



# more than

Tony Peters' paintings are outward expressions of inner searches

# pretty pictures

BY BONNIE GANGELHOFF

SHABBY STREET corners, deserted rail yards, neighborhood liquor stores: When it comes to subject matter, these are a few of Tony Peters' favorite things. "The urban landscape is my natural environment. I wish to paint the world as I know and see it," Peters says. Indeed, while many of his Southern California contemporaries rush to capture crashing waves, sun-drenched beaches, and windswept eucalyptus trees, this Golden State painter finds his artistic calling in the big city. It's the rougher edges of the Los Angeles-to-

San Diego corridor that inspire him with a sense of awe and wonder.

Peters first appeared in the pages of *Southwest Art* in 2001 in the annual feature story "21 Under 31," which spotlights emerging artists. During the past decade, his interest in psychology—specifically the work of Jung and Freud—has grown and added new layers of meaning to his slices of urban life. Ten years ago, a freeway might have interested Peters simply as an iconic structure on the Southern California landscape. These days, the streets, byways, and freeways that recur in his works have taken on an array of symbolic meanings.

For example, in a recent painting of a driver racing toward an enormous, looming overpass, the freeway may represent the "weight of the world" on the figure's



▲ Buick Convertible, San Diego Freeway, oil, 16 x 41.

◀ Waiting, oil, 18 x 24.

shoulders. Likewise, an exit ramp might symbolize that a driver is headed to a desired destination, but it also might point toward a person's deeper concerns, such as psychological, spiritual, or artistic goals. In short, the concrete networks of streets and freeways—a dominant visual presence on the Southern California landscape—offer Peters countless metaphoric opportunities. And, as he points out, freeways are the channels from which most Southern Californians view the landscape. Through a windshield, in a rear-view mirror, or from behind the wheel, they get fleeting glimpses of various roadside attractions, from elegant palm trees to garish neon signs. Indeed, Peters is the first to admit that the landscape as seen from the car is one of his favorite points of view. And the automobile a person chooses to drive says a lot about him or her, Peters explains. “[Your car] is a statement to the world as to your personality, character, status in society, and the way you wish to be perceived,” Peters says. “On the road, it’s as if we’re on display in a glass box for everyone to see.”

In BUICK CONVERTIBLE, SAN DIEGO

FREEWAY, Peters portrays a young couple in a classic 1960s convertible, with the top down on a sunny Southern California day. While some of Peters’ urban scenes evoke a sense of isolation, in this case the mood is more optimistic, possibly reflecting a time when people, armed with high hopes, flocked to California in search of the American Dream—a new life and prosperity—in the country’s last frontier.

For Peters, the road also represents his personal journey as an artist. His artistic path began in 1997 when he entered the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, CA, and apprenticed with artists Ray Turner, Mark Ryden, and Richard Bunkall. Bunkall, in particular, would have a profound impact on Peters’ life.

As a student and gallery assistant at Pasadena’s now defunct Mendenhall Gallery, Peters was asked to help Bunkall, who was preparing for an upcoming show. Bunkall was battling Lou Gehrig’s disease; he could not drive, walk, or breathe on his own. Peters carried paintings to framers and photographers for him, among other things. And since Bunkall could no longer stand on his own, and he painted large-



## representation

**Alcala Gallery**, La Jolla, CA;  
**Just Looking Gallery**, San Luis Obispo, CA.

## upcoming shows

Solo show, **Alcala Gallery**, through March.  
**California Art Club’s Gold Medal Juried Exhibition**, Autry National Center, April 1-22.



Looking Inward, oil, 36 x 48.

scale works, he frequently asked Peters to turn his canvases upside-down on the easel so he could complete them. “I was so impressed with how Richard was content to spend the last efforts of his life immersed in his work. Not sulking, not wallowing in self-pity over the loss of his health ... he worked. He feverishly poured his all into the paintings,” Peters recalls. “The experience rocked me to the core. I knew I had to be a painter; nothing else would do. Through that experience, I was given the gift of absolute certainty that I was on the right path.”

