

The Sun

A New Yorker at Heart & in Paint

By **FRANCIS MORRONE** | August 16, 2007

Olive Ayhens paints with extraordinary vigor, and any exhibition of her work merits attention. A very small show — three oil paintings — of hers, "Rivers of Light," is currently on display at the New York Public Library's Mid-Manhattan branch.

I place Ms. Ayhens right up there with such masters of the modern cityscape as Rackstraw Downes, Craig McPherson, and Yvonne Jacquette.

Ms. Ayhens worked between 1999 and the spring of 2001 out of a 91st-floor studio in the World Trade Center, as part of the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's World Views residency program. (She has said that she has not yet assimilated her feelings about the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, into her work.) From that lofty perspective, she indulged her sense of the vertiginous heights of New York, a city she came to from San Francisco in 1996.

Ms. Ayhens's delirious New York features tumbling skyscrapers, a perennial theme in American painting. Ever since skyscrapers began to be built, dreamers of one stripe or another have fantasized about tall buildings tilting and tumbling. John Marin and Abraham Walkowitz offered such visions. Marin's 1922 work "Lower Manhattan (Composition Derived From Top of Woolworth Building)," at the Museum of Modern Art, contains the first part of Ms. Ayhens's recipe. And Ms. Ayhens once titled a painting "The Aesthetics of Pollution," which could be the alternate title of George Grosz's "Lower Manhattan" of 1934; the German's close-packed tableaux, sinister atmospherics, and apocalyptic stirrings do seem to be an influence on her. Mostly, Ms. Ayhens paints modern Gothic pictures; her elders include Bruegel, Bosch, and Grünewald.

One piece in the NYPL exhibition, "Bristlecones on the Balcony" (2003), shows a view from a balcony, the edge of which we see in the bottom foreground of the picture. We see the bristlecone pine: the tree that grows older than any other known living thing. It stands like a proud flame — like one of Childe Hassam's flags in the lowering sunlight — reaching from the balcony's edge three quarters of the way up the left edge of the picture. Some critics have said that Ms. Ayhens disregards the rules of perspective, but I think she manipulates them quite nicely. The bristlecone sets the perspective, both visually and morally, for the image. In the lower right corner, a pair of

birds suggests the bird's-eye view of flight over the city. The skyscrapers, streets, and cars appear in cool colors: pastel pink, yellow, green, and white. There's almost a Tony Sarg jauntiness to the picture — and not for the first time in her oeuvre. The skyscrapers tilt playfully, not ominously. But the eye moves upward to a bridge painted like a great diagonal gash of flame across the top of the picture. The suspenders sweeping down from the bridge's tower in the upper right corner suggest the contents below comprise a vertical swath of imagery framed within the pointed arch of Gothic architecture. The crimson and gaseously orange gash of the bridge dispels the pastel mood of the rest, while beyond it lies some vaporous moonscape.

Political concerns play a major role in Ms. Ayhens's work, but she's far too sophisticated to indulge in the sort of pop apocalypticism of Alexis Rockman. Her paintings convey permanent truths about nature and the tenuousness of human existence that resonate regardless of one's politics. "Coral Trees" (2004) shows us red trees, yellowish clouds, a pink parking lot, and lots of agitated strokes of white and green. She paints in colors that are emotive signifiers — ever varied, vivid, and surprising — and that, above all else she does, lend to the paintings their intense vibrancy. "From the Underground," from 2001, sounds misleading at first: It's an elevated train platform, not a subway, after all, that bisects the picture from lower left to upper right. It looks like the Williamsburg Bridge, with Manhattan, including the Twin Towers, across the water to the left. On the right appears to be the real underground, the streets passing by and under the great viaduct in a steely darkness of urban gloom, conveyed in bold, self-assured strokes.

The show's third-floor space, in the library's art department, unfortunately, does no justice to the paintings. The viewer must stand in a narrow, heavily traversed lane between the wall and reading tables. A ledge juts out from the wall beneath the paintings, and, when I visited the show, a library patron had stacked his books on the ledge so as to obstruct — and possibly to damage — the lower part of one of the paintings. Nevertheless, the exhibition is well worth the detour on your Midtown rounds.

Until August 23 (455 Fifth Ave. at 40th Street, 212-340-0849).

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