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The Watercolors of Frederick Brosen

Frederick Brosen must be a walker. His luminous New York cityscapes, amazingly detailed watercolors that demonstrate a profound understanding of his subject, are the distinct impressions of a native, of one who possesses experiential knowledge of a place. His vision is the result of engaging specific subjects (the surprising brick red façade of a local firehouse in *Engine 55, East Broome Street*, 1998, or the variegated hues and patchwork textures of the buildings that occupy the triangular intersection in *Canal and Division Streets*, 2000, for instance) under a variety of circumstances and conditions. But most significantly, his is the perspective of the pedestrian, of someone who has repeatedly navigated the streets on foot. A city resident and urban explorer, Brosen captures the city's ordinary, everyday sights (in contrast to the views a visitor might treat), depicting the city as a collection of knowable spaces, neighborhoods, or villages set within a larger, perhaps more cognitively elusive whole. Brosen is a *flâneur*, at home on, and unthreatened by, the city streets. His attention is drawn not to the chaos of the urban masses, however, but to the simple mysteries of the city's built environment and its unexpected beauty.

In this sense Brosen's works are not so much "urbane" (as the title of one recent exhibition of his works suggests) as they are erudite, for they surely result from a studied and prolonged consideration of his environment. And although Brosen chooses to limit the presence of human activity in his images, his works nevertheless reveal a familiar point of view, the figures appearing relaxed and comfortable within the manageable scale of a neighborhood. For example, in *Doyer Street* (2002), the warm glow of early-morning light illuminates a street in Chinatown before the chaos of the work day begins. The focus is on the dichotomous architectural elements: the tenement structures and streetlight are reminiscent of turn-of-the-century New York, while the colorful signs, bright lights, and flanking barber poles place us firmly in our own time period. Yet the three pedestrians pictured, the couple who converse casually on the sidewalk and the man, shopping bag in hand, about to exit the image as he follows the curve of the street to the left, contribute a reassuring sense that all is as it should be. As in so many of Brosen's scenes, the viewer comfortably enters the space depicted; no

barriers exist to block the way in or obstruct the way out. Brosen's relation to the city is both familiar and intimate; according to the artist, his work is "especially evocative and expressive of the New York I love."

By reducing Manhattan to a manageable size and offering the viewer the privileged position of a city native, Brosen can (and does) revel in the act of image-making, producing cityscapes that are touching portraits of places with distinct personalities instead of merely recorded impressions. He captures not only the way the urban landscape looks but also the way it affects one on a more emotional level. According to the artist, "I believe the psychology of the cityscape should be as interesting as the physical appearance." After sketching on-site and completing small studies in watercolor, his image begins as a graphite drawing, upon which Brosen builds layer upon layer of subtle watercolor pigment until the finished scene is realized. Individual bricks are noted and reproduced, with the minutiae of varying shades and textures included, as in *Mulberry and Prince Streets (Old St. Patrick's)* (1997), where the naked eye cannot count what Brosen has so painstakingly and carefully replicated. Literally hundreds of stones make up the façade and side of the church, each defined by the masonry surrounding it, each slightly different in color from the next. Here, although we are momentarily halted as we enter the scene by the two Don't Walk signs and the traffic light glowing red, our impulse is to take the casual pace of the pedestrian in the left foreground and follow the wide sidewalk past Old St. Patrick's, perhaps into one of the buildings beyond. Again, like an inhabitant, one might not even give the lovely cathedral across the street a second glance when ambling by on daily errands—its beauty has been noted before, and here its presence is intuitively registered, felt more than it is seen.

In almost all of Brosen's New York cityscapes, the artist pays surprising attention to the decaying street surface itself, as if the area's memories are somehow contained within the history of patching and paving the thoroughfares (whether cobbled or poured) whose names help to map and define the space. This approach stands in contrast to the cleaner, more romanticized streets and alleys that Brosen depicts in his European views, such as the one in *Saint Severin* (1999) or *Rue des Barres* (2001), where history is registered by the attention given to the *preservation* of the individual stones. For instance, in *Bond Street* (1997), Brosen renders the uneven surface of the cobbled street so realistically that one feels unsure where to step. In the dead center of the roadway, where it dips into a covered manhole, a whole section of stone has been worn away, exposing the asphalt underneath. The stately turn-of-the-century buildings that rise from the

sidewalks seem compromised by the crumbling street, as if awaiting the revival of gentrification.

By eschewing the sublimity of the metropolis (the lofty verticality of the downtown skyscrapers, the expansive bird's-eye view from above), Brosen grounds himself within the horizontality of the street. Because he is comfortable and at home in the urban environment, his brush materializes the remarkable details of the everyday world, allowing the viewer (or visitor) an insider's look at urban existence. With a cartographer's accuracy (minus, however, the mapmaker's generalizing imperative), Brosen documents the city as accessible to all on a human scale.

