



Taxi, o/e, 24" x 30", 2004
Col. of Tom & Stephanie Coffin

John Hardy's New York

Though not a native New Yorker, John Hardy is passionate about the city. He lived in Brooklyn from the time he was one until he was six, when his family relocated to suburban Long Island. He was only eight when his mother died and he was sent to live in Roanoke, Virginia, while his father remained in New York. That was 1931. It took Hardy until 1975 to settle down in New York. But once he arrived at his destination, he has painted the city of his imagination over and over again with relish.

Hardy's most recent paintings capture the obsessive consumerism associated with New York, not only by its residents, but by the teeming throngs of visitors who flock there in search of stimulation, bargains, and gratification. Advertising looms large— in fact gargantuan— as giant billboards posted on the sides of buildings. Hardy has sometimes painted what was there, but other times appropriated the images he desired from print media and inserted them into the cityscape. His choices confirm the advertisers' mantra: sex sells.

Yet despite their pursuit of this obsessive consumerism, the people that Hardy depicts reveal alienation as they go about their lives, but often do not connect with one another in the big city. In *Intersection* (2002), a large billboard features an ad for Gucci, in which a female model's head is cropped, but her legs and sandaled foot are exposed. Below this conspicuous pitch to the consumer, a couple of lone pedestrians pass by, while in the street, we see two helmeted figures riding by on a motorcycle, and what appears to be a homeless man pulling a cart of all his possessions through the street. Hardy is fascinated with communication on the city streets, not only to potential consumers from the

goods and services pushed by the billboards, but particularly through that now ubiquitous invention: the cell phone. It appears on billboards, in the hands of a caller who stands on a roof top for better reception, and held by many who talk as they walk down the sidewalks, oblivious to fellow pedestrians. The people Hardy depicts in paintings such as *I Need to See You* or *Unlimited Minutes* (both 2004) are therefore at once physically present and not fully there.

Perhaps it is the obsessive youth and the fashion of the billboard images that ultimately holds Hardy's attention. Deshabille, come-hither glances, idealized bodies, and luscious lips painted red are just some of the images that have caught his roving eye. His paintings actually do look like the city, but they project more than just appearance. Images of young models sporting designer clothes or states of undress at once evoke sexuality and suggest deeper meanings. In *High Living* (2004), a number of other emblematic symbols cluster together under a dark sky and above a crowd of pedestrians sheltered and made even more anonymous by their umbrellas. A billboard of an out-sized Hummer insinuates itself into this crowded scene of Times Square; it competes with a column of other billboard images of expensive, non-essential consumer goods: Rolex watches, lipsticks, and cell phones.

In *Manhattan Incident* (2001), Hardy caught a moment of panic, where pedestrians dash for safety. A man dressed in a suit and red "power tie," clutches his briefcase with his left hand, while speaking into the cell phone that he holds against his ear with his right hand. Several police cars have already arrived on the scene. The twin towers of the World Trade Center are

visible through the opening at the end of the vista. Eerily enough, Hardy conceived and produced this painting in the summer before 9-11, adding the twin towers *in memoriam* after their destruction.

Hardy paints other familiar landmarks with affection. We see the Empire State Building in *Fifth Avenue Bus* (2004), once again in *Avenue of the Americas* (2002), and poking out elsewhere. Beloved by artists since it was completed in 1902, the Flatiron Building, on its triangular plot between Twenty-second and Twenty-third streets, at the intersection of Fifth Avenue and Broadway, is another Hardy favorite, visible not only in the *Flatiron Twilight* (2004), but also in *Unlimited Minutes*. There are also recognizable views further downtown. In Soho, for example, *Wandering Hands* (2004), depicts Lafayette at Houston Street.

Tribeca is the setting for such works as *Wish You Were Here # 2* (2004), which depicts Teddy's with its crown modeled after the Statue of Liberty. Church towers also capture Hardy's attention, but one suspects that he chooses them for their dramatic contrast with their surroundings, for he charges his scenes of the city with energy, episode, and irony.

