

ART BUSINESS TODAY



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Living for the city

Join the Grand Tour. City art makes buyers feel modern, sophisticated, liberated, whether or not they have visited the places that decorate their walls. **Pete Armitage** investigates

In 2007 Henderson Cisz carried off Best-selling Artist at the Art & Framing Industry Awards, a win that has been further consolidated by his top placing in the EPSON/Art Business Today Best-selling Images Poll (see p42). Cisz's successive victories clearly suggest that his 'bright lights, big city' vision continues to capture the

imagination of art buyers (Cisz also won the Up & Coming Published Artist award in 2006). And the artist is just one of a growing number for whom the city is a key motif.

As well as Cisz, DeMontfort Fine Art publishes David Farren, James Blinkhorn and Oana Lauric. Washington Green has just launched a new collection of six atmospheric city images by Paul Kenton (who also featured among the top ten in the latest Best-selling Images Poll). Washington Green also carries urban art by Neil Dawson and the newly recruited Louis Solano, whose editioned images of New York and London are produced on hand-fired glass.

Aquarelle Publishing sells the work of Alexander MacFaul, whose kinetic paintings seem literally to propel the viewer through the night-time streets of London and New York, and Aurora Fine Art has the lambent city views of Madjid.

City images by photographers Francis Aliefah and Jeffrey Jaye, and artists such as Alex Borissov and Colin Ruffell, who paints both London and New York, are among the most successful they produce.

'The big trend used to be naïve art but increasingly buyers like the sophisticated connotations of urban images,' says Washington Green Marketing Director Samantha Jackson. 'They are not just a city gallery sale. We are selling them in galleries right across the country.'

Poster publisher International Graphics launched Ayline Olukman's city art images at the start of the year 'and demand has been high ever since,' said Ian Cairns, Export Manager, adding that, 'urban art reflects some people's wish to move away from Tuscan vistas or dreamy floral landscapes in favour of something more tangible, – that they can more easily identify with.'

Mankind at full throttle

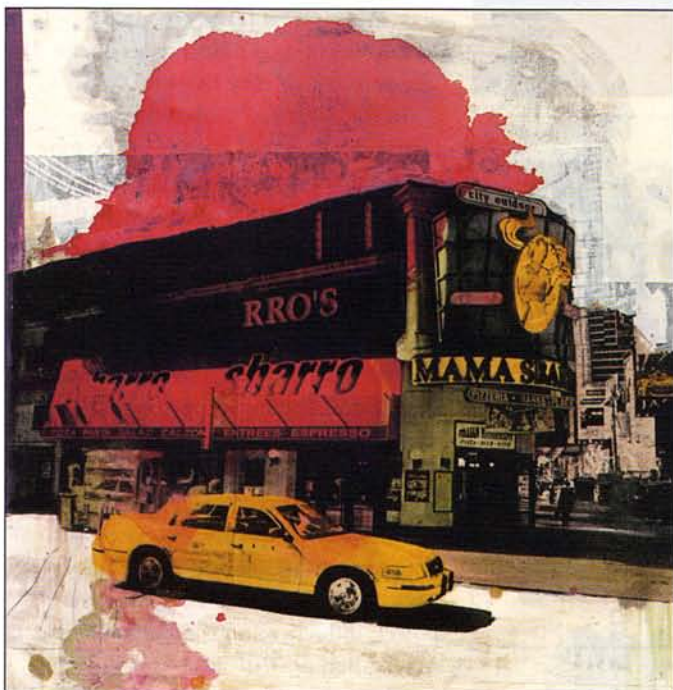
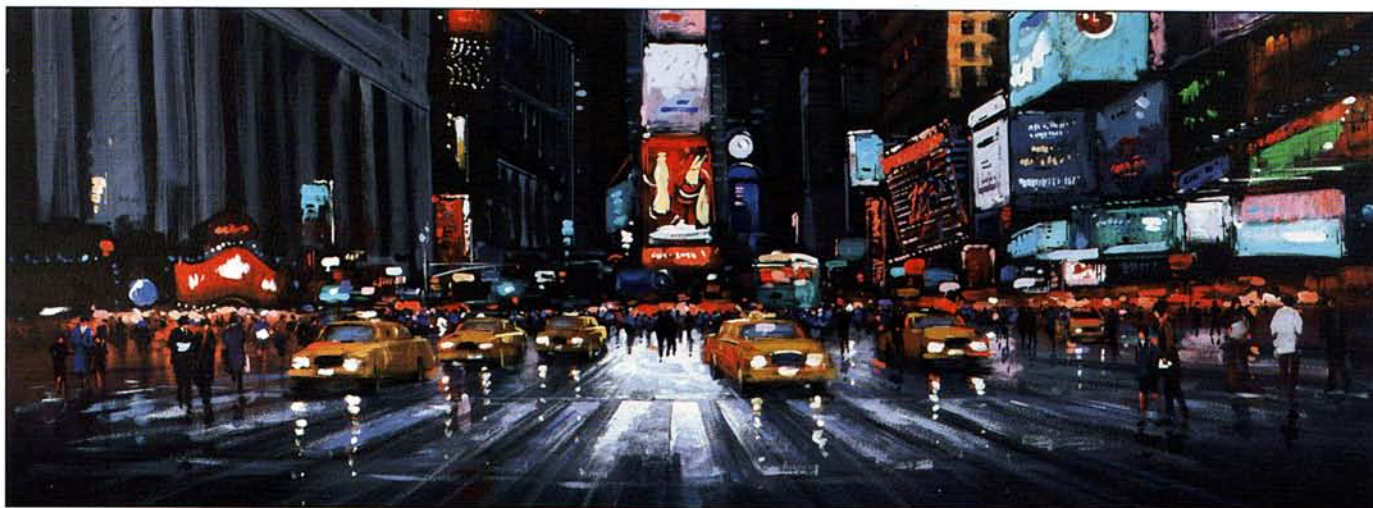
He is right. These images, often big, brightly coloured and expressively painted, connect with our excitement about the 21st century urban environment, the idea that, surrounded by stupendous architecture, we can indulge our consumerist fantasies in myriad shops, restaurants and bars, on streets that are alive with incident and entertainment – if not a little danger. This notion is everywhere, from celebrity obsessed newspapers and magazines to TV shows such as *Friends*, *Sex in the City* and *Brothers and Sisters*. The city is hip hop, diamond stud earrings, WAGs, Paris



