

Slice of Life

Scott W. Prior's high-energy canvases capture the mood of the urban scene

BY BONNIE GANGELHOFF





▲ **Market Street Hustle**, oil, 28 x 32.

◀ **Café Zoetrope**, oil, 12 x 16.

A BIKER pedals down a narrow lane, wedged between an oncoming trolley car and a bus. In his left hand he balances an umbrella. It's a rainy day in downtown San Francisco—puddles, soggy streets, and other vehicles are all shrouded in cool gray light. In **MARKET STREET HUSTLE**, artist Scott W. Prior captures both the high energy of the big city and the somber mood of the cloudy skies. There is an immediacy and spontaneity to the artwork that invites viewers to step inside the painting for a moment. "I want

viewers to feel like they are right there with me," Prior says. "If I get the wow factor going for myself, I know I am onto something good, and people will feel it. I want the viewer to say things like, 'Damn, that's a good painting.'"

Sometimes starting a painting can be a battle, Prior says, but **MARKET STREET HUSTLE** "just flowed." Then again, the artist knows his subject matter intimately: Although he lives in Southern California today, he once called San Francisco home while attending the Academy of



representation

www.scottwprior.com



Midtown Mules, oil, 28 x 32.

Art University. During those years he crisscrossed the city, walking, biking, and driving its cramped streets, often with his painting gear in tow.

The painting showcases Prior's signature style, which he describes as post-Impressionism, referring to his penchant for tight drawing but loose paint application. "When I was at the academy, I was really into the loose brushwork of the Bay Area artists, but I'm much slower nowadays," he says. "I try to study my subjects more, being more intentional with each mark and not so loosey-goosey in slapping paint around."

In terms of subject matter, Prior's slice-of-life works hark back to the California Scene painters, a group of early 20th-century artists known for capturing Golden State people, places, and landscapes. Fittingly, *MARKET STREET HUSTLE* sold recently to California art collectors Mark and Janet Hilbert, the founders of the Hilbert Museum of California Art in Orange, CA. The museum is highly regarded for its extensive collection of works by legendary Scene painters such as Emil Kosa Jr., Rex Brandt, and Millard Sheets. These days the museum is also adding works by contemporary

artists like Prior who carry on some of the Scene painters' traditions.

While Prior's body of work embraces all genres, including landscapes, figures, and still lifes, his soul belongs to the city. Destinations like San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York City offer him the high-octane scenes that fuel his creativity. But Prior is never afraid to step out of his comfort zone when an out-of-the-box idea intrigues him.

For example, earlier this year he was chatting with friends in his weekly Tuesday Art Night sessions. The topic: horses in landscape paintings, which is a pet

peeve of Prior's. The artist admits that he went on a bit of a rant to the group, poking some good-natured fun at painters who plop token horses into every landscape painting to help it sell. "I went on to them about how I was taught at the academy that if you do a good enough landscape painting, you don't have to add a person on a horsie in it," Prior says.

Then he shared an idea with the group that was marinating in his imagination, an irreverent spoof on the "horsie syn-

drome." Prior imagined a painting depicting two hefty mules named Pancho and Cisco lumbering down Lexington Avenue in midtown Manhattan. "One mule has a rider on it that resembles me," Prior says. "The other is a pack mule that has all the things I would bring on an adventure, like a skateboard, surfboard, fishing pole, ukulele, art supplies, and camping gear."

The Tuesday Art Night artists liked the idea. And when the pandemic caused the group to disband recently, Prior

went to work in his studio, completing *MIDTOWN MULES* as this story was going to press—adding, perhaps, a dash of surrealism to his current body of work.

PRIOR GREW UP IN Costa Mesa, CA, in the heart of suburban Orange County. From an early age he was active in sports, treasuring hours spent skateboarding and playing soccer and handball—but also suffering an array of injuries. In first grade he broke his left foot playing handball. Oddly enough, that broken bone marked the beginning of his lifelong journey into the art world: His mother, seeing that her lively son was now bored while recuperating, brought him books on how to draw cartoon characters. Prior began using the first of what would be many sketchbooks throughout his career. Three months later, he broke his other foot. Unable to play sports once again, he pulled out his sketchbook and continued filling it with "cartoon characters, little war scenes, and space stuff."

