophy” homes in on a ubiquitous object in the New York skyline, the wooden water tower. These top-floor storage tanks have been providing water to the New York population for over a century. They seem antiquated compared to the glass and steel edifices around them and Meyer has captured that dichotomy effectively.



Artist Jenny Wantuch cites David Hockney as an influence in her bold use of color, seen here in “Bay Breezes,” which depicts a San Francisco neighborhood in unusually bright, saturated colors. Courtesy Pamela Walsh Gallery.

For San Francisco-based artist Jenny Wantuch, the draw is “how artists can make a city feel personal – not just depict its buildings, but give the place a particular mood and point of view.” She said that she has been influenced by David Hockney’s use of color and that can be seen in “Sunset Reflections” and “Bay Breezes,” both oil on panel. Her use of bold areas of saturated color for the somewhat wonky and out of proportion houses and streets makes for a fun and funky representation of San Francisco’s outlying areas.

“I am less interested in making a comprehensive record of a city than in simplifying and finding a view that feels distinctive,” she said.

Dmitri Cavander said that he generally paints what is familiar to him. He works in the photo-realism style of Robert Bechtle and said that in cityscapes, “I see architecture as playing an essential role in creating the feeling of a place.” His working method is sketching on site, using an iPad and the Procreate app. He uses these drawings as a foundation for larger paintings made in the studio.



With “Broadway to Battery,” Dmitri Cavander uses perspective and shadow to realistically portray San Francisco’s famously steep streetscapes. Courtesy Pamela Walsh Gallery.

In “Broadway to Battery” the artist has used diminishing perspective so effectively that the viewer feels they could walk right into the painting and continue up the rising street. There is exquisite detail in every colorful house and car and, like Bechtle, the use of shadows to evoke the time of day is masterfully done.

When asked why the city remains such an enduring subject, all of the artists cited reasons such as light, scale, energy and how it is constantly in flux.

Cavander summed it up: “I think many artists, especially artists who live in cities, find in their immediate environment a subject that is infused with a broad range of at times paradoxical feelings — excitement, peace, energy, loneliness, melancholy, order, chaos, beauty, ugliness. And perhaps, most importantly, the city is, after all, home.”

Bay & Borough is on view through Dec. 5 at Pamela Walsh Gallery, 540 Ramona St., Palo Alto.