Glamour mixed with grime, the feeling of being swept up by the city or of viewing it from the cocoon of a high-rise apartment. Who wouldn't want that on the dining room wall?



The American Dream by James Blinkhorn, published by DeMontfort Fine Art



Clockwise from top: *Midnight, Times Square* by Henderson Cisz, published by DeMontfort Fine Art; *Times Square AM* by Paul Kenton, published by Washington Green; *Pizzeria Marketplace* by Ayline Olukman, published by International Graphics Walmsley GmbH

Hilton and Banksy. Though often noisy and jarring, cities are also engrossing and vital. The idea that to live in them is to be at the heart of things is a powerful one. The city makes us 'players', masterful types jumping into cabs and furiously counting the minutes until we can bound free into some swish office or bar. That's what city images are about, isn't it? The jostling, contradictory experience of glamour mixed with grime, the feeling of being swept up in the city's frenetic activity – what Colin Ruffell calls 'the excitement and buzz of mankind at full throttle'. At other times, we want to be at one remove from it, enjoying its panoramas from the cocoon of a high-rise apartment or hotel.

People have all sorts of reasons for liking city images, suggested Colin Ruffell. He has collected comments from his buyers that range from: 'My favourite

is *St Pauls* showing red buses – reminds me of my first job' and 'Take me to the bright lights', to: 'So beautiful but also melancholy and almost haunting – a sense of the anonymity and cold wet loneliness that city life can be!' The city may offer a rush of adrenalin or be the last place you want to be. Whichever way around, who wouldn't want all this on the dining room wall?