In high school his passion for sports continued to take center stage. Then during his sophomore year, he broke his leg on a camping trip to Baja California—time to pull out his sketchbook and fire up his imagination once again. Once the bones knitted together, Prior tried out for and made the wrestling team at Estancia High School, eventually winning top awards in statewide competitions.

After graduation, Prior bounced around to different colleges and odd jobs, searching for the right path to follow. He explored physical therapy, business, nutrition, and radio communications, but nothing stuck. Seeing Prior struggle, his mother once again intervened, this time suggesting that he sign up for art classes. Prior listened and soon enrolled in illustration classes at Orange Coast College, where the pieces of his future career puzzle began to come together. Instructors were impressed with Prior's drawing ability, offering praise and encouragement to continue his art studies; in 1992 he graduated with an associate degree in illustration. Without hesitation, he packed his bags and brushes and moved to San Francisco to attend the Academy of Art University, where he studied with well-known



Pacific Sparkle, oil, 12 x 9.

artists like Craig Nelson, Bill Maughan, and Huihan Liu. "Studying art and being in the city is where I was supposed to be then," Prior says.

Prior graduated with a bachelor's degree in illustration in 1997 and returned with his wife, Wendy, to Southern California. There he set up a freelance business specializing in storyboards, illustrations, and background scenes for film and television. In his free time, he painted and taught art classes at Palos Verdes Art Center. A fellow artist there, Dan Pinkham, told him about the California Art Club and suggested he apply for membership. Prior did and was accepted on his first try. Looking back, he considers that a turning point in his career: With membership came opportunities to

introduce his work to the public at prestigious shows and museum exhibitions. Paintings started to sell, and galleries called to represent him. In 2001, Prior launched his full-time art career and never looked back.

TODAY PRIOR SPENDS hours creating paintings in the garage studio at his home in Oceanside, CA, about 40 miles north of San Diego. He is a signature member of the California Art Club and the Laguna Plein Air Painters Association, and he's won an array of awards from organizations such as the Portrait Society of America.