Working in post-9-11 New York, Hardy allows that his recent canvases contain "symbolic metaphors that harbor political undertones." *Where Do We Go From Here?* contrasts the austere facade of a Catholic church and its pure white statue with a billboard of a female fashion model, clad sexily in revealing black, striking a dramatic pose between seduction and salute. Below passes a U.S. Postal van emblazoned with the American flag; a taxi's sign displays the

painting's poignant title. The model's gesture mocks the palpable patriotism after 9-11, when Western society's religious traditions and sexual mores came under attack.

References to patriotism recur. In *Avenue of the Americas*, Hardy depicts a traffic-jammed street headed uptown toward a large billboard on which a sultry young blonde sports an American flag arm band and a man's necktie fashioned out of camouflage cloth. In the background, looms the Empire State Building, suddenly again New York's tallest. In *United We Stand*, the American flag and the slogan appear on a poster beneath a billboard of a posturing male model in Calvin Klein underwear. He casts his seductive gaze over a cropped street scene framed by the red, white, and blue stripes of an Amoco gas station.

Where Do We Go From Here?, *Bebe* and *St. Anthony's*, and *Church on 31st Street*, all represent identifiable Catholic churches juxtaposed with sexy fashion models, suggesting further contradictions and impositions in the contemporary West as Hardy, who was born in France of a French Catholic mother, perceives them. The current struggle between the forces of modern secular society and religious orthodoxy, regardless of faith, resonates throughout Hardy's recent work. Nowhere is this more emphatic than in *Lipstick and St. Anthony's* (2003), where the billboard's caption is "So Hot," the model is in a state of undress, and the large erect red lipstick joins the cross atop St. Anthony's in pointing toward the heavens.

The play of sunlight on architectural forms clearly enchants Hardy, yet he also paints overcast days and the night sky. He knows how to catch the sunlight and

shadows just where he wants them. In *United We Stand*, the sun illuminates only the name of the designer, while the nearly nude male model is cast in shadow, emphasizing the eroticism of the image. In *Flatiron Twilight* a pool of white light illuminates the pavement under a darkening sky. Hardy repeatedly catches the way that the light manages to animate the city despite the corridors of skyscrapers.

In Hardy's most recent canvases, the anonymous imaginary characters take center stage with the city now serving as a backdrop. This latest shift recalls his earlier series of urban paintings that also focused on specific figures, only now the figures have become even larger in proportion to their surroundings. It is as if the billboards have come to life and have jettisoned their advertising slogans and logos. Hardy's imagination appears to function with telescopic vision and for now he has decided to look at the inhabitants of the city up close and personal. Issues of communication— or the lack of same— remain implicit, as the figures he captures tune into stereo earphones or cell phones, ignoring his gaze.

Hardy's focus on the cityscape and on roof tops with their characteristic water towers suggests an affinity with the somewhat more abstract Precisionist painters of the first half of the twentieth century, from Charles Demuth to Charles Sheeler. This is particularly so when Hardy delivers a bird's eye or worm's eye view of the city. But Hardy's close observation of the people who inhabit the city calls to mind other early twentieth-century painters such as John Sloan or Reginald Marsh, who both loved painting the posturing of people

and revealing the seductive pleasures offered in the metropolis. At other times, when Hardy allows only a few or no figures to populate his scenes, we think of his affinity with Edward Hopper, whose evocative urban scenes are much less populated, even empty and certainly less noisy.

Like those of Hopper or Marsh, Hardy's paintings often imply multi-layered meanings, enabling him to distill the essence of a cultural moment. What appear as chance encounters are sometimes invented and shaped by Hardy himself, who becomes the director of an imaginary drama envisioned as unfolding daily on the streets. He selects and manipulates with an uncanny power, achieving ironic realism.

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John Hardy

PAINTINGS
2001 - 2005