



THE ARTIST AS CRITIC: ART THAT INSPIRES

An Interview with Tony Peters on Edward Hopper (1882-1967)

by Miriam Nöske

In this feature we select a leading contemporary-traditional artist to describe a historic work of art that has inspired his or her own work with the purpose of providing our readers with a better understanding of art terminology and the ability to look more critically at art. Colour reproductions are available online at www.californiaartclub.org.

Miriam Nöske: What intrigues you about Edward Hopper's 1953 painting, "Office in a Small City?"

Tony Peters: It's the quiet and thoughtful composition of the scene, as well as Hopper's orchestration of light. The attention is on the businessman who is sitting isolated in his corner office looking straight ahead through a large unencumbered window. Hopper's architecture frames the scene, and it seems symbolic that the building and the sense of space is all about the man's thoughts.

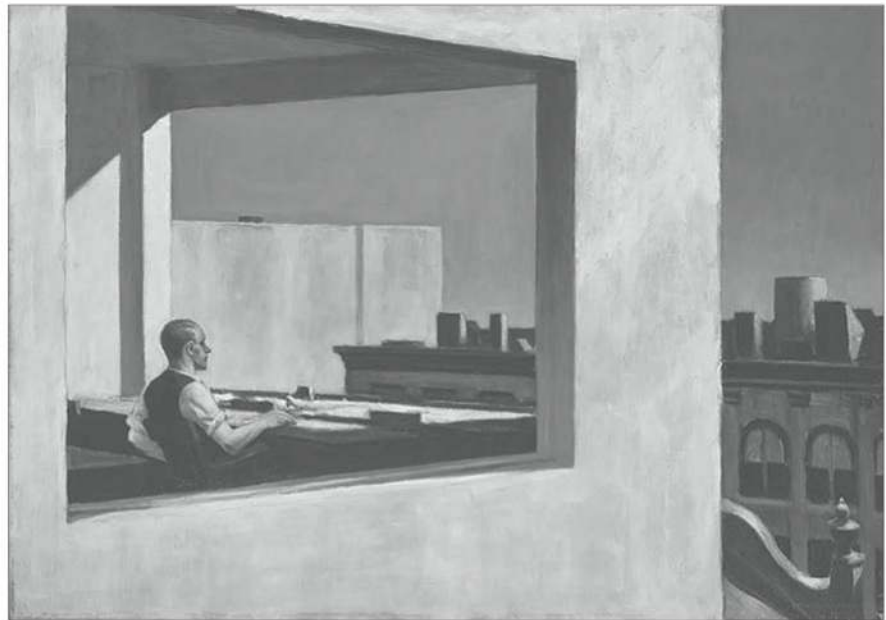
MN: What can you tell us about Hopper's own time and influences?

TP: Hopper belonged to a circle of young urban realist painters living in New York City during the turn of the twentieth-century. These groundbreaking artists included, George Bellows, Robert Henri, Arthur Davies, William Glackens, George Luks, Guy Pène Du Bois, Everett Shinn, John Sloan, Alfred Maurer and Rockwell Kent. These artists rebelled against the popular and genteel American Impressionist movement by portraying the harsh reality of poverty and human struggles in the big city. The group was derogatorily dubbed the "Ashcan School" by an art critic who commented about their dark paintings of back alleys lined with "ash cans." Like so many fine artists, Hopper's career started slowly and he compensated by doing a lot of illustration work. I like the style and common sensibil-

ity of these cutting-edge painters who succeeded in depicting a very specific urban mood.

MN: Where have you seen Edward Hopper's paintings in person and what was your reaction?

TP: I recently saw a selection of Hopper paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and at the



Edward Hopper (1882 - 1967)
Office in a Small City, 1953
Oil on canvas 28" x 40"
Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Whitney Museum, and in 2008 I saw a retrospective of Hopper's work at the Art Institute of Chicago. I was fascinated with every period of his career, but especially with his mature works where his focus on single or groups of figures in an urban setting conveys a sense of loneliness and intriguing psychological depth. For the last ten years, my own art has been concerned with urban landscapes and architecture. The distinct placements of figures in Hopper's paintings certainly strengthened my awareness to introduce characters in my own urban scenes.



MN: Your painting, “Looking Inward,” reverses the spectator’s standpoint inside an architectural space, as compared to Edward Hopper’s painting, “Office in a Small City,” where the viewer watches a businessman from outside a building. What interests you about this contrast of placements?

TP: The title for my painting, *Looking Inward*, is taken from a quote that appears in the writings of the famous Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung who used the term “looking inside” to refer to a sense of awakening, and “looking outside” to refer to a state of dreaming. Hopper’s businessman sits alone at his office desk isolated and absorbed in his thoughts while looking outside his window where there is no human activity. My own painting depicts myself looking inside a typical American diner through a window and into a brightly lit interior that is devoid of people. The positioning of the figure

outside the restaurant window in *Looking Inward* is a metaphor for self-examination. I also tried to enhance this idea of introspection by layering a different sense of blue light over the canvas. An area of brighter sunlight emphasizes the 1950s design of the diner interior and may well reflect on the city of Los Angeles’ past. Light is a great tool to direct the viewer’s eye.

