



Angela Wakefield: The New York Series

Ian Welland casts his eye on the latest outstanding paintings by the acclaimed urban artist Angela Wakefield. Welcome to *The New York Series*...

New York has a dense, smog-like existence. Its iconic architecture merges into its noise, but also into a quirky 24/7 economy driven by people of all nations, pursuits and cultures. The light changes on every street level and there is a story on every street corner. No two places are same in this metropolis. The famous song *A Heart in New York*, recorded by Art Garfunkel in 1981, captures this wondrous mix by comparing the street scene with that of movies, whilst at the same time acknowledging realism. Angela Wakefield goes one better in that she takes us right onto the street, delivers the city agenda and persuades us to live the metropolis. We become part of the story on the street corner or in the diner.

The first thing that strikes when viewing *The New York Series* is the vast scale of these new works. They are much larger, more exploratory and create a louder soundtrack than her previous paintings. Angela abandons nothing from before; moreover, she stays loyal to her principles and continues to move these forward through subtle step changes. I am seeing a definitive progression in the way the palette is pre-selected and applied. The preferred medium remains acrylic with strong bold usage which is now joined by a new awareness of dramatic tonal contrasts. This

awareness is brought about by the artist through absolute respect for her subject matter, in this case the ever-changing tones of New York. New York requires an understanding and balance when conveyed on canvas. It is like no other city. The artist has no difficulty in appreciating this and then stripping the cityscape down to its various layers. I have selected four works to emphasise the artist's appreciation and interpretations.

New York 15 (acrylic on canvas, 60 x 120 cm) is a frantic pedestrian thoroughfare demonstrating the daily ritualistic commute against the yellow halo of the Chrysler Building looming in the grey New York skyline. The artist takes brash urbanised abstract arrangement and combines it with a calming impressionism. Completed in May 1930 and designed in an art deco style, the Chrysler Building imposes in this painting similar to Monet's *Houses of Parliament in The Thames below Westminster* (c1871). Angela's painting is an interesting people-watch as well as filled with aesthetic values. A man enjoys a cigar as his footsteps seem to stride a disco beat. His swagger is confident but unrelated to the other pedestrians who are seemingly heading for the commerce up town. The man could be an actor as this scene is set close to 42nd Street's historic theatre district. What is impressive is the scaling. The Chrysler Building is

opposite: New York 15

left: New York 16

within the top three tallest buildings in New York and the artist has maintained vital realism of hierarchy of the architecture. The muddy facade of the adjoining buildings brings the modern to the very doors of today's whimsical renaissance to preserve and over-glorify pedestrian space. Even the bulbous street lamps command a sculptural central stage. Apart from the perceived actor, the individuals appear solitary – very few walk in twos. The city's drone far outweighs any conversation. The pristine paving is the only saving grace for light and helps distribute casting shadows. I particularly enjoy the artist's subconscious remembrance of her outstanding work *Oldham Street* (2009). *New York 15* captures the same industrious energy.

New York 16 (acrylic on canvas, 48 x 36 in) sets the city in a more familiar way. The evening

movement downtown, complete with yellow taxi monopoly, ushers office dwellers to bars and theatres, whilst a sizable stretch of greenery border invites the city to pursue low carbon initiatives to combat high emissions. In the same Garfunkel song, apparently Central Park is not for wandering in after dark, but Angela is suggesting otherwise. The greenery portrayed here is a reminder that the oxygen we breathe comes from plants through photosynthesis. The sun, setting behind the rise and fall of the four lane street, is a vital connection to this process. The painting is saying, "Go and enjoy the open space; it's precious within this urban jungle". New Yorkers may not always respect the environmental argument due to their very location and materialistic habits, but the artist creates a stark mission through bold blue, green, red and yellow in this work. The buildings, against the neon light



reflections and solar resonance, are dressed in blue streaks that simply draw you up and out off the street. Left behind are the car horns and vacuum of dust. Mother Nature is still waiting for her day, and she *will* return. This is a large work and rightly so. The grooves of modernity in the architecture are clearly interwoven with the circa 1930s frontages. The odd canopy suggests a bar, diner or bistro; the on-street parking in the right foreground suggest inner city apartment residential. *New York 19* (acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48 in), on the front cover, is an earlier snapshot of the scene but closer to the horizon. The architecture is viewed in all its mosaic glory – the colours possibly marking the era of construction. The emerging three tiered building on the right brings forth the notion of high rise apartment living, complete with New York concierge, all very palatial and pricey.

