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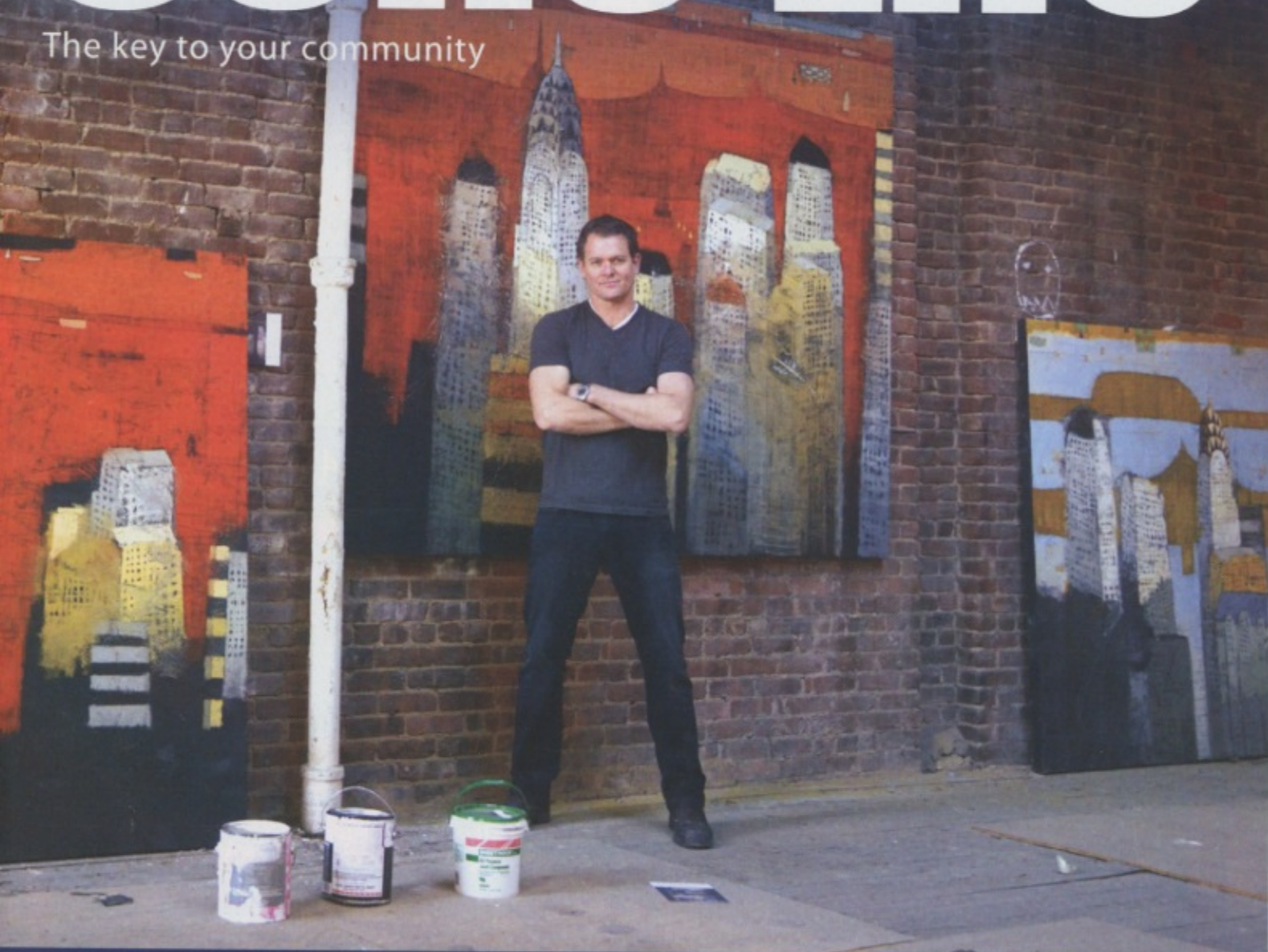
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SOHO Life

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City Impressionist

Artist Paul Balmer Creates Powerful Paintings

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Cover photo by Caitlyn Cabana



SoHo artist Paul Balmer's love of New York City is evident in his works.