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Paintings by FREDERICK BROSEN



Canal & Division Streets, 2000



Marais Door, Horses of Apollo, 2002



Engine 55, East Broome Street, 1998



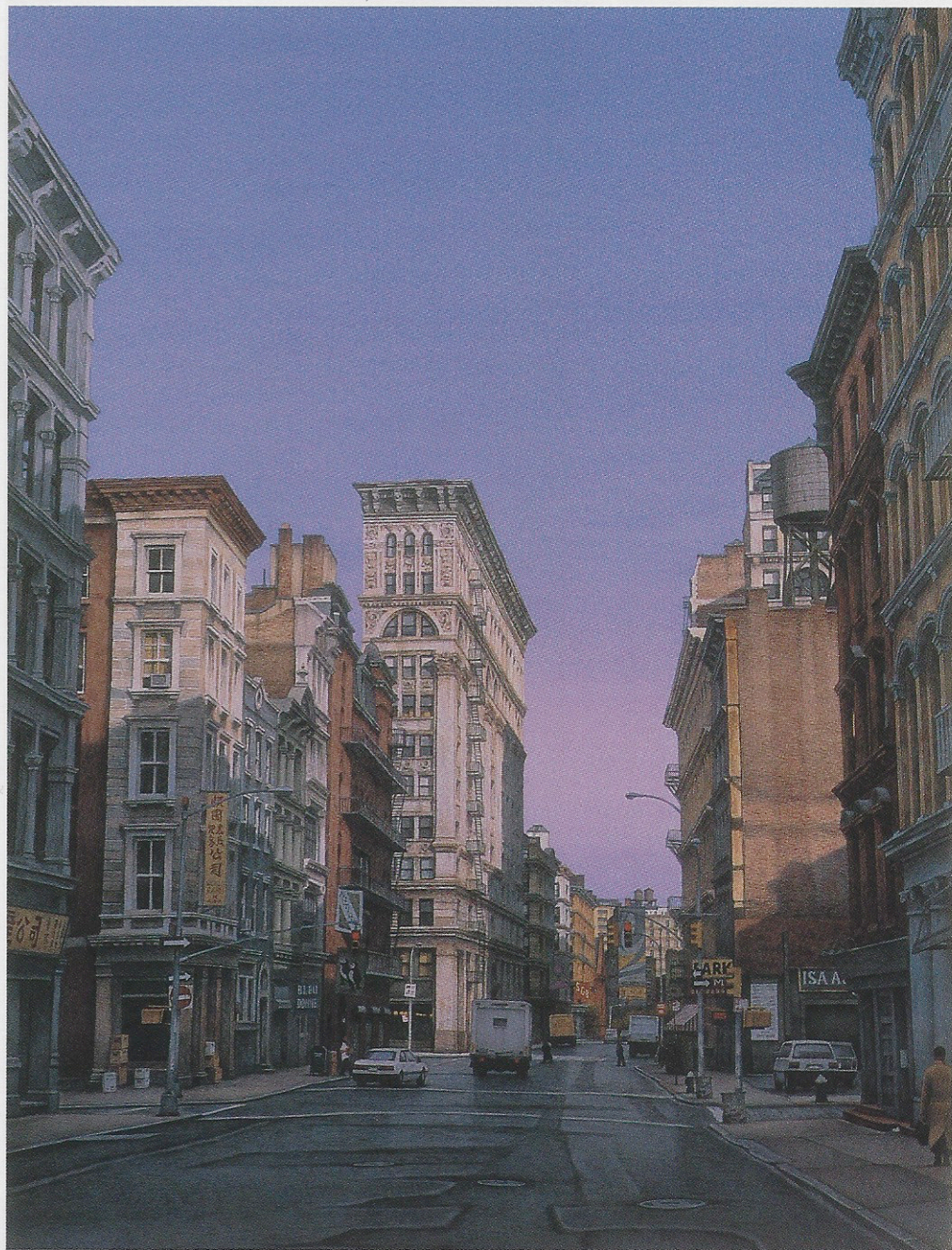
Bond Street, 1997



Mulberry & Prince Streets (Old St. Patrick's), 1997



Rue des Barres, 2001

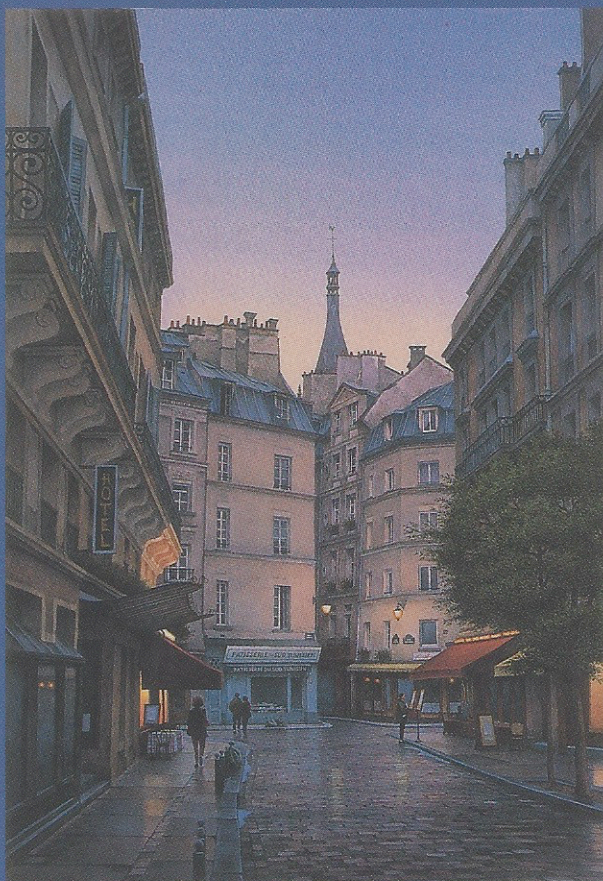


Broome Street, 1998

Broome Street, 1998



Doyer Street, 2002



Alice Friman

Charles Yu

Norma Marder

Dean Young

Carol Frost

Alan Michael Parker

Akshay Ahuja

Judith Vollmer

Others

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