

Black Is (not really) Black | Drawing on Toned Paper

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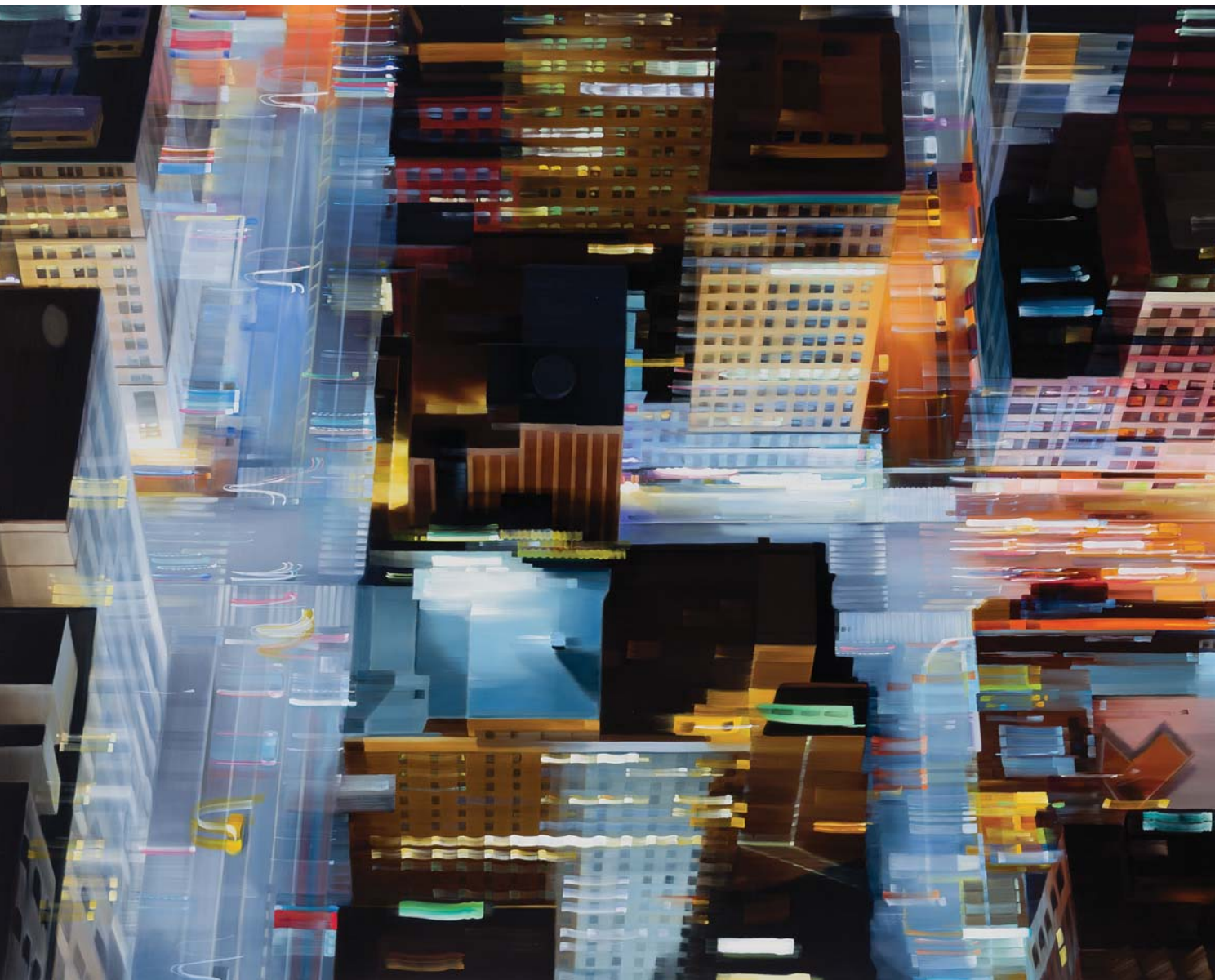
Alexandra Pacula's abstracted cityscapes convey the vibrant, glowing energy of a never-sleeping metropolis.

