FREDERICK

BROSEN

Frederick Brosen's watercolors have been the subject of over thirty solo exhibitions in galleries and museums across the country, most recently at Hirschl & Adler Modern and the South Street Seaport Museum, both in New York City, in 2012. His work is in the permanent collections of over a dozen major museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of the City of New York. From 2005 through 2006 the Museum of the City of New York held an exhibition of his work in conjunction with the publication of a monograph of his New York City watercolors, *Still New York* (Vendome Press, 2005). Currently two of his paintings are featured in *Coney Island: Visions of an American Dreamland, 1880–2008*, premiering at the Wadsworth Atheneum and traveling to several museums, including the Brooklyn Museum in November 2015. A show of his recent works of Rome, Italy, is scheduled to open at Hirschl & Adler Modern in March 2016. Brosen has taught at several major art schools, including the National Academy of Design, Lehman College, and Pratt Institute, where he earned his MFA in 1979. He has been teaching watercolor painting at the Art Students League since 2008.

Frederick Brosen
East Sixth Street Synagogue
2010, watercolor over graphite on paper, 36 x 24 in.

FREDERICK BROSEN

Classic Watercolor Realism

Since I was a small boy, drawing has provided both a nurturing private escape and a positive sense of identity for me. But until I went to Europe for the first time, on my own at eighteen, that activity largely comprised cartooning, with Thor and Spider-Man as my models. My first time in Amsterdam, at the Rijksmuseum, however, quickly changed that. The Dutch seventeenth-century rooms thrilled, moved, and inspired me. Coming from a Manhattan neighborhood of brownstones, the cityscapes had a wonderful familiarity for me. But it was the combination of great technique and open accessibility in the paintings that I deeply responded to; unlike so much contemporary art of that time, the seventies, you didn't need a PhD or the latest issue of *Artforum* magazine to understand them. They invited you in, let you move around, yet were profound in their understanding of light, color, and form. That combination, beautiful craft and depth of feeling, became the ultimate goal in my desire to become a professional artist.

That desire, that romantic approach, has become the basis of my philosophy of painting; an artist's technique is a fusion of subject and feeling: the subject, technique, and interpretation are indivisible. The artists I fell in love with, like Vermeer, Chardin, and Ingres perfected this way of seeing within their own work; in watercolor, J. M. W. Turner, John Sell Cotman, and John Singer Sargent; there are many others, both well and lesser known.

I also believe that landscape painting is primarily about the creation of space, that people instinctively respond to moving around within a painting, with being pulled into deep space.

In these ways, I am, I suppose, an anti-modernist in that for me the subject and the artist's connection to it are as important as the style. And although a painting should work as a flat design of color and shape on an abstract level, I want my landscapes to pull one into deep space, to puncture the picture plane and create a forceful illusion of depth. I admire authenticity and genuine feeling; I do not respond to the ironic detachment of the current pop culture, and its foundation of insincerity. I want to be moved, transported by great art. I want art that enhances how I look at the world, not a celebration of celebrity culture.

I had formal art training in high school at the High School of Music & Art, then City College of New York for a BFA, and lastly Pratt Institute for my MFA. At that time, 1968–1979, traditional skills were not emphasized, particularly at the graduate level. I did seek out the few professors who were empathetic to my interests, but once I began doing watercolor, in my second year of graduate school, I developed my technique by independently studying the great early masters of the medium. That meant seeking out the work of Richard Parkes Bonington, Cotman, Thomas Girtin, and the great early English watercolorists. I also continued to find inspiration in the cityscapes of the Dutch, and of Canaletto and his nephew Bernardo Bellotto (also sometimes called Canaletto), and in the melancholy romantic landscapes of Friedrich. By the time of my MFA thesis exhibition at Pratt in 1979, I had found my medium, watercolor, and my subject, landscape and cityscape. Over the next few decades, my work has been a continuous development and refinement of these interests.