Photo by Caitlyn Cabana

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Photo courtesy of hibu



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New York City as Mentor and Muse

Artist Paul Balmer creates powerful paintings of Manhattan cityscapes.

by Yukie Ohta, photos by Caitlyn Cabana
Community contributors

Often called “the city that never sleeps,” New York is alive, never resting, always in motion. Like the city itself, Paul Balmer’s recent paintings buzz with a constant, irrepressible life force. His vibrant cityscapes are rendered with a tenderness that gives them palpable character, as if buildings were figures rather than towers of cold steel. His almost childlike fascination with the city is evidenced by his use of bold color and simple shape, while the textured surfaces of his works evince his unwavering devotion to craft.

Artist inspiration

Paul Balmer was drawn to New York City by its vast wealth of promise. He has always been an artist with a deep emotional connection to his surroundings, so it comes as no surprise that leaving his native South Africa for this seat of modern culture entailed monumental changes in style, palette and subject matter.

Born in South Africa, where he lived until he moved to Australia at the age of 17, Balmer studied fine art at the Drawing School in Sydney and then moved into graphic design at the Sydney Institute of Technology.

“Art was something I did a lot of as a child, as with all kids, but I kept on at it as I got older,” he said. “At 11, I was making sculptured dinosaurs out of glue and toothpicks and drawing family portraits. I never thought a career was possible until I went to art school.”

After spending several years working in illustration and advertising in Africa, Australia and America, Balmer’s passion for art took him to Europe. He eventually found himself venturing across the planet to New York where he found a metropolis like no other he had experienced, bursting with endlessly intriguing juxtapositions of color, texture, scale and form.

“New York is all about contrasts,” he said. “Open areas versus congestion, small buildings up against tall skyscrapers, decayed surfaces suddenly taking on a sleek modern sheen. It is the most exciting place I have ever been.”



Balmer was born in South Africa, has lived in Australia, and has made SoHo his home for the past 13 years. “New York is all about contrasts,” he said. “Open areas versus congestion, small buildings up against tall skyscrapers, decayed surfaces suddenly taking on a sleek modern sheen.”

This world of contrasts continues to serve as an inexhaustible source for Balmer’s work and has found expression on canvas after canvas.

“The shapes,” he says, “come as unexpectedly as color combinations. I get all my inspiration from walking around the city and documenting it through sketches and photographs, not just of buildings, but also of textures and colors. Even on the grayest of days I relish getting out onto the streets.”

Abstraction in art

Balmer’s subject matter is the cityscape, but he doesn’t depict it as it is seen by the naked eye. Rather, he captures a mood, feeling or impression of the city and the farther his paintings fall into abstraction, the more successful he feels it is.

In a recent interview, he described the turning point when he made the transition from figurative to abstract painting.

“I was teaching in Switzerland and had many opportunities to travel around Europe — to Paris mostly — to paint Neoclassical architecture. This kicked off five years of realistic figura-



tive work," he said. "It was when I moved to New York that it all changed. I wanted to represent not only the building and scale of New York, but also the atmosphere and the craziness of the place. I started drawing this city without worrying about perspective. I flattened some surfaces that would usually have more depth and added textured areas to represent the 'feel' of Manhattan. It was not only more fun to do, but also more spontaneous and somewhat subconscious."

It comes as no surprise that Balmer's influences come from those artists whose work emphasizes spontaneous or subconscious creation, rather than a thoughtful, linear approach.

In art school he studied New York painters of the 1950s and 60s when Manhattan was home to an enclave of artists who gathered together to share ideas and agree on common principles that formed the basis of a new movement: Motherwell, de Kooning, Kline, Rauschenberg, Pollock, Johns.

"I am most influenced by the abstract expressionists who emerged during that period," Balmer said. "I admire them as much for their process as for the work they produced. I am especially drawn to the concept of 'automatism' coined by Motherwell — allowing the subconscious mind to come through in one's work."

Balmer allows a controlled randomness take over his canvases.