By B.J. Foreman

PAINTING THE LIGHT FANTASTIC

At first Alexandra Pacula's monumental paintings seem to glow with the exciting light generated in the high wattage metropolis of New York City, where she lives. "I paint cityscapes because I'm drawn to the way light behaves in a city," says Pacula. "Light plays on the street, on the windows, on buildings and in the clouds. The cityscape allows me to create a stable composition that can be filled with wild, energetic light."

LEFT: "All the lights in *Enthralling Vertigo* (oil on canvas, 60x60) are generally the same shape, created with the same gesture," says Pacula. Repeating the gesture makes my paintings rhythmic and musical. This painting has a classical-music feel to it."



Closer examination, however, reveals that the exciting light in her paintings is something else altogether. It isn't really the reflection of skyscrapers' lights or the blur of the street-lights we see; it's nothing that she has observed. Rather, it's something of a fantasy element. Her works remind

the viewer of time-lapse photographs taken with a moving—and perhaps jostled—camera. In the grid of the city, a little (or a lot) of chaos wreaks havoc.

"The light has a life of its own," Pacula says. "It flows over structured and rigid architecture; it escapes its confinement and is free to become

whatever I want to make it. This juxtaposition of the rigid structure and free-flowing shapes makes the work dynamic."

INTRODUCTION TO CITY LIGHTS AND OILS

Pacula grew up in Kraków, Poland, and immigrated to America in 1993, when she was 14. "Kraków, coming out of Communist rule, was a quiet and dark city at night," she says. "Seeing the grandeur and glow of Manhattan was breathtaking to my 14-year-old mind, so the city gradually started to appear in my work."

She'd been seriously painting in oils since the age of 12, using a set

Pacula's Studio Pacula says that, during college, having her first studio made her feel she could finally produce art without limit. "I think it's important to have a space dedicated to your art-making—a place where you can make a mess and not have to worry about spattering the floor," she says. She favors north-facing windows, and high ceilings are a must. She also likes to have a row of lamps with full spectrum bulbs shining down on her canvas. "That way," she says, "I can be sure the colors will look great in any situation."



given to her by her mother. “I still have that set, and the smell of cadmium orange still reminds me of my first painting days,” says Pacula. “I remember trying to figure out how to work with oils. Not having any mixing mediums, I used my mom’s cooking oil to thin my paints.” From then on, her path was clear, progressing through her high school art club to a bachelor of fine arts degree from Rutgers University to a master’s degree in fine arts from Montclair State University.

Through it all, her favorite medium remained oil paint. “I like the viscosity of oil as well as its body,” she says. “I like building up impastos (thick paint layers), and oils lend

themselves to that. A brushstroke keeps its shape. Oils also let me create seamless transitions between colors.”

PLANNING BEFORE PAINTING

Pacula uses photography as a starting point in her process, taking still shots and moving shots of the same subject. By her own description, though, she’s not really a photographer. Photography is purely a tool.

Her first cityscapes addressed New York at street level; then she gradually elevated her perspective to bird’s-eye or rooftop views. “I took some photos from the subway that goes over the Manhattan Bridge and from the trolley that goes over

ABOVE RIGHT: **Luminous Heights** (oil on canvas, 60x60) presents iconic New York landmarks: the Hudson River with a faint brushstroke indicating the Statue of Liberty (background), Freedom Tower (left background), Empire State Building (left midground), W.R. Grace Building overlooking Bryant Park (left foreground) and the Bank of America Tower (tallest building on right). “I painted the lights with left-to-right movements of the brush,” says Pacula, “and let the brushstrokes overlap the window frames in order to animate the composition.

ABOVE LEFT: Pacula painted the swathes of blue in **Floating Metropolis** (oil on canvas, 46x68) with glazes of turquoise, ultramarine blue, cobalt blue, Prussian blue and Payne’s gray over a bluish-gray underpainting.



the Queensboro Bridge. I like to challenge myself,” she says.

In the studio Pacula examines her photos and creates her composition. “There are angles I don’t like when I compare the still and blurred

ABOVE LEFT: Two glowing, blue skyscrapers engage in “light” conversation in **Luminous Matrix** (oil on canvas, 68x48).