The technique I derived from this study is based on the early English approach to watercolor. Over hard graphite drawing (4H–6H pencils) many layers of transparent washes, or glazes, are overlaid. The larger, lighter washes are laid in first, usually the sky along with an undertone of a light warm color over the architecture and landscape, which both creates a cohesive color scheme and fixes the drawing. Washes of color are

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then built up over this in layers, allowing drying time in between so that each layer is dry enough to be glazed over. The darkest passages and finely resolved details go in last, over these earlier layers. This employs the four main watercolor applications: wet-in-wet, wet-on-dry, scumbling (or dry brush), and point-of-brush (using a fine brush almost like a pen, for final detailing). I employ a limited palette of nine colors, five warm and four cool, because a good colorist is one who can create many colors from a few. This also simplifies your material setup. It is a technique that takes time to master but that provides great subtlety and depth of color.

In my own studio work I do a range of scales, often taking a successful composition through a small study, a midsize work (around 18 x 12 inches), and a larger finished work (from 36 x 24 inches to 30 x 50 inches). I stretch my paper, Arches cold-pressed watercolor paper, by first soaking it in cold water for fifteen minutes and then affixing it to a drawing board with a combination of brown gum tape (aka postal tape) and staples, using a lightweight staple gun and 5/16" staples. This creates a taut smooth surface that will not buckle through several wettings and rewettings.

I mix my colors in separate white ceramic palettes, often premixing enough color to use throughout the entire painting process. This keeps the colors pure and assures they retain their chroma. To prevent the colors drying out, I cover them with plastic wrap overnight. I use a variety of brushes, mostly sable rounds, along with larger squirrel flats for big washes.
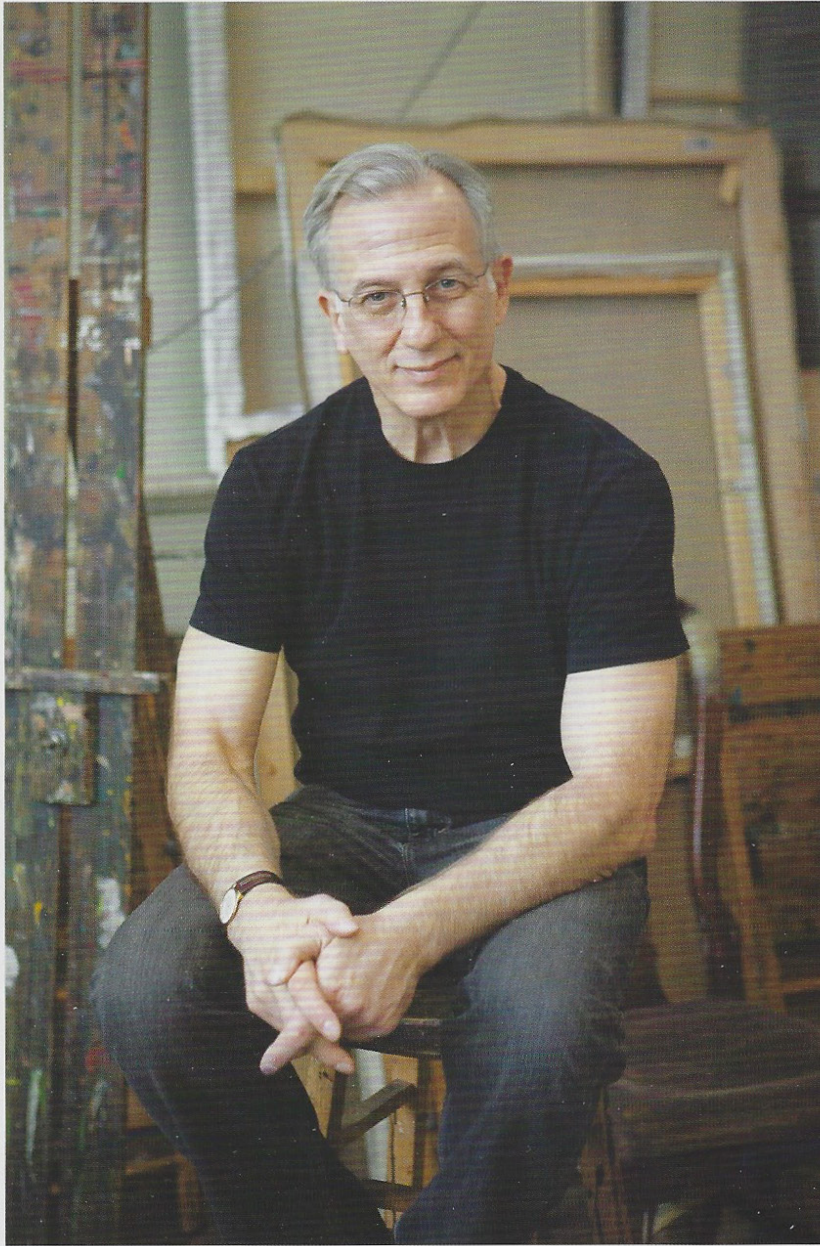
As a teacher, one tries to be the instructor one wishes one had studied with as a student. I believe the mechanics of painting are readily teachable: perspective, color mixing, rendering, light and shade, and so on. And this is what I teach, the nuts and bolts of the classic transparent watercolor technique I described above. I emphasize that in watercolor, solid drawing skills are the foundation upon which everything else is built; the transparency of the medium means the drawing will remain your guide throughout the painting process. In some cases I may recommend a drawing class before a student is ready to begin my class. My students are free to pursue any subject they choose, and to evolve their own style over time. They may use any reference they choose: drawings, still life, photos. Copying the work of past masters is a great way of gaining insight into the painting process and often may provide greater insights than I can. I do not enforce my preferences on my students' work. I have no desire to create acolytes but to help students develop their paintings according to their particular passions and interests more effectively. Because this approach creates a healthy diversity within the classroom, I encourage a mutually beneficial exchange of ideas between students. The environment then becomes an open and supportive, rather than a competitive, one.