History

Of course, city art has a long, illustrious history that encompasses both splendour and squalor, reflecting our love-hate relationship with urban living. The 18th century produced Piranesi's melancholy engravings of Rome, Canaletto's serene views of Venice and Hogarth's shocking, uproarious images of London: *Gin Lane* and *Beer Street*. The sprawling metropolis of 19th century

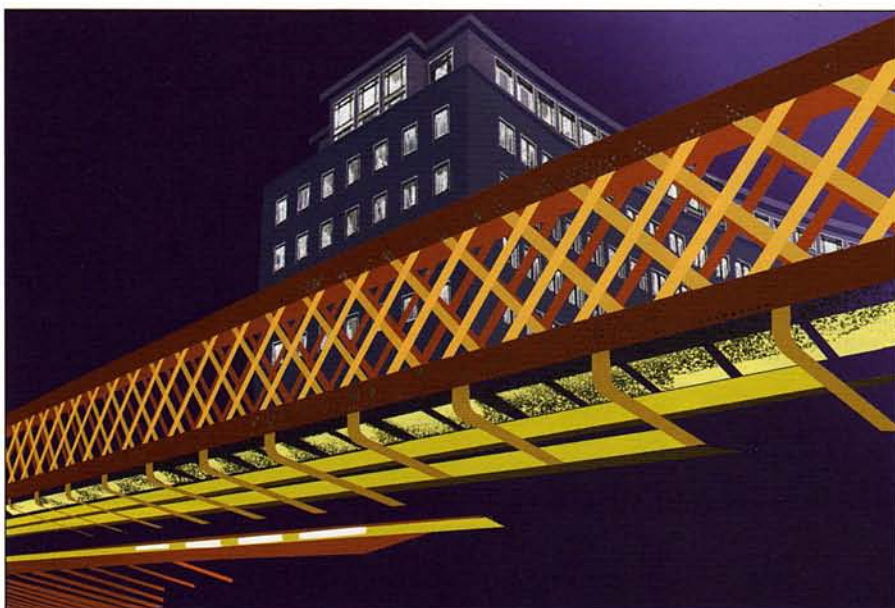
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Contemporary city art is inspired by films like *Taxi Driver* and *Manhattan*, as well as famous ads, such as the one featuring Wrangler man trapped in crosstown traffic

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Paris was captured in Charles Meryon's copper engravings (the more he made, the more terrifying they became) and later in the rather rosier, more romantic views of Impressionists Monet, Pissarro, Renoir and others.

A few years on Fauve artists such →



Clockwise from top: *Water Arch* by Andrew Turnbull, www.aktturnbull.com; *The Gherkin* by Louis Sidoli, published by Washington Green; *Busy River* by Colin Ruffell, www.artreo.com

→ as Dufy, Derain and Marquet were picturing the same city as blue skies, windows flung wide and fluttering flags. By way of contrast, 20th century Britain and America produced the glum city visions of LS Lowry and Edward Hopper – Lowry's smoky towns thronged with hunched, preoccupied figures and Hopper's downbeat cafés and dusty, deserted streets.

Photography and film

Urban art is strongly influenced by photography and film and borrows heavily from both in style and treatment. It is a two-way process, of course, because urban settings have featured strongly in the work of many leading 20th-century photographers. Two of modern photography's biggest names, Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Doisneau, bolstered hugely the idea that to live in the city is to be fashionable, spontaneous

and modern. One of the world's best-selling images is the photograph, *Lunch Atop a Skyscraper*, by Charles C. Ebbets, which shows workmen eating their lunch on a girder hundreds of feet above the towering cityscape of New York.

Contemporary city art is also inspired by films – *La Dolce Vita*, *Manhattan*, *Taxi Driver*, *Scarface* and countless heist movies, as well as famous adverts, such as Benson & Hedges' epic pun on the Manhattan riverscape or the Wrangler man trapped in a traffic jam with Jimi Hendrix's *Crosstown Traffic* crashing away in the background. It picks up style cues from innumerable car and cosmetics ads – the list goes on ...

Paul Kenton points to the influence of film on his work, making an interesting connection between Monet's early paintings and a medium that would not become universally popular until some

years after the artist's death.

'I love the way [Monet's] paintings evoke a mood in the same way a short film clip does, rather than simply being a physical representation of a scene. In the same way I see my paintings as a short film clip rather than a photographic still.'

'For me, the best artwork around today is in the form of adverts, video games and the imagery in music videos,' adds artist Louis Sidoli. It is a neat summary of many contemporary art buyers' taste.

Been there, done that

Of course, city art also draws on long established connections between affluence and international travel (though people have always bought landscapes of the places in which they live too).

