

STEPHEN MAGSIG

# Living scenes

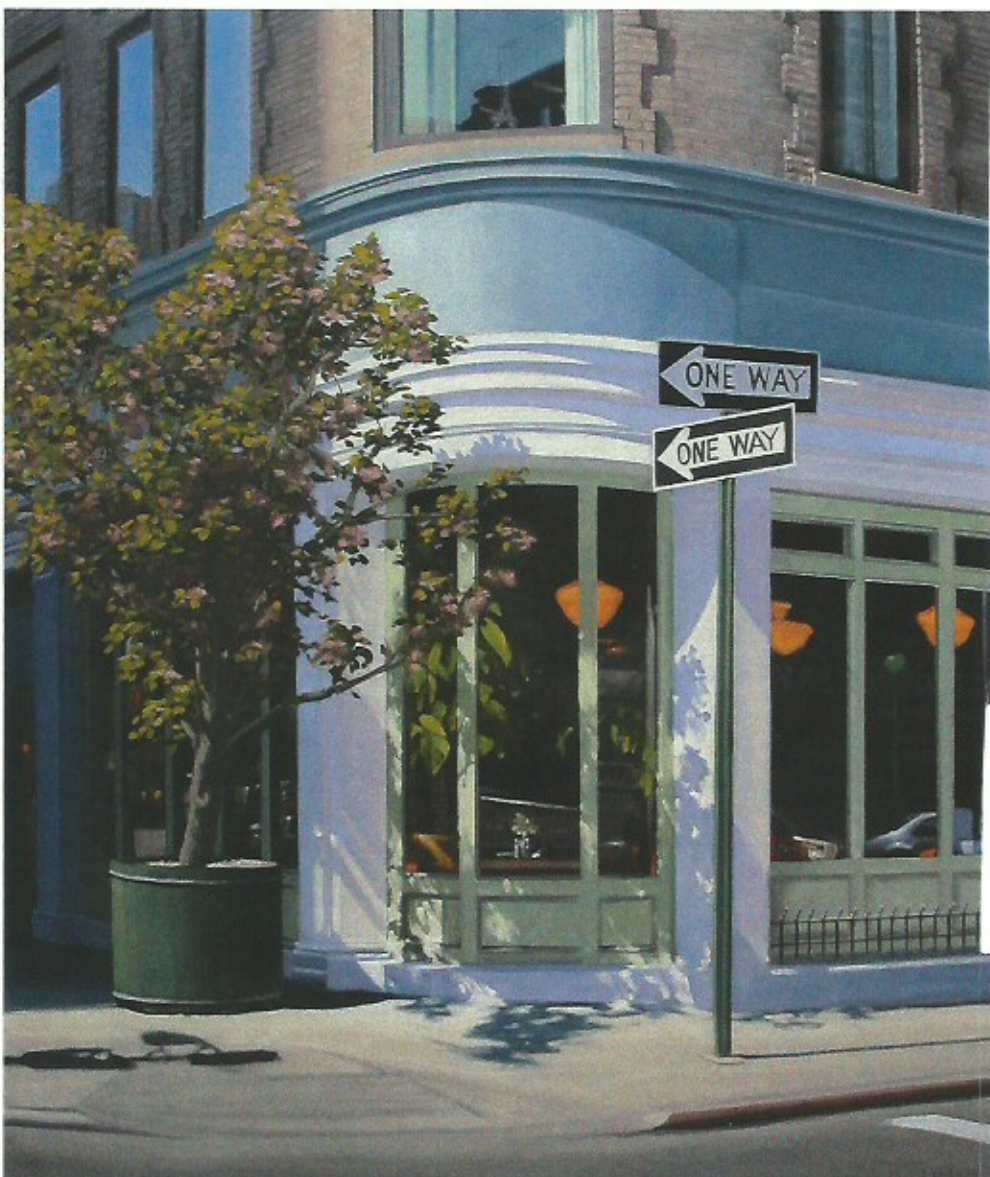
When Stephen Magsig first started painting New York City 20 years ago, he quickly realized he was painting an evolving organism made of steel, concrete and glass. As he documented the mood of a corner, a storefront, a subway entrance or a breathtaking panorama, he knew he was recording a view that would go extinct the moment he turned away.

"I've painted many buildings more than once, and they'll often completely change. It will be a different color, different shape. It's just different. And not always for the better," Magsig says, specifically mentioning a piece titled *Brooklyn Bridge Shadows*, which contains a view he's seen slowly evolve over the years. "Sometimes the building will get changed, and that patina of life—its character—gets rubbed off. My paintings are visual documentation of the city and how it is always changing."

Magsig, who lives and works in an art-centric community north of Detroit, says Manhattan and the surrounding boroughs have also become cleaner, which might be great for tourists and residents, but has a noticeable effect on painters. "I've always loved the Tribeca area because it had these wonderful colors—institutional green, gray-green, Mars violet—that held a real grip on the city. And when they were dirty or dusty, they were fun to paint. The top surfaces were lighter, and they had this unique look," he says. "When there is fresh paint, it's not as pretty. Well, it's pretty, but it's not interesting. Sometimes the dirt and graffiti really colors the city wonderfully."

Magsig's New York City works will be in a new exhibition at George Billis Gallery through May 23. The show will feature his trademark city views—*Spring Street Corner* and *Green St.*, with their sidewalk perspectives, are great examples—as well as a number of new viewpoints, including water scenes of the East River with its iconic spans of the Brooklyn and Manhattan bridges.

The painter considers himself a realist, but not a photorealist. "They're



not photorealist because they're not so tightened up with the detail. They really are quite painterly. I draw in a paintbrush and not in a pencil, so it's not so rigid," he says. "I work from life, and although I'll use photographs, I'm not a slave to them. I'll leave things in and take things out. I'm

mostly concerned about the quality of my paint and color."

Magsig adds that he recently finished a residency in Italy, which forced him to experiment with different colors. "In Detroit or New York you start with the darks first, but you can't do that in Italy,



1  
Spring Street Corner, oil on canvas, 42 x 36"

2  
Greene St., oil on canvas, 62 x 48"

3  
Greenpoint Reflections, oil, 30 x 60"

where the light is just very different," he adds. "It changed the way I see color."

His works are especially strong in the shadows, which he credits to his precise use of color. "I study it and constantly ask if it is warm or cool or reflective. A lot of things are important to understand why a color is the way it is. Ask people what color a tree is, and they say green. But a tree isn't just green—there are reds and blues and all these other colors. It's not just one color," he says, adding that he uses his knowledge of color to inform the subtle detail in his works. "In my shadows, I'll mix up an array of colors, warm and cool, and that way I can use each as needed, so as a shadow pulls away I can use a cooler color. There is a lot of life in those shadows."

And there is also a lot of life in his subject, New York City. "It's still exciting even after all these years. You walk everywhere and you see so much more," Magsig says. "It's the traffic and people and reflections and graffiti and noise. It's everything. You're just bombarded by all this excitement." ●