Prior says his daily life has not changed much amid the current pandemic. "I'm

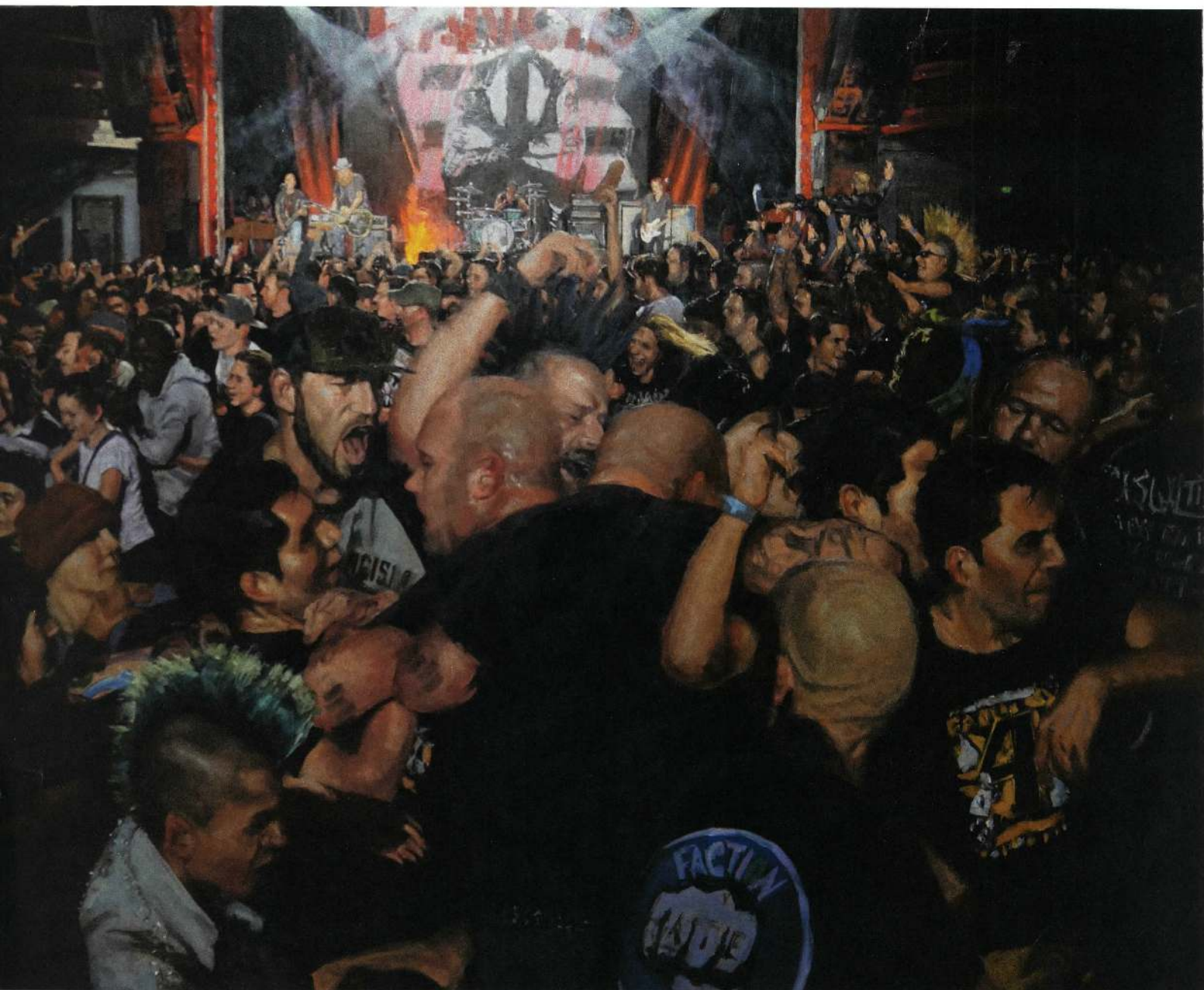
a recluse anyway and usually stay at home in my studio all the time," he says. "What the pandemic has done is to make me think about trying out new ideas, like the mules in Manhattan and a multi-figure painting that has been on my mind forever."

Indeed, Prior recently completed his first large-scale, multiple-figure work, **STANDING ROOM ONLY**. The compelling piece depicts the intense, "in your face" drama of exuberant fans in the mosh pit at a punk rock concert. For the uninitiated, the mosh pit is the area closest to the stage where concertgoers are fond of slam-dancing into fellow audience members.

For reference material Prior attended a live show by the band Rancid at the Regency Ballroom in San Francisco in 2018.



Timeless, oil, 36 x 48.



Standing Room Only, oil, 48 x 60.

He stood on the fringes, shooting dozens and dozens of photographs. “I really wanted to make the painting feel like I was standing there at the edge of the mosh pit at the show,” Prior says. “My oldest daughter, Hannah, came into the studio and said, ‘Dad, this is so good. I feel it, like I was right there at the show.’ I knew then I was onto something special and had to keep going with the idea.”

STANDING ROOM ONLY, which Prior completed after more than 200 hours of

work, was recently selected as a finalist in the Art Renewal Center’s prestigious Salon competition. Is he concerned that the painting is unconventional in comparison to his past works and may not sell? “No, I totally painted it for myself,” Prior says. “I would love it to go to a museum collection somewhere. We will see.”

As for the future, Prior says that along with his cityscapes and landscapes, viewers can expect to see more mules in cities and more moshers at live shows—

these recent paintings are each the start of a new series. “They are super fun for me,” he says. ♦

Bonnie Gangelfhoff is a contributing editor at *Southwest Art*.

See more of Prior’s work at
www.southwestart.com/featured/prior-s-feb2021.