The luminosity and nuance of watercolor make it perfectly suited for landscape and architectural subjects. Working over a preliminary graphite drawing, students are taught a classic transparent wash technique, allowing for a subtle buildup of light, shadow, and local color. The separate elements of landscape—skies, trees, and architecture—are addressed, all with the goal of combining cohesively the particulars into expressive paintings.

What I do not believe is teachable is poetry. The challenge of every aspiring artist is to acquire the necessary foundation of skills and technique, and then to develop a unique personal expression employing those skills. I can help a student gain those skills, but I cannot give a student the vision it requires to transcend technique and become an expressive and unique artist. The technique, the first part, takes time to develop, and is the requisite vehicle needed for the more challenging step, the personal expression, to have a chance to emerge.

Throughout the course of the school year, I integrate lectures, demos, and selective museum visits into the

in the seventeenth to those in the twentieth centuries, and are not always watercolorists. As much as verbal explanations help, class demos remain an essential teaching tool. My classroom demos usually are done over two sessions in which I complete an entire small-scale work. Seeing the painting process from beginning to end allows the students to understand how to sequence the layering of washes, a crucial aspect of watercolor painting. Experienced artists do many, many small or unconscious things in their painting process that can only be revealed by observing the work in progress. One demo is worth a thousand words.

On a grander and more venerable scale, this is what the Art Students League uniquely offers its students: a diverse and inclusive range of approaches, taught by an accomplished faculty of working professional artists. Whatever your aesthetic direction, you can follow it and study it in depth in an atmosphere of encouragement, engagement, and mutual respect. And it remains an affordable school to attend, located on 57th Street in Manhattan! Now that is indeed unique.