MN: What interests you most in depicting the urban landscape?

TP: Most striking to me is the art and design of the early twentieth century up to the 1950s. In the ‘50s much of America was already built and the sense of design and style of that era is still eminent in most cities in the U.S. I like 1950s modern architecture, the use of chrome and the industrial shapes of that time. The city is a place where you go to work or to make things happen. My urban landscapes are paintings about the work environment, but I also like to capture the city’s history through depicting landmark buildings and certain designs of the past.

MN: Your paintings often project a stark sense of clarity and remoteness. How would you compare your approach to that of Edward Hopper’s?

TP: The sense of detachment in Hopper’s paintings is powerful. His compositions are based on simple geo-



Tony Peters
Looking Inward
Oil on canvas 36" × 48"
Winner of Art Ltd.’s Urban Landscape Award at the California Art Club’s 98th Annual Gold Medal Juried Exhibition

metric shapes that further emphasize a feeling of bleakness. By adding lonely people to this type of setting only enhances Hopper’s paintings as introspective narratives. My personal sense of isolation is expressed in much of my work, such as a series of paintings I did of the 1939 Los Angeles Union Station in which I portrayed a vacant terminal with empty chairs.

MN: Do you like to compose your paintings based on a preconceived narrative or is your work more of a formal discourse about the figure and architecture?

TP: In my earlier paintings, I often experimented with a limited colour palette that was comprised mostly of earth tones and greys to reference the limitations of an urban environment and simplified beauty. I am fascinated with skill and craftsmanship, but as Hopper knew, art that deals with ideas is more interesting than art that deals purely with technique. Hopper’s paintings are charged with symbolism and narratives of the unconscious. Years ago when I moved to Pasadena to study at Art Center College of Design, I took the train from San Diego, where I grew up, to Union Station in Los Angeles. Observing the landscape passing by on a train can be magical because you can only capture a split second of the scenery. It is the same as being surprised by a scene while walking home or driving on the



freeway and recalling these short moments later on. I cherish these unexpected moments as narratives for my paintings and often do quick sketches to help develop concepts for future works.

MN: Is “Looking Inward” a self-portrait?

TP: The painting was intended as a self-portrait, that’s why I cast myself as the actor on this stage. But it really could be anyone. A painting is often like a dream, where everyone involved is a part of, or a reflection of, some aspect of oneself. Almost any painting I do is really a kind of self-portrait.

MN: Edward Hopper’s paintings are often described as psychological puzzles. What do you like about investigating and creating paintings of deeper and intensified meaning?

TP: In Hopper’s paintings there is potential for conflict. Through the positioning and choice of characters, he creates suspense in his rather remote and cool-looking scenes. Hopper engages the viewer in trying to find out what is happening. The viewer is always kept at a distance. Although painting is my passion, I’m also interested in psychology and philosophy because they provide a better understanding of our cultural and interpersonal constructs. Sigmund Freud described the term “sublimation” as a transformative process of repression which is a source of creation. In addition, I like to think along the lines that Hopper once brought up, “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.”

MN: Do you draw and paint *en plein air* and from life models?

TP: I like to paint from life, but in the end, I am prima-

rily a studio painter. As far as working from the figure, I have always kept up with taking drawing and painting workshops and frequently organize life model drawing sessions in my studio. I believe it is necessary to achieve a good drawing craft to be a successful painter. My larger paintings are created in the studio only. What interests me is the shift between natural observation and a world created out of pure imagination.

MN: What literature and museum collection would you recommend?

TP: My literary resources are “Art and Fear” by David Bayles and Ted Orland, “Man and His Symbols” by Carl G. Jung, “The Road Less Travelled” by M. Scott Peck and an audio book by Gail Levin titled “Edward Hopper, an Intimate Biography.” Regarding museum collections I enjoy my visits to the Timken Museum in San Diego. New York’s Metropolitan Museum and the Frick Collection are impressive. I would also recommend the Brandywine River Museum in Pennsylvania with its collections of outstanding American paintings and illustrations.

Notes: The author Miriam Noske is the California Art Club’s Exhibitions Curator. Tony Peters is a Mentor Program Member of the CAC, and at the Club’s recent 98th Annual Gold Medal Juried Exhibition his painting, Looking Inward, received the Urban Landscape Award from Art Ltd. magazine. Peters was a scholarship student at Art Center College of Design where he graduated in 2000. He continued his art education by apprenticing with Richard Bunkall (1953-1999), Ray Turner and Mark Ryden. For more information about Tony Peters, go to tonypetersart.com.

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