New York 17 (acrylic on canvas, 40 x 30 in) finds us right on the street in the heart of the metropolis. We are about to walk on by the couple waiting impatiently for their taxi. A theatre on the left is bathed in the warm glow of the low sun as is our walkway. Both streams move us into a hive of activity. Vehicles jostle for advantage on the road, as people jostle for restaurants ahead of a show. I like the crowd congregating on the street on the right hand side junction; are they waiting for a cab or peering into a restaurant and checking out the menu at the door? There is an aroma of food and diesel chugging out. The painting also conjures up a set of questions. Is jaywalking still an offence in New York or is the theatre district of Manhattan exclusively for soul city walking as seen with our actor in *New York 15*? The theatre could be the home of the latest Broadway spectacular, but I can't help but hear the song *We'll Take Manhattan* funnelling toward us? The subway may charm but the artist brings a cohesive cocktail of balmy breezes of people. The tonal range is executed without compromise and shows the artist has reached a demonstrative high standard. Consider the directness of the shadows of the waiting couple and how these naturally are drawn and paralleled with the orange-red divides of walkway and street. Tapering off to the right of each person is an effective contrast of colour again as our walkway falls away to a shallow guttering that borders our walkway and stairways up to building entrances. There is dew in the air, not uncommon in New York. New York is prone to damp cold winters not too dissimilar to London, but is also prone to sharp unseasonal showers that last but few minutes. Normally the dew is quickly evaporated by the city's manmade greenhouse



effect that greys the skyline and occasionally will smog the skyline, but I am of this opinion by virtue of a small puddle that can be seen on the right ahead of the tall thin lady holding her garment. The neon lights scatter, glisten and reflect to again suggest this possibility of a recent sharp shower. The suspended traffic signals tower over the junction adjacent to the theatre as the green light pierces through brilliant sunlight.

"Hi there, welcome to New York 20! Have a seat,

below: New York 17

right: New York 20

what can I get ya?" says the diner's manager. *New York 20*, unofficially subtitled *The American Diner* (acrylic on canvas, 36 x 24 in) is an exceptional work that stands out in this collection. It certainly takes Hopper's *Nighthawks* (1942) to a higher plain by allowing us full consent to venture in. The diner's neo-art deco moulding high above the counter is stylistically offset against the compartmental seating arrangements and overall diner bar elaboration. The diner manager lurks behind the jars with his hat perfectly diagonal to the cap of the elderly gentleman reading his newspaper. I doubt if his newspaper is *The Wall Street Journal* or *The New York Times*, but maybe *USA Today*? The artist is playing with our beliefs of class systems which are still prevalent in today's metropolis. The shadowy figure to the left appears to have just arrived and is looking for a seat away

from the clunking of coffee making and pancake prep. In front of the shadowy figure, another person is about to enjoy his food. Hopper's voyeurism has moved indoors, but Angela has added narrative here, setting the scene for our individual take. I believe the sports channel is blaring away somewhere on high fixed television screens where previously the jukebox would dominate the sound waves within the diner. Or maybe the news channel is on, announcing some breaking news of the President or Wall Street. However, the noise of the diner service siding with vocal rhubarb could be drowning out the broadcast. Crucial to this painting are the reflections which are so defining. I am impressed with the depiction of lower teardrop domed lighting suspended from the ceiling, with fans and fluorescent strip lighting tracking down the left.





The whole energy rush is at its maximum from the national grid with no regard to conservation or controls. The elderly man at the counter silently reading will no doubt be oblivious to the chorus of fluorescent humming and whipping of fan blades. Mention must also be made to the precise curvature of the same man's coat as his sits on a stool leaning over on the shiny counter. This shows full control of shaping and scaling by the artist. The vanishing point rushes toward us as the counter and high stools mark our position. We are sat adjacent to the long counter. The chromatic illumination and reflection is highly worked to great effect. The whole arena makes you want to stay a while, eavesdrop and sample the real streetwise New York.

There is an important continuous process in this series. The subjects follow on from each other and have connectivity. The urbanisation hits you visibly and psychologically. There is spatial context which provides an understanding of the city's

varying pulse. The series is a genuine attempt to collate New York's diversity and purposely magnify and exploit it, the exploitation perhaps echoing the very essence of Americanism.

As a critic, I believe this series is significant. Collectively, *The New York Series* is a major statement of artist and place. The paintings are exciting and well informed. Angela Wakefield's work is very collectible and is rightly attracting connoisseurship. As she explained in 2010 (*Art of England*, June 2010) her work speaks on a number of levels. I agree with the artist that it also strikes a deeper chord and resonates with people, hence the growing following and connoisseurs. Angela Wakefield is the most instinctive artist of our age.

Angela Wakefield's The New York Series can be viewed at Ascot Studios, +44 (0)1254 878100 www.ascotstudios.com