ABOVE RIGHT: To Pacula, **Evanescent Glow** (oil on canvas, 54x80) suggests jazz, each brushstroke freely improvised, yet contained within the city’s structure.

photos,” she says, “and I try to correct the perspective before I start painting.” She considers this planning stage—making sure everything is in its right place—one of the hardest parts of her process. “I make precise measurements, for the windows, for instance,” says Pacula. “I painted more loosely in the past, but now I’m painting more architecturally.”

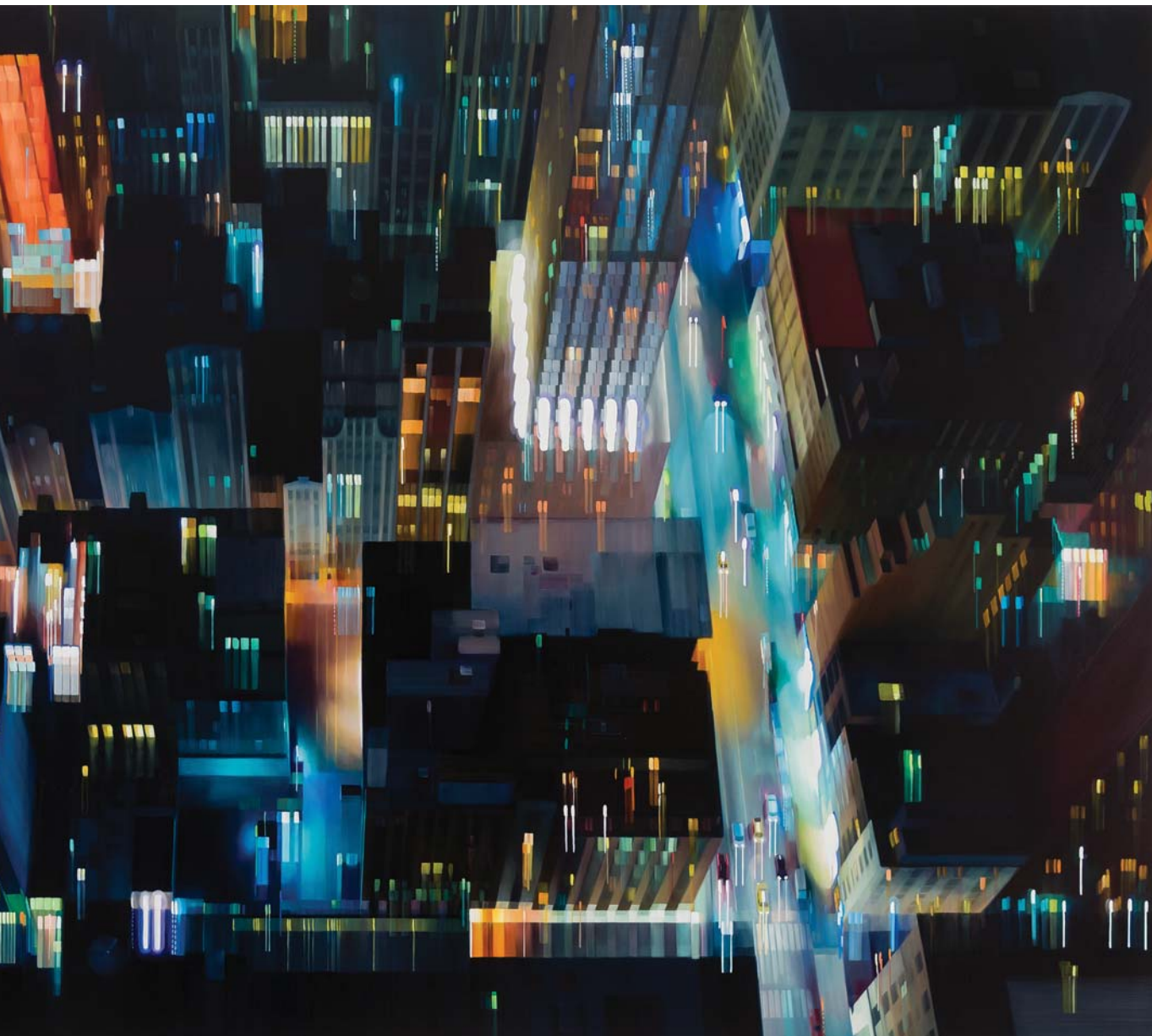
After establishing a composition that captures the moment, she draws it in turpentine on the canvas. Next she sets the colors with light washes. Then comes thicker, textured paint. She completes the painting with multiple layers of transparent glazes.



