



*Many Distant Penthouses, 2010.*



*Waterlilies #5, 1997.*

# Mark Innerst

In his luminescent canvases, this East Coast painter endows fleeting moments with a grand presence

By Peter Terzian

*Ocean Drive, 2004.*



The next time you're in Manhattan, stand at the center of a midtown crosswalk. Then look up the avenue and squint a bit. The jumble of language on billboards and shop signs falls away, and you're left with a mosaic of stone, glass, and hazy light.

This is the New York that Mark Innerst paints. It's a city largely stripped of signifiers—the precise locations are revealed only by such titles as *Near Times Square* and *Entering Bryant Park*. As such, it's a city that exists out of time. Innerst captures the sense of wonder a visitor might bring to a present-day walk through midtown, but he could just as easily be painting the streets as they appeared during the 1920s and '30s, the golden age of the skyscraper. A buzz of human activity takes place at street level, at the bottom of the canvas, but the real action is up in the air, where the buildings reach out of the frame. Innerst's small-scale paintings waver between realism and abstraction, sometimes in the same work. In *Many Distant Penthouses*, a high-rise with cornices, windows, and a thin flagpole is rendered amid shafts of pure color. In other paintings, the

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city has the geometric simplicity of a set of child's blocks. "There's a beautiful cryptic quality to what Mark does," says Michael Kohn, whose eponymous Los Angeles gallery has exhibited Innerst's art since the mid-1980s. "His paintings are easy to enter into because they have a traditional outer skin—they're representational, they have perspective. And yet there's no narrative. You don't quite know what they mean, but you certainly know how they feel. That never fails to touch me."

In Innerst's city scenes, natural light irradiates tall vertical bars of smoky blue, pale gold, and burnt umber; Innerst also paints landscapes, and he renders New York in the same colors we associate with earth and sky. The buildings gleam, like the Emerald City in *The Wizard of Oz*. It's not surprising to learn that Innerst sometimes paints while classic movies play on his television. "I'll put a movie on 50 times, for the atmosphere," he says. "I could list artists throughout history whom I'm indebted to, but I think the movie and television experience is really tangible in what I do." In person, Innerst's paintings are luminous, with a glossy texture acquired from layers of transparent glazes. "I'm trying to capture the magic of the light coming from a black-and-white TV set." Kohn imagines a time when the artist's work is

discovered by the museum community: "Four or five rooms filled with 200 Mark Innerst paintings would be nearly as beautiful as the Vermeer show at the National Gallery a few years back."

Innerst grew up in York, Pennsylvania, and lived in New York for 25 years; he now divides his time between Philadelphia and New Jersey's Cape May. Recent paintings evoke the cape's crowded mid-summer beaches. "Usually I sit on the fringe of the beach," he says, "but I started planting myself in the middle. When it came time to paint, people, umbrellas, everything became fragmented. I saw the pattern of the bathers as a stream that went through the painting." The images are long and horizontal, but the crowd dematerializes into reflections in water that mirror the vertical lines of Innerst's city scenes.

Such correspondences occur throughout Innerst's work. The dots of electric light in an aerial view of New York's Columbus Circle at night bear a resemblance to an earlier close-up of water lilies floating in a pond—bursts of brightness in the dark. "A common theme for me is comparing something small with something great," he says. "Looking out into the vast nighttime of the city is not unlike seeing the complexity and the circular shape of the water lily, down to the cells—the micro and the macro." ■

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** *Entering Bryant Park*, 2010; *Cove Beach*, 2010; *Columbus Circle Seen from the Essex House*, 2007; *The Top of the Wheel*, 2004.