



# Yvonne Jacquette

This New York artist takes an elevated approach to landscape painting, depicting the dark beauty of skylines and plains seen from on high

By Peter Terzian



One day in 1973 the artist Yvonne Jacquette was taking a trip by plane, making watercolors of the clouds she saw from her window. "Then the clouds rolled away," she says, "and I had to face that gigantic spread of cities." A new subject, the landscape as seen from the air, was revealed.

Jacquette's early paintings had looked above or below our everyday line of sight, up to a fluorescent ceiling fixture or down at a hardwood floor. The aerial view offered another uncommon perspective, one with a more capacious field of vision. In daylight, she has painted the farms, industrial plants, and coastal towns near her house in Maine, where she spends part of the year, as well as the patchwork countryside of the American West, northern California, and Vietnam. But most of her paintings are of the night city—electric maps of Chicago, San Francisco, New Orleans, Hong Kong, and especially New York, her home for more than 55 years. Dark seas of blue, gray, green, and black are crisscrossed by rows of car headlights and illuminated windows, the sweeping curves of roads and rivers, the intersecting angles of bridges and skyscrapers. The viewer, like the artist, hovers above this animated world. "There's a fantasy quality to her paintings," says Andrea Henderson Fahnstock, a former curator at the Museum of the City of New York. "You really feel like you're flying through these wonderful buildings."

What draws Jacquette to painting the night? "It's less specific than daylight," she says. "When you look at something, you can project whatever you happen to be interested in projecting. I remember once being on a plane at night and having a very erotic sensation looking out at the lights below." She admires the "emotional ▷

*Lake Shore Drive II,*  
1997–98.

tone” achieved by the 19th-century painter and engraver Samuel Palmer, who made ecstatic, dreamlike images of the English countryside by moonlight. Fahnestock compares Jacquette’s work to the hallucinatory New York City nightscapes that Georgia O’Keeffe painted in the 1920s.

To attain the high vantage points her work requires, Jacquette often hires a Cessna to fly her over her proposed subject. “At first I thought I was nuts to do something so difficult,” she says, “to draw in a plane while going around and around.” And her job is not without occupational hazards. The Cessnas bounce when they hit thermals near mountains and over water. Helicopters are even more difficult, she says. “They take the door off and strap me in; it’s very windy and hard to concentrate.”

She emphasizes that her paintings are part invention. “I sift out what interests me most,” she says. “I’m not painting reality but what I’m perceiving and what I enjoy perceiving.” She has painted triptychs of the same scene from different perspectives; sometimes she makes composites, placing scattered landmarks within the same frame and creating a view that you couldn’t see in real life—not unlike the capriccio paintings of Canaletto, in which existing buildings and ruins form fictional combinations. In *Above Times Square III*, multiple structures that Jacquette observed from an adjacent high rise are pushed together, she says, “to make a space that has lots of vibration.”

The 76-year-old painter’s late husband was photographer Rudy Burckhardt, and the couple were part of a circle of artist friends that included Fairfield Porter, Alex Katz, Red Grooms, and Mimi Gross. Burckhardt’s photographs, like Jacquette’s paintings, documented such iconic landmarks as the Flatiron Building and the Brooklyn Bridge; she says that his rooftop views of New York’s Chelsea neighborhood in the ’30s were an inspiration for her paintings. His candid street scenes perfectly complement her fiery, playful nightscapes. “We perceive New York as being so grand and overwhelming,” says Fahnestock, “but their work captures a sense of intimacy about the city.” ■



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:** *Napa Valley Composite II*, 2005. *Above Times Square III*, 2007. *Chrysler Building Flanked by High-Rise Buildings III*, 2009.