"You set it up so mistakes will happen; they can be erased or kept or form the basis for another start," he said. "I work on many paintings simultaneously and often don't know which direction they may go in. It's somewhat of an exploration and you can travel down that road and see where it takes you. Experimentation is a fundamental part of the process for me."

The process

The process of alteration is central to Balmer's work. After documenting the city — drawing it from numerous perspectives and angles while committing to memory interesting surface textures and details — and several rounds of sketches, each growing progressively more abstract, the result is controlled chaos verging on complete abstraction.

Art historian, critic and novelist David A. Cleveland observed in his monograph, "Paul Balmer: Cityscapes," that "to watch the artist at work in his New York studio is to be impressed by the concentrated energy, elbow grease, and struggle that goes into each work as Balmer brings to bear every resource of the imagination and craft in order to produce a satisfying result. He is relentlessly self critical. Standing before a large canvas he works it over with practiced flourishes and the exacting placement or removal of a brush stroke."

"Paul Balmer is a classic case of an artist seemingly born to his craft. He works diligently with obsessive attention and then lets go. The right balance requires a never-ending struggle between the consummate craftsman with full control of his materials and the experimentalist compelled to take risks."

- David A. Cleveland

Considering Balmer's affinity for combining direct, conscious perception with intuitive response, it seems natural that he would be drawn to artists such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, an artist deeply engaged with filtering the rational, objectively perceived world through the irrational, highly-personal lens of the unconscious. Basquiat gravitated toward a bold, expressive, tactile and primal aesthetic that let nothing rational or predictable seep into his work. Basquiat's work has been described as naïve and primitive, and these elements are certainly also present in Balmer's cityscapes.

"My New York paintings capture the city as an experience — not in any figurative or concrete way, but as an impression of place," Balmer said. "A successful painting for me is one that conveys an impression. The less realistic and the more irrational, the better."

Cleveland agreed.

"Paul Balmer is a classic case of an artist seemingly born to his craft. He works diligently with obsessive attention and
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Balmer's studio is in the Singer Building on Broadway at Prince Street. He also uses a temporary 10,000 square-foot space on Broome and Wooster, which is flooded with natural light.

The process of alteration is central to his work. After documenting the city, drawing it from numerous perspectives and angles while committing to memory interesting surface textures and details, several rounds of sketches, each growing progressively more abstract, result in controlled chaos verging on complete abstraction. To create his cityscapes, Balmer says, "I use all kinds of tools — some traditional and some not."

He may use rollers, cooking spatulas, old paint brushes, powdered pigments and on occasion a power sander.

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then lets go. The right balance requires a never ending struggle between the consummate craftsman with full control of his materials and the experimentalist compelled to take risks. To achieve this kind of balance takes years of concentrated exploration and experimentation that is clearly visible in his work."

Balmer's studio is in the Singer Building on Broadway at Prince Street and he also uses a temporary 10,000 square-foot space on Broome and Wooster that is flooded with natural light. He now exhibits his work around the corner on West Broadway at the Campton Gallery, but has also exhibited widely in the U.S., England, Australia, South Africa and the Netherlands.

SoHo Studio

It was Balmer's long-time dream to have a studio in SoHo, the neighborhood where so many of his "mentors" began their careers. Basquiat had a studio on Crosby Street and then on Grand Street. SoHo's history also loomed large in his imagination as a place that was a hotbed of creative foment in the 1960s, where artists lived next door to galleries through the 1970s into the 80s. Leo Castelli, the art dealer who represented Willem de Kooning, Robert Rauschenberg, Jackson Pollock, and Jasper Johns, among others, opened a gallery on West Broadway in 1971.

"My New York paintings capture the city as an experience — not in any figurative or concrete way, but as an impression of place."

- Paul Balmer

Balmer's dream has been fully realized due to his hard work, perseverance and raw talent. He is the most serious of artists, always thinking, working, creating. It is thus destiny that brought him to a city that is always thinking, working, creating, the city that never sleeps. Paul Balmer makes it look easy, however, as if his work appears organically, almost by accident.

"Letting accidents happen," he said, "is the fine line between craftsmanship and freedom."

For additional information on Paul Balmer's artwork and upcoming exhibitions, see paulbalmer.com.