Bunkall died in May 1999 while his show was still hanging at Mendenhall Gallery. Peters graduated from art school a year later. By the time he graduated, he had secured gallery representation, sold a number of paintings, and exhibited in shows at Mendenhall and Tirage Fine Art, also in Pasadena. Witnessing Bunkall’s passion for art up until the end of his life made Peters certain that instead of pursuing a steady paycheck and working as an illustrator or as an animation background painter, like some of his

friends, he should follow Bunkall’s path and pursue a full-time career in fine art. “Richard made me see that I didn’t have to latch onto a gimmick to attain attention as an artist. It made me see that collectors actually enjoy a well-crafted work of art that is both visually pleasing and personally expressive, and that as well-painted as Richard’s work was, it was artwork about ideas and more than pretty pictures.” Like Bunkall, Peters decided to create artwork that was more than just a pretty picture.

**PETERS’ PAINTINGS** have been compared to works by American painter Edward Hopper [1882-1967]. Both artists are adept at conveying a sense of loneliness and isolation in the modern metropolis. Hopper belonged to a circle of young urban painters living in New York City at the turn of the 20th century known as the Ashcan School. The creative coterie included legendary painters who made significant contributions to American art, such as George Bellows, Robert Henri,

Arthur Davies, and Rockwell Kent. But the term “Ashcan School” was a derisive one, coined by critics who considered the works ugly because they depicted ash cans, back alleys, poverty, and the harsh realities of life in the city.

The Ashcan artists were also known as rebels who were reacting against the popular American impressionists of the time—painters who tended to favor romantic, genteel views of the landscape and family life. “Hopper’s work does far more than depict the American scene. His art is about ideas. The work is quiet and solitary,” Peters says.

Peters belongs to a similar school of art—the L.A. River School of Painting, a term jokingly coined by Southern California painter William Wray to describe a loose-knit but serious cadre of contemporary urban painters who, like the Ashcan artists, prefer to portray the more frayed, forgotten nooks and crannies of the city, ranging from the L.A. River to nocturnal scenes of industrial warehouse complexes.

Like Hopper, Peters layers his paintings with ideas. Take his self-portrait,

LOOKING INWARD. In the painting a male figure peers through the window of a brightly lit diner. The title of the painting is taken from the writings of Jung, who used the term “looking inside” to refer to a sense of awakening, and “looking outside” to refer to a state of dreaming. For Peters, the position of the figure as he peers inside the diner is a metaphor for self-examination. The piece is also a reference to one of Peters’ favorite quotations by Hopper: “Great art is the outward expression of an inner life in the artist, and this inner life will result in his personal vision of the world.”

Often a Peters scene can encompass two very different interpretations—one optimistic and the other more desperate or cynical. Jung might call the more cynical interpretation a reflection of a shadow, or darker, side. He believed that everyone carries a “shadow” self and that the less it is embodied in the individual’s conscious life, the blacker it becomes.

In *GIRL ON BRIDGE*, a young woman sits over the railing of a bridge, her feet dangling. Is she simply enjoying the view, or is she about to jump? Likewise in *ESCONDIDO LIQUOR STORE*, the painting’s message is open to interpretation. Is the figure at the phone booth simply calling for a ride home, or is something shadier, like a drug deal, about to go down?

As this story was going to press, Peters was working on a private commission, a painting that depicts a 1972 Chevrolet Malibu convertible. He plans to continue exploring the theme of the road as a metaphor, working on large-scale paintings depicting freeways, highways, and city streets. Sometime during the year he plans to pack up his car and drive across the country, wandering the open road with his sketchbook, paintbox, and camera in search of new visual ideas. “For all of us, each day is a step closer to our last,” Peters says. “My wish is that I, too, will be content working through my struggles till the end, putting them onto canvas with the kind of eloquence of Richard Bunkall.” ❖

Bonnie Gangelhoff is Senior Editor at *Southwest Art*.

See more of Peters’ paintings at  
[www.southwestart.com/featured/peters-t-mar2012](http://www.southwestart.com/featured/peters-t-mar2012).



▲ *Girl on Bridge*, oil, 24 x 24.

▼ *Escondido Liquor Store Nocturne*, oil, 12 x 12.