In the 18th and 19th century, aristocrats collected images of the most important stopping points of the Grand Tour; to bring home images of Venice, Rome and Naples was the obvious way to show that they'd 'been there, done that'. In the 19th century, Paris – a magnet for anyone nurturing a creative impulse – became the place to be seen and images of its cafés, boulevards and famous monuments carried international cachet. Paintings of Paris or Venice are now generally picturesque and nostalgic, images of cities chiefly associated with honeymoons and holidays, whereas New York is the city that now symbolises power, influence and contemporaneity. Maybe Beijing will succeed it in time.

The genre's associations with affluence may account for the style, scale and format of many contemporary city images. They are mainly upbeat, energising and often large, printed or painted as box canvases. They serve as 'impact' pictures, prominently hung against the white walls of newly built homes and loft apartments, comments Mark Prince of Chantry Fine Art. And if you've made an expensive trip to New York, an image on the wall that sparks questions about it serves an important purpose, doesn't it?

Dream destinations

There is a long history of city images being bought by tourists who want mementoes of their travels. In the eighteenth-century, *capriccio* paintings of architectural landscapes, which combined both real and imaginary features, were very popular. Aspirational travellers like city art too – they like to imagine themselves in their dream destinations.



Lower Manhattan IV by Maurice Tan, published by Editions Braun

Though some of us will never make it, that doesn't stop us enjoying the potent mix of edgy sophistication and sense of freedom it projects.

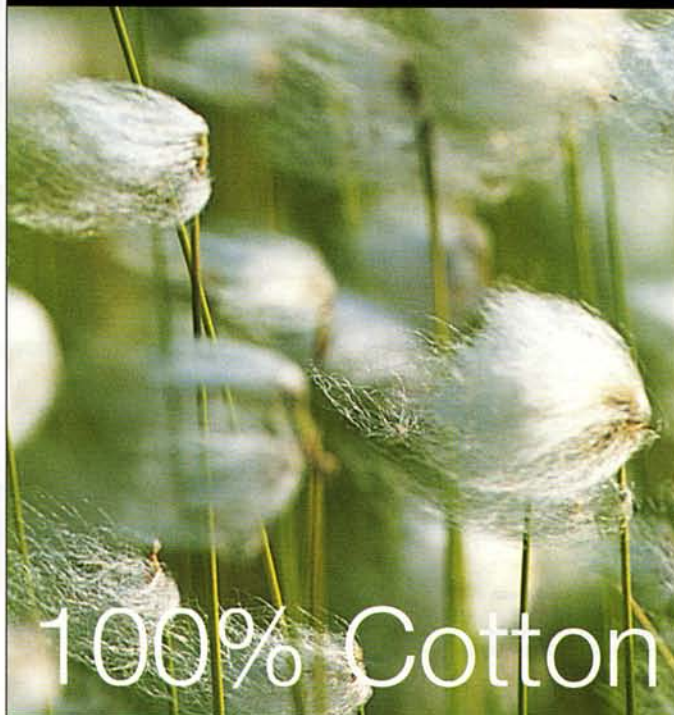
This is perhaps why sales of such pieces extend beyond the galleries in big towns or cities, suggests Stephen Eccles of Triton Galleries, Torquay, for whom Henderson Cisz's paintings and prints are proven sellers. These images reflect back on the people who buy them and in some sense signify the kind of people they are, he argues. Who would not want to be thought of as well travelled and worldly-wise, whether as a well-heeled Manhattanite or a Parisian boulevardier?

Susan Rydel, Key Accounts Manager at picture manufacturer, Artko, argues that the trend for big, splashy city panoramas is now being replaced by more elliptical images that intimate an urban lifestyle, backstreets rather than famous monuments. As examples, she points to *Evening Church* and *Wait* by French artist Denis Fremont, whose rooftop views and interiors, the latter sometimes featuring a lone musician, comfortable as a cat in his own space, clearly show the influence of Hopper, in subject matter, style and palette. Rydel also points to the Paris-based Singaporean artist Mo Maurice Tan, whose subdued acrylics and watercolours focus on building shapes, blocks of light and shade and are often left unfinished. He paints neglected streets or the backs of buildings, rather than the typical tourist views. A pair of his images, printed quite small and beautifully framed, provided a welcome contrast at this year's Autumn Fair Birmingham. Tan's work offers a more intimate, personal experience of the city and suggests there is plenty of life in the genre, even as our tastes evolve. ●

Pete Armitage is a freelance journalist

Additional research by Mike Sims

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