curriculum. When you admire an artist's work, it is always illuminating to know the circumstances of the artist's life. Understanding the context of the work enhances our appreciation. The artists I discuss range from those
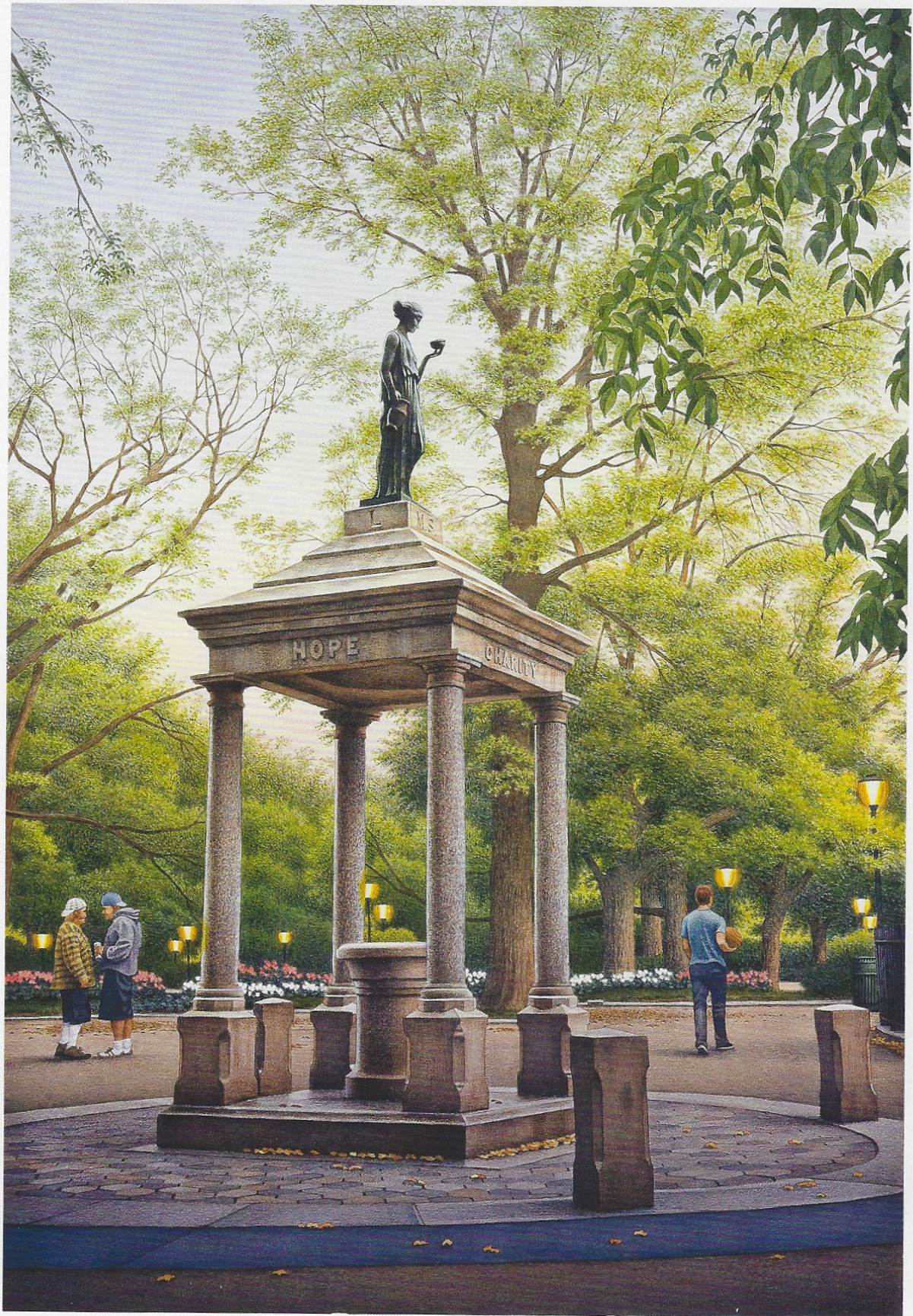
Frederick Brosen
Astroland
2008,
watercolor over graphite on paper,
32 x 54 in.

Frederick Brosen
West 10th Street
2012, watercolor over graphite on paper,
34 x 40 in.

Opposite
Frederick Brosen
Temperance Fountain, Thompkins Square Park
2011, watercolor over graphite on paper,
38 x 26 in.

