

# A Sense of Awe

Southern California painter **Tony Peters** has a reverent eye for Los Angeles

*By Bonnie Gangelhoff*



SEVENTH STREET, OIL, 30 x 60.

**T**ONY PETERS STILL VIVIDLY REMEMBERS the train ride that carried him north to Los Angeles from his home in suburban San Diego. He was reading a book about discipline as the train steamed towards the sprawling metropolis where he was about to pursue his dream of becoming an artist. It was a mere five years ago that the neophyte painter disembarked at Union Station, eager to start classes at Pasadena's prestigious Art Center College of Design.

Much has already happened to Peters since then. Only 25, he has seen his renderings of the urban Los Angeles scene featured in more than five gallery shows over the past several years. And he has become popular among collectors who share his appreciation of the history and architecture of the nation's second-largest city.

Some of the first scenes he saw in the City of Angels are among his favorite painting subjects today—the train yards, Seventh Street scenes, and the tattered corners of downtown



Los Angeles. Peters is fond of referring to his painting style as neoclassicism. "I like to look at Art Deco buildings and old power lines, not for nostalgia's sake, but rather to portray them in the tradition of landscape painting, as part of a journal of places I've been, and the memories and moods I experienced while there," he explains.

Even though he has lived in Los Angeles for half a decade,



TONY PETERS.

Peters still enjoys playing tourist, he says. On any given day he combs the city and snaps

photographs of atmospheric cafes, funky clubs, and scruffy downtown streets. At home he will tape as many as eight shots of a scene together and place them in a photographic "sketchbook."

Some of these images inspire his paintings. Take *THE WHISKEY*, for example. Last spring on an urban photo safari he walked by the legendary Whiskey A Go-Go on Sunset Strip in West



"The Whiskey" by Tony Peters

THE WHISKEY, OIL, 36 x 36.

36 x 36, oil, 2002





FRED'S 62, OIL, 12 x 28.

Hollywood—a night spot where infamous rock stars like Jim Morrison and the Doors got their start. He stood outside the building and marveled at its architecture, saturated color, and history. And he marveled at the fact that top pop music still pumps out of it today. “As soon as I saw it, I realized that I had only viewed the club at night,”

he says. “I had never seen it during the day when it is so calm and without people. I knew I wanted to paint it.”

For Peters, buildings like the Whiskey A Go-Go and the Wiltern Theatre on Wilshire Boulevard have a life and presence of their own. “Standing in front of them, you are in awe as you think about their history,” he says. The Wiltern is a green-gilded Art Deco landmark built in 1931. In its early years it was a movie palace, but today it is a well-known concert venue. The theatre is located near the Miracle Mile, the stretch of Wilshire Boulevard between LaBrea and Fairfax avenues that is home to other grand old Deco buildings, stately palm trees, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Peters recalls seeing the Miracle Mile and the museum for the first time and being impressed by the vast collections, including works by some of the Ashcan painters. As

he drove home along the Miracle Mile he thought seriously about what he wanted to paint. “The Ashcan School painted New York,” he says. “And I remember thinking, ‘I want to paint my new city and capture the sense of place here.’”

Peters thinks that for many Angelinos, the awe is gone for their city. They are numb to the rich history and architecture that surrounds them every day. No doubt those same folks would shake their heads in wonder when told that he also views the city's vast web of freeways as visually intriguing. He sees them as examples of classical architecture, with their giant cement columns and archways. “These huge man-made creations are similar to a modern-day Great Wall of China or the Coliseum in Rome,” he says. “Thousands of years from now many people may be seeing the remnants of our freeways.”



SAILBOAT, OIL, 12 x 12.



For him the miles of concrete ribbons that snake through the city are metaphors for life's many pathways and choices. "When you are under one of these things you get the sensation of destiny," he says. "This big burden looms over your head, and you have to decide which way to go."

Peters suspects he knows the freeways intimately, as well as any taxi driver. In art school he was an assistant at the now-defunct Mendenhall Gallery in Pasadena, where his job included making frequent deliveries around the city. It was during his gallery stint that the owner gave him an assignment that influenced his art and changed his life, he says.

In 1997 the gallery owner asked him to assist the prominent artist Richard Bunkall, who was dying of Lou Gehrig's disease. He helped Bunkall prepare for what would be his last two gallery shows in spring 1998 and 1999. "Richard had little strength and could paint less and less often," Peters recalls. "There was no strength in his right arm, but his right hand still had two mobile fingers, so he could slightly but masterfully move his brush with the help of a brace."

Since Bunkall was unable to reach the top of his monumental canvases, Peters would turn them upside down on the easel so he could continue working on them. "I could see how much these paintings mattered to him," Peters says. "They were his dying statement."

Later, when Bunkall was finished, Peters would load the



WILTERN THEATRE, OIL, 24 1/4 x 14 1/4.

paintings into his truck and drive them to the gallery. "It would always rain, and it seemed to me at the time like the sky was crying," Peters recalls.

Once at the gallery he would contemplate Bunkall's

somber renderings of huge ships, planes, and trains for hours. For many viewers including Peters, the works evoked a journey through life and time. The canvases were sometimes punctuated with references to literary (CONTINUED ON PAGE 150)



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sources such as *Moby Dick*, *The Odyssey*, and *Hamlet*. "It was a spiritual experience, and I looked at the paintings like they were holy relics," he says.

"I also kept thinking, here was this man at the end of his career and here I was at the beginning of mine. At the time he was 44 and I was 22. I saw a glimpse of the years ahead for me and thought, Richard has been working at this for 22 years and this is the artistic conclusion he has come to. Where am I going? I saw that I had my work cut out for me, but I also saw that a lofty goal was attainable."

Today Peters keeps a relief sculpture by Bunkall, who died in 1999, on a shelf near his easel. The dominant feature in his studio, though, is an L-shaped, 17-foot-long bookshelf packed with art books. Several paintings by Ray Turner, a favorite teacher at the Art Center, adorn the walls. Every available surface in the room is filled with brushes, paints, and artifacts.

His thinking about art has coalesced into two separate pathways over the past five years, Peters says. On the one hand he sees creating paintings as very much about hard work and putting ideas into action. At the same time, he views creation as a spiritual experience. "Painting has become a doorway that has opened my eyes to a whole spiritual way of looking at things," he says. "Painting at its best does that."

Peters plans to travel down both roads on his artistic journey in the years ahead. And his goals for the future are simple: "I want to express my culture and my time," he says. □

PETERS IS REPRESENTED BY TIRAGE GALLERY, PASADENA, CA.