



Capturing a Scene, Minus the Camera

Gallery-Going

By [MAUREEN MULLARKEY](#) | April 10, 2008

THE PLEASURE OF CITYSCAPES GOES BACK TO ANTIQUITY. EVEN IN HIS COUNTRY HOUSE, THE ROMAN OWNER OF THE VILLA AT BOSCOREALE, PAINTED around 40–30 B.C.E., included frescoes with trompe l'oeil architectural details of a spatially ambiguous but distinctly urban setting, a reference to what contemporary artist [Ben Aronson](#) calls "a city's urban current."



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Ben Aronson, 'Nighthawks' (2008).

[Tibor de Nagy](#)

Mr. Aronson's second exhibition of cityscapes at [Tibor de Nagy](#) is a lively blend of architectural and pedestrian scenes of [New York](#), [San Francisco](#), and [Paris](#). The grace of these panel paintings lies in his skillful, sensitive massing of light and shadow. Light at different times of day, in different latitudes, under different weather conditions is the essential subject of paintings that rely only anecdotally on particular locations.

While some scenes might be worked from studies done directly on site, Mr. Aronson's approach would not be possible without the camera, a more rapid means of note-taking. His work is far from photo-realism but, like much contemporary urban painting, it owes a debt to photography. What matters, of course, is what is accomplished with the photograph, and how it is revised to serve larger non-photographic purposes. Mr. Aronson's transformations are intelligent, painterly, and beautiful.

"Late Afternoon Sun by [Lincoln Center](#)" (2008) is a particularly vivacious example of his working method. Sunlight divides the architecture of tall buildings from the muted street below. The attention of the viewer travels between the transient luminosity of the structures, a medley of carefully adjusted cadmium yellows, and the play of darkened warm tones at street level. Foreground details blur slightly, as they would if glimpsed quickly in passing.

A similar approach in "Rising Shadows, [Boulevard Saint Germain](#)" (2008) turns a tourist snapshot into an essay on movement and color. Retreating light passes through the tops of trees and glances off isolated reflective surfaces in flashes of red and clear cobalt. "Rue de Roi de Sicile" (2008) is a study in gritty Parisian grays, punctuated by the various reds of a canopy, a street light, and the back lights

of cars. In both pieces, subordination of detail lends an air of solidity and truth to images no more than a foot square.

"Ascending Traffic" (2008) is a steep view down a San Francisco street that slopes toward the bay. The composition divides diagonally into distinct zones of gloom and light. The shadow zone is relieved only by hushed reflections on darkened cars, directing the eye to the glow of that side of the street catching the last light before sunset. The slant of late-day sun provides a tenebrist's side lighting that unites disparate buildings in a radiant flare.

"Nighthawks" (2008) is Mr. Aronson's clever update of Hopper's 1942 scene in a nighttime diner. The famous lunch counter gives way to a sleek bar in a chic restaurant. An elegant foreground table setting, with silver and linen, highlights today's greater affluence.

Close-range views of faceless pedestrians, such as "Counterpoint" (2008), tend toward slurry clichés of the anonymous urban crowd. But the large, imposing "Urban Reflections" (2008) is pitch-perfect in its balance of articulation and indistinction. Instead of simply being erased, individuals recede into shadow. Tonal relations integrate passing figures into darkened harmony with the modern building façade that reflects their movement. Nicely done.

Until May 17 (724 Fifth Ave., 212-262-5050).