Frederick Brosen
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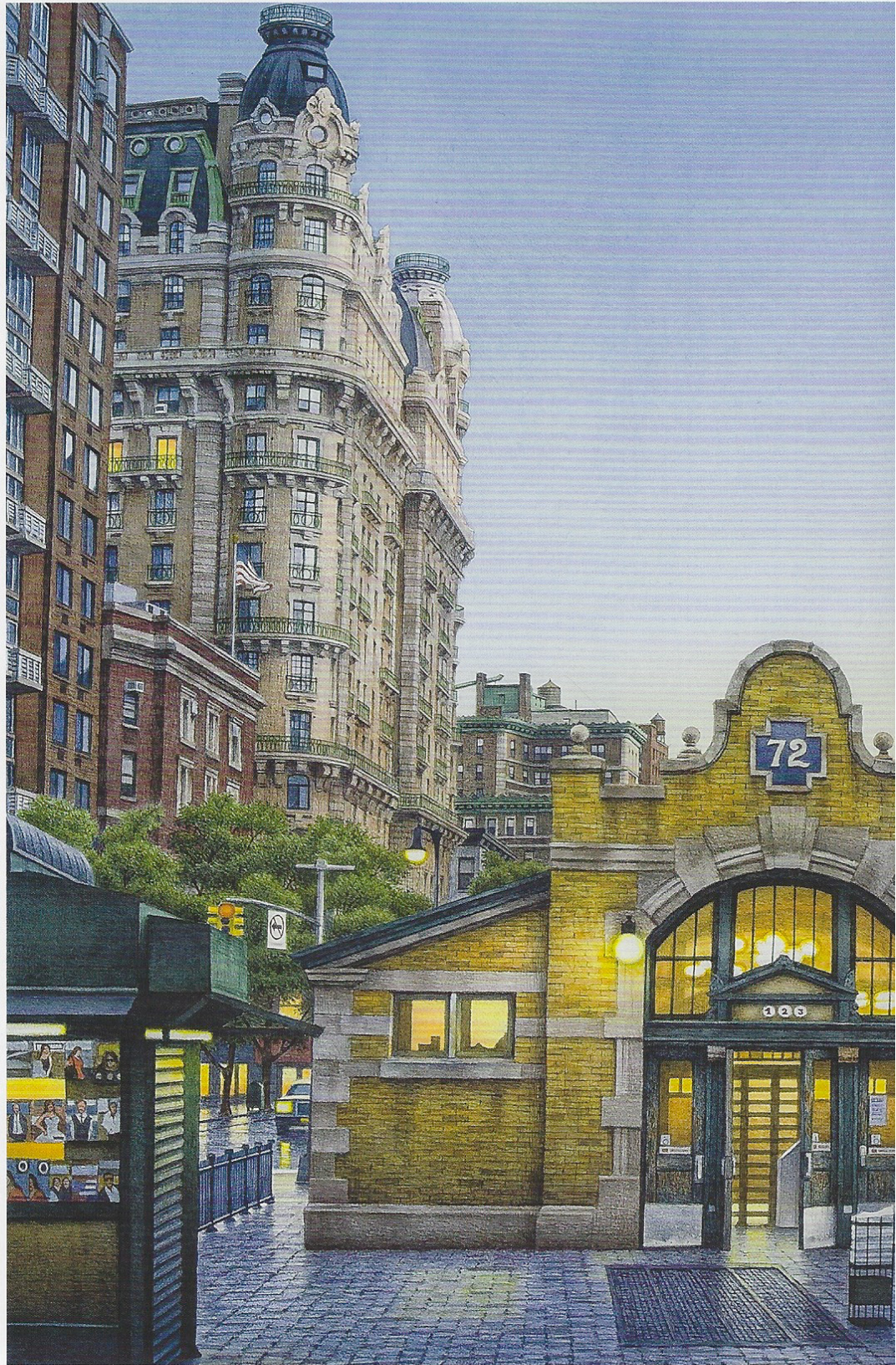2012, watercolor over graphite on paper,
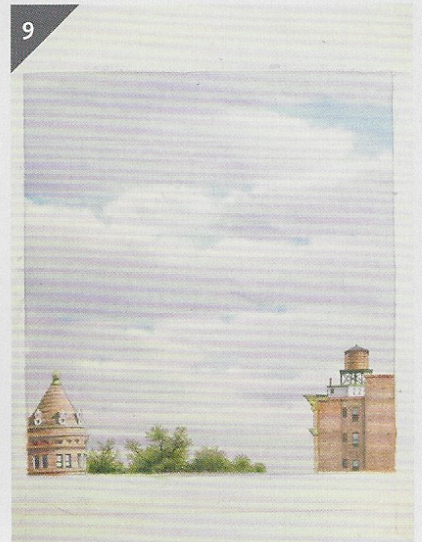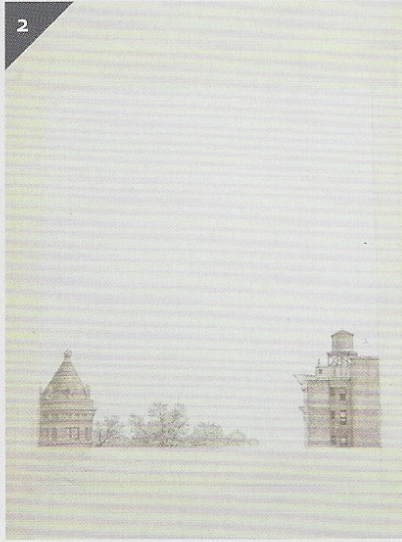34 x 40 in.