SYMPHONY OF STROKES

As important as photography is in the planning stages of Pacula’s work, these reference images play a limited role. “I’m not a photorealist painter,” she says. “My goal is just to be a painter. I don’t want to copy. My brushstrokes make obvious that I’m creating a painting.”

Each brushstroke is sacred to this artist. Each starts with a life of its own yet works with all the others to achieve a super-reality. In the large paintings, any single stroke may represent an athletic feat requiring a steady hand, the climbing up and down of ladders or the turning of a



canvas to get at various areas of the composition.

A casual viewing of a painting may reveal both matte and glossy strokes. “The matte look has to do with the drying process,” says Pacula. “Sometimes I don’t use medium so the paint dries more matte. I finish most of my paintings with semigloss varnish that evens out everything, but sometimes I like the matte look because it adds dimension.”

Pacula’s attention to each brush mark results in a symphony of strokes. (In fact, she often compares her works, with their rhythmic repetitions and sweeping gestures, to music.)

MATERIALS

SURFACE: 50-50 blend of cotton/linen canvas, purchased in rolls from Robert Doak & Associates in Brooklyn, New York and stretched by Pacula, sometimes with the help of an assistant.

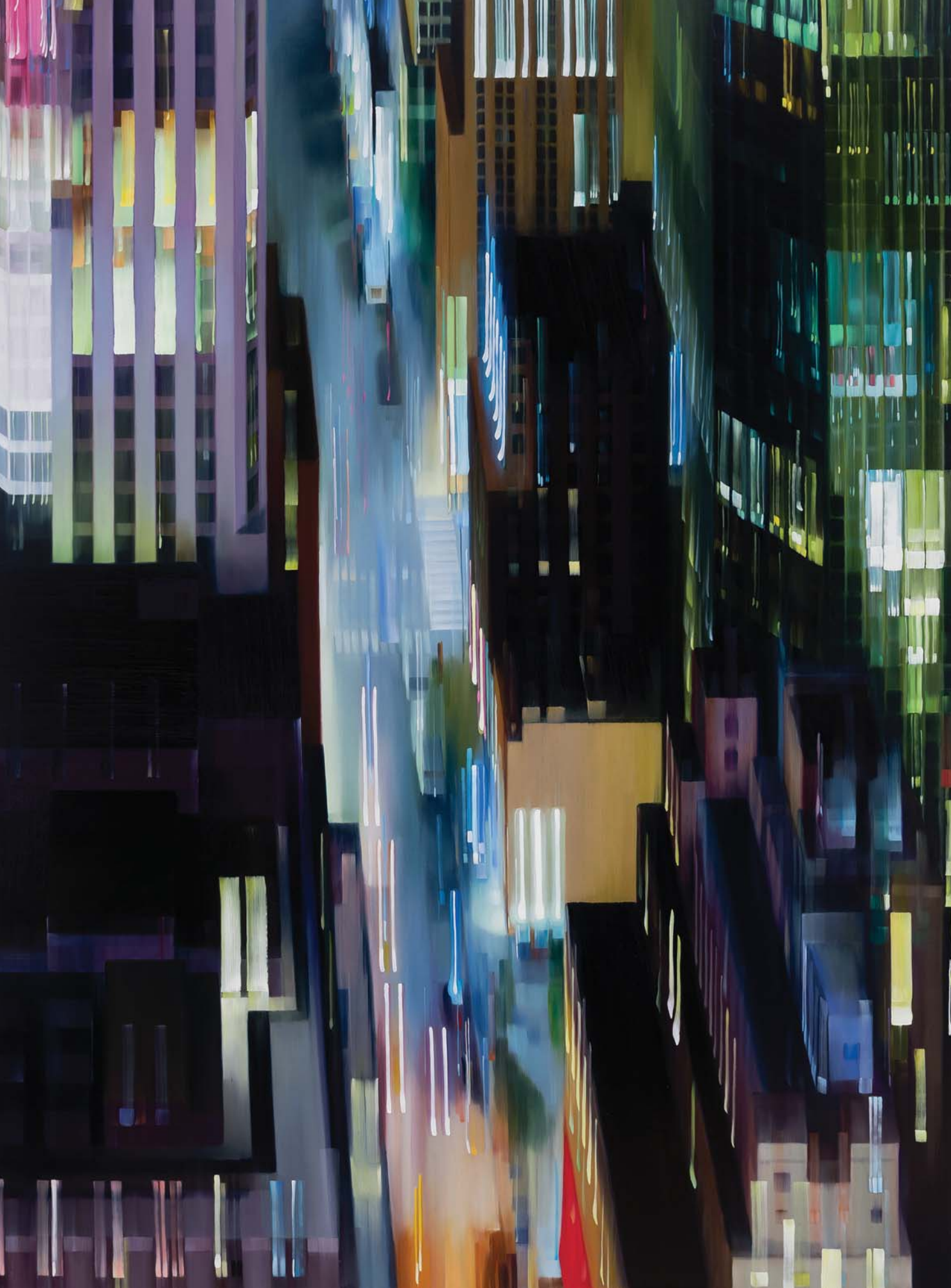
OILS: wide variety of transparent colors, including these favorites: Holbein rose violet transparent and Gamblin green gold and transparent orange (to keep the chroma intense); East Coast Colors

