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Central Park Nocturne Max Ferguson

On the Cover

Portions of the following are based on an interview with the artist on April 11, 2013, and video and audio interviews available at the artist's website, maxferguson.com.

Nocturne . . . The word itself evokes sound more than sight. Typically, a nocturne refers to a reflective, dreamy, night-inspired musical composition, such as those written by Claude Debussy and Erik Satie. Yet some of James McNeil Whistler's paintings also have the word in their titles (e.g., *Nocturne in Black and Gold*). That mix of the arts—of music and of painting—is fitting for Max Ferguson, whose *Central Park Nocturne* is this month's cover art. Ferguson is passionate about both art forms. The former is now avocational; the latter, his life's work.

The youngest of four children, Ferguson grew up on Long Island, New York. From an early age, he intended to be an artist. As an adolescent, in the days before computer rendering, he focused on "old school" animation. "I made thousands and thousands of drawings. At about the time I'd had my fill of that medieval monastic activity, I found myself drawing and painting much better because of all the practice I had had." While a student at New York University, Ferguson decided to spend his junior year in Amsterdam because of an animation program offered there. "In this incredible environment of drawing and painting, I began going to the Rijksmuseum every day. [One of the world's most famous museums, the Rijksmuseum houses more than 30 galleries devoted just to such 17th-century masters as Rembrandt, Vermeer, and Hals.] The city of Amsterdam had an annual exhibition where artists could submit paintings, and they [the city] would buy a few. I was—and still am—very influenced by the Dutch school of painting. I had done a genre painting with a very Dutch feel to it, a domestic scene of a woman standing by a window in my apartment. The painting was bought by the city, and things clicked quickly from there."

Ferguson returned to New York, briefly pursuing illustration rather than fine art, as it seemed like a practical way of being an artist, but he found the "insane deadlines and rushed work" unpleasant. Fortunately, his detailed paintings of New York rapidly gained popularity, with gallery exhibits and purchases beginning shortly after he graduated from college.

Whether as foreground or background, New York has remained his primary subject matter. "I've focused especially on nicer, older aspects of the city that I feel are an 'endangered species.' I wanted to capture them before they disappeared. In one sense, my work is about New York, yet ultimately I would like to see it as more universal, a reflection of a contemporary city. The more personal you get, the more universal you become." An urbanite, Ferguson splits his time between Jerusalem, with his Israeli wife and three children, and New York.

Ferguson's style, which he compares at times to a mixture of 17th-century Vermeer and 20th-century Edward Hopper, is meticulously detailed. Often beginning with photographic studies he has taken, he usually starts by making a drawing. He then transfers the drawing to canvas and begins painting, initially with a thin, monochromatic, underpainting layer. He follows this with gradual additions of color in layers. After adding each layer, time is needed to let the oil paint dry. Ferguson uses small sable brushes, more typically used for watercolor painting, which allow the fine detail that subtly accretes with each layer.

The crispness, clarity, and tight control that he maintains over his images could be compared to photorealism, yet Ferguson is clear that for him, photos are only a means to an end, jumping off points from which he can then move on to capture the human spirit in his paintings. Most of his paintings—his *Central Park Nocturne* series is an exception—contain at least one human figure, although often a solitary one, which Ferguson compares to a soliloquy. He is most interested in a conversation, the dialogue between the artwork and the viewer. He wants to convey warmth and humanity, a sense of calmness and timelessness while being "hyperconscious of the brevity of life." He reflects on the ironies of his being "the most live-wire, can't-sit-still person you can imagine" and of having started out as an artist who was "all about motion [animation]" yet now painting scenes designed to be tranquil and lacking in activity.

This particular painting contains many of Ferguson's key elements. One's eye is drawn across the horizontal plane by the spaced lights. Vertical punctuations emerge in the reflections of light on the water, while lights shine from apartments in the distance (with the implication of people snug and safe from the storm). The strong verticals of the black metallic fencing, the streetlights themselves, and the trees are further balanced by the curve of the snowy path, moving the viewer's eye back into a three-dimensional plane so that it takes in both the details and the totality of movement and stillness. There is a quality, simultaneously, of timelessness, of all the snowstorms one has ever experienced, and yet a vivid sense of being present at this particular moment. From the footsteps in the snow, now becoming covered in drifts, one knows that people have been here and will be again. Points of light cut through the storm, yet one experiences the sense of a cold wind blowing and swirling. Light and dark, cold and warmth, connection and solitude, transience and permanence—fitting for the endings and beginnings of this time of year.

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