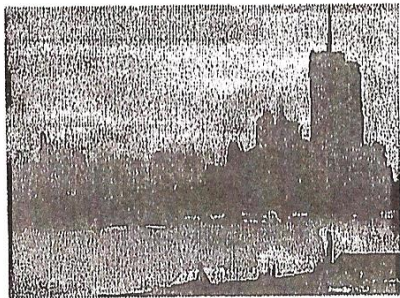


Urban Poetry in the Paintings of Lawrence Kelsey



Lawrence Kelsey, "World Trade Center/Fog"

Good painting is produced through a peculiar alchemy. The base material of pigment is applied to a surface, be it canvas, a wood panel, or paper, and it is the task of the artist to make it come alive in a manner that cannot be attributed to anything truly tangible. Mere technique will not quite suffice to explain what makes any painting superior; in fact, facility alone can produce a likeness, but it will invariably be lifeless.

Lawrence Kelsey, whose solo show of recent paintings of New York City is at Michael Ingbar Gallery of Architectural Art, 568 Broadway, through May 29, is a painter with a good deal of technical skill. However, he has learned over three decades of diligent work at his easel to reign in that skill and sidestep facility with admirable grace. Operating on the theory that "less is more," he creates oils and gouaches that resonate with the atmosphere and poetry of the city without

becoming mired in its specific details. Kelsey knows just how much to leave out of a picture to achieve that perfect balance between the real and the abstract that makes all the difference between an illustration and a painting.

It helps that Kelsey has the instincts of a true painter; unlike a lot of other artists who tend to draw with paint, he works for the most part with masses of color rather than with line. Indeed, one would be hard put to find many linear elements in Kelsey's work, which has the feeling of having materialized fullblown on the canvas or wood panel, rather than having been cobbled together from disparate drawn elements. In this regard, Kelsey shares certain qualities in common with the late Fairfield Porter, a realist peer of Abstract Expressionists who absorbed aspects of their ethos without surrendering his commitment to recognizable subject matter.

Kelsey, however, has a less selfconscious way of integrating abstraction into realism in the natural course of eliminating unnecessary details and paring down his compositions for maximum impact. Being a post-modern free agent, unhindered by the need to prove his own relevance as odd realist in a predominantly abstract milieu, he is free to pursue his urban subjects unselfconsciously, playing with light for its atmospheric as well as its purely visual qualities, making his paintings resonate emotionally as much as formally.

Particularly exemplary in this regard is the small oil on panel "Steam and

Rooftops," where Kelsey achieves a real sense of depth and mystery with just a few boldly brushed forms to block in a subject so amorphous that the entire painting appears on the verge of vanishing into thin air. Yet, remarkably, the composition coheres. By virtue of that mysterious painterly alchemy we spoke of earlier, these spare areas of color, applied with seeming effortlessness to a small wood panel, evoke steam streaming up over tenement-tops amid very specific intensities of light and shadow.

Impressive, too, is the restrained painterliness, the subtle succulence, that enlivens his considerably larger, more worked up paintings of the Manhattan skyline, such as "East River Night," where dimly glittering lights along the shoreline and the bridge lend the scene a quiet luminosity. Here and in other large oils on canvas such as "Sunrise New York," where his handling of light is dynamic yet skillfully controlled, he captures the majesty and poetry of the city without indulging in showy brushwork or straining for undue drama.

Kelsey has stated that he wants his intimate paintings to have presence and his larger paintings to have intimacy, and he succeeds splendidly in that goal, judging from the above mentioned large canvases and such smaller works on wood panels as "Broadway in the Rain." The latter painting is one of those modest scaled tours de force at which Kelsey excels, with its single tiny figure, huddled under an umbrella as it

passes a subway kiosk, dwarfed by the looming structures of Times Square. This is a subject so innately atmospheric that it would be easy to overdo it. Kelsey, however, exercises his customary restraint, paring the composition down to a few essential forms, casting the scene in muted monochromes to produce a small gem of a picture considerably less detailed than but akin in feeling to Childe Hassam's 1885 masterpiece, "Rainy Day Boston."

Also outstanding in this exhibition are a group of gouaches on paper in which Kelsey pares down the elements of his compositions even more drastically, taking them to the brink of abstraction, while retaining his poetic vision of the city. Here, the various architectural structures afloat in luminous washes of gouache take on an almost anthropomorphic quality, like behemoths in primordial mists, with the broad bullying shoulders of skyscrapers rising aggressively above clustered tenements. Yet the real drama, as in all of Kelsey's paintings, has to do with the play of light and shadow against hard and soft elements such as steel, brick, steam, and smoke, and how such stark, simple contrasts have the power to provoke subtle moods and emotions.

The only concern of a painter such as Lawrence Kelsey is how to transmute such contrasts through strokes of pigment on paper, canvas, or wood panel, and it is this peculiar alchemy, achieved without gimmicks or tricks, that we see and celebrate in this outstanding solo exhibition.

—Ed McCormack