

KOHN GALLERY

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COMMUTERS V. SKYSCRAPERS: THE DUAL WORLDS OF PAINTER MARK INNERST

Just when there seems to be a little hope for mass transit in Los Angeles ...

Like a huge butcher's mallet, a slab of silvery architecture seems poised to crush a multilevel aggregation of urban commuters, cowering in a bluish, semi-dark tunnel. This painting, "Strata," shows a rare intersection between the two principle worlds of painter Mark Innerst, who is showing 28 new works at the Kohn Gallery in Los Angeles.



The first world is tightly imagined, brightly colored high-rise cityscapes, soaring to an unperceived vanishing point. The second is the subterranean dusk of the drab toilers whom, you imagine, somehow, invisibly, fill these soaring buildings whose footings threaten to squash them flat.

There is a hierarchy to Innerst's paintings. The blue-lit horizontal subterranean views of shambling commuters (pictures that possess commuterly names like: "Exit the El" and "Cross-Town Platforms") tend to be small, practically letter-sized panels, largely often done in acrylic. The contrasting, sky-reaching streetscapes are riotously colorful, sunlit, vertical to the extreme, and painted on canvas, some over 5 feet tall. They have the might, dignity, and glory that his dark, diminished subterranean humans lack.

This is even true in his "Met Lobby," a blue-gray depiction of the interior reception area of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, teeming with tiny, scurrying commuter-like figures, hurrying to catch their favorite paintings, rather than their trains to Croton and Westport.

The whole suggests a hustling, darkling Piranesi engraving. You could call this one of Innerst's "Inside" paintings. The "Outside" paintings are the ones that soar, often out of glittering gulches of light, straight toward the stratosphere, drawing your eyes to the top of the picture frame.

Innerst's influences are hard to trace. The tall buildings hint at Manhattan-era Lyonel Feininger; but their spare yet intricate detail more suggest to me Innerst's fellow Pennsylvanian of a century ago, Charles Demuth, the man

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who invented “Precisionism.” Their fantastic exaggerations of mundane urban reality also recall the black and white, vertical, windowed acreages of Fritz Lang’s classic silent film, “Metropolis.”

But sometimes, Innerst’s external structures seem to pull themselves into orderly geometric colors recalling Piet Mondrian. Some of the works, like “Tiffany,” toss in falling streams of Klimtian jewels and glitter. “Beneath a Canopy of Lights” stretches the Klimt coloration into a tight-focused, vertical skyline portrait that verges on abstraction.

With their mysterious chasms, ravines, and gaps, Innerst’s great, bright towering downtown shapes suggest something beyond the urban, even beyond the human, something that sometimes makes you jump back in astonishment.

But then, a moment later, you want to enter into Innerst’s masonry cascades of idealized structures — each of them just a little too fantastic and appealing for this real world.