Opposite
Frederick Brosen
Temperance Fountain, Thompkins Square Park
2011, watercolor over graphite on paper,
38 x 26 in.

Frederick Brosen
72nd Street
2013,
watercolor over graphite on paper,
32 x 52 in.

A LESSON IN PRINT:
WORKING FROM PHOTOGRAPHS IN WATERCOLOR

1. The first image shows my painting setup as I prepare to begin. In the foreground a ceramic butterfly palette, mixing bowls, and two bowls of water are laid out (note that I am a lefty). Farther back along the table is the stretched sheet of Arches paper affixed to a drawing board.

2. This image reveals a 4H graphite drawing over which I have laid a very light wash of pink (very diluted Winsor red) and taped the border with Nichiban artists masking tape, an excellent masking tool.

3. Now I am ready to lay in my sky. Working wet-in-wet with a 2" squirrel flat, I paint a warm undertone over the entire painting; purple-blue-gray is applied in descending bands to create cloud shadows. Note the excess splatter on the Nichiban tape. This will be removed once the tape is lifted.

4. The structure of the clouds is defined by the careful addition of the background blue, creating edges and highlights.

5. After the sky is thoroughly dry, the local colors of the architecture are applied using a variety of warm color: burnt sienna, permanent rose, raw sienna. Note that, as a left-hander, I have my brushes and palette to my left. Also note that I always work flat, and standing. In my own studio I work on a large architect's table, which allows me to both stand comfortably and tilt the board at different angles when required.

6. The sky is done in one initial wet-in-wet layer, the undertone applied first, cloud shadows after that, and finally the background blue of the sky itself. Given sufficient drying time, the entire area can be rewet to deepen colors and articulate edges. I have found that this approach allows for soft evocative edges when painting skies, and edges and masses are what it's all about!

7. The aerial view shown here is revealing. Think of a workspace like a musician's keyboard. Everything is in its place. To the left, the same side as my dominant hand, we see my paints, mixing bowls, water, and brushes. In the center, I work on a stretched sheet of paper. Notice the sheet of glycine tissue paper folded back. When I have completed my work for the day, the paper is folded forward to cover and protect the painting's fragile surface. A photo reference rests casually above the painting, which I am not copying but rather allowing to inspire me. To my right is a copy of my book, open to my painting of Belvedere Fountain. Below that you see a random sheet I am using for testing color swatches. To the right of that is a box of pencils, with a sheet of sandpaper.

8. Back to the details, using a fine brush, here I add deepening colors and modeling to the detail of the architecture. Note how the hard pencil drawing remains visible and becomes integrated into the color layers.

9. This image reveals the finished demo, without the taped border, showing the juxtaposition of the soft sky forms, filigreed tree edges, and the sharper contours of the architecture. The use of the cool sky colors against the warmer tones of architecture creates a tangible sense of foreground and background space. The final detailing and texture of the landscape are done in darker colors with point-of-brush, articulating detail and scumbling textures.