



Lonely glows from a doorway and truck set the mood in '86's Hopper-esque "Mr. Softee."

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# pictures of the city

Painter turns his hyper-realist eye on NYC



"My Father in Katz's" (2005) pays tribute to a classic New York City delicatessen.

BY PATRICK HUGUENIN

Looking into one of Max Ferguson's paintings is like peering through a window to a New York that has disappeared.

Or maybe it's the New York you just haven't seen yet.

Ferguson's paintings reveal the city's secret scenes: the interiors of forgotten shops and quiet Laundromats, the nighttime business of pool halls and restaurant kitchens, and a lone Mister Softee truck, a bright spot on a dark street.

Ferguson's style is so crisp it's almost photographic — though he doesn't care to be called a "photorealistic painter." Photorealists, he points out, often project a slide onto a canvas and fill in the image with paint. The works in Ferguson's show "Urban Intimacy," on view this Thursday to Dec. 4 at Gallery Henoeh (555 W. 25th St., galleryhenoch.com), aren't copies of photos. They are a mix of the painter's observations and imagination.

"I'll take photographic studies as a springboard, a starting point," he says. "I then change things radically from the photographs. I'll do a bunch of drawings to get a sense of how I want to piece things together — some from the photos, some from my head."

When Ferguson is happy with his drawing — a map of the painting to come — he transfers it to a canvas. He fills in the lines with a

monochromatic under-painting of brown, black and white, then adds three or four layers of color until the image is sharp.

Sound like a lot of work? Ferguson is clinically obsessive-compulsive. "The thing about oil paint is in theory you could work on one painting for the rest of your life," he says. "So as compulsive as I am, I generally stop myself after three or four layers."

Born in New York City, Ferguson, 51, grew up on Long Island and studied animation at NYU.

"As far as natural ability, God-given gifts, I'm not very good," he says. "I wasn't a prodigy or particularly good at drawing or painting early on, but with animation I was doing thousands and thousands of drawings for two- or three-minute films. I got much better in a short time."

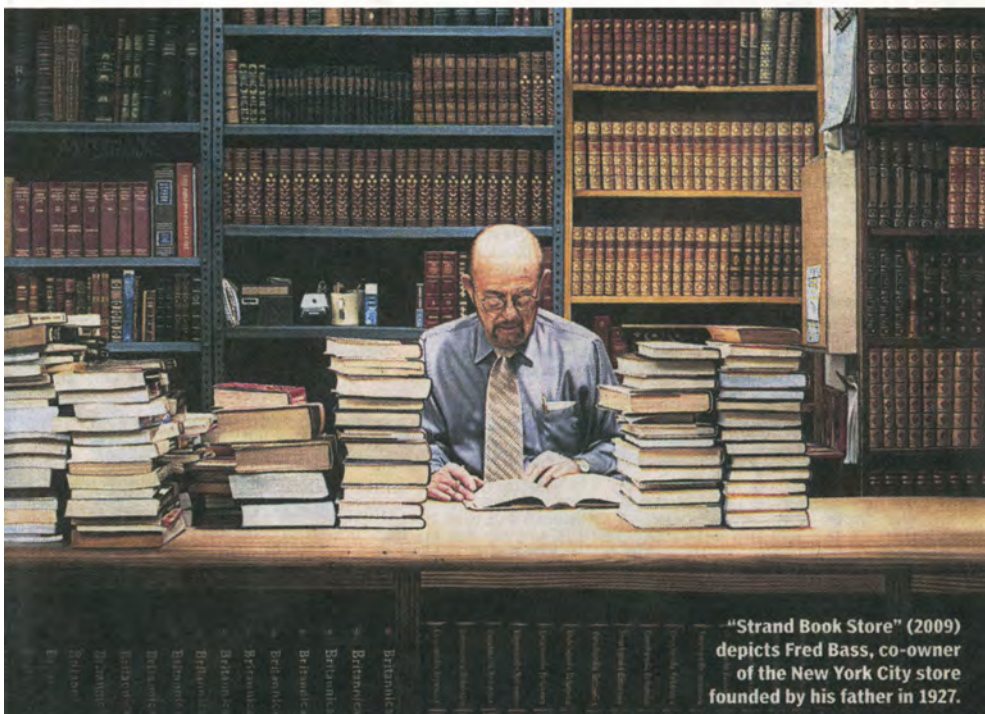
His subject matter: working people, from craftsmen to cooks, and the owners of clock- and shoe- and doll-repair shops.

He finds his inspirations in untouched corners of the city — or in the quiet nooks of busy landmarks. In "Strand Book Store," the store's co-owner Fred Bass flips through a volume, surrounded by others. In "Katz's 7 A.M.," a man mops the floor of the famous deli — the glare of a neon sign reflected in the wet surface.

"I'm very into the idea of preserving things that are disap-



With "Shoe Repair," above (2008), Max Ferguson captures the moment of creation as well as the subject. In "7 a.m.," at left (2009), the glare of neon at Katz's Deli is reflected on the wet floor.



"Strand Book Store" (2009) depicts Fred Bass, co-owner of the New York City store founded by his father in 1927.

pearing," says Ferguson. "Sometimes I will hear or read about something that's about to be demolished or a store that is about to close after being there 100 years, so I run there."

One of Ferguson's disappearing scenes is the New York Doll Hospital, a workshop on Lexington Ave. operated by Irving Chais, who passed away last year at 83. Ferguson did a portrait of Chais in the shop in 2005.

There's always a chance he'll return to Katz's, where he has painted the dining room, the kitchen, and a portrait of his late father — one of his frequent subjects — eating a sandwich.

What does he like to nosh when he needs a break? "The irony of ironies," he says, "is I've been a vegetarian for 39 years."



"Woman in Cafe" (2009) conveys both interior and exterior worlds.