titanium mika white and Williamsburg cobalt teal (for purity and vibrancy of tone); Winsor & Newton indigo (for deep tone and strong pigment)

BRUSHES: Mostly flats (Raphaël red sable and mongoose; Rosemary and Co mongoose; Escoda kolinsky sable; Creative Mark Mural nylon or bristle; sometimes four large bristle brushes attached together for a 20-inch brushstroke) and some filberts

MEDIUM: 4½-to-4½-to-1 mixture of turpentine, stand oil and damar varnish to make the paint dry a little faster and keep it glossy; works well in glazes

OTHER: large glass palette on a wheeled table; 12-foot mahl stick that’s also used for drawing in perspective; thick rags or Viva paper towels; Talas silicone release paper for rolling up a painted canvas (it won’t stick to the paint, even when exposed to heat)





She wants the viewer to examine her paintings both up close and from a distance. “From far away,” she says, “my work may look like a photo, but close up it’s more expressionistic.”

BRIGHT LIGHTS

What viewers first notice about Pacula’s work, however, is her depiction of colored light—vibrant, kinetic, glowing. She achieves the look by

applying thin glazes of transparent color over opaque paint—an effect she says works best when the color underneath has a lighter tone.

“Achieving luminosity is one of my goals when I paint,” says Pacula. “Sometimes the effect is hard to capture in a photo of a painting but, in person, my pieces have an inner glow. Because my paintings have a lot of contrast and vibrant color, they even glow in a dimly lit room.”

Some of Pacula’s works are more traditional linear studies of the city; in other pieces she blurs the view and simulates motion, resulting in pure abstractions of shifting shapes and colors. Still other works are salutes to signature New York City architectural landmarks. Every work, however, is alive with light. Always, New York glows in her eyes. ■

B.J. FOREMAN, art critic and small business owner, is a longtime contributor to *The Artist’s Magazine*.



MEET ALEXANDRA PACULA

As a child in Kraków, Poland, Alexandra Pacula made art out of paper scraps until her mother gave her an oil painting kit. After immigrating to America at age 14, she eventually earned a bachelor of fine arts degree at Rutgers University (New Brunswick, N.J.) and a master of fine arts degree at Montclair State University (N.J.). In 2010, Pacula received a fellowship in painting from the New York Foundation for the Arts and a one-year residency at the Marie Walsh Sharpe Art Foundation. She has exhibited her work in Russia, Spain, London and Paris, as well as in the United States. Gallery Henoch (New York City) represents her work. [Visit her website at alexandrapacula.com.](http://alexandrapacula.com)

ABOVE: “In *Pulsating Network* (oil on canvas, 50x68),” says Pacula, “the light and direction of the brushstrokes echo the dominant note of the composition: the three-point perspective of the architecture.”

LEFT: “I applied the yellow wall in the middle of *Cascading Current* (53x40) with one pull of a seven-inch brush and a substantial amount of paint,” says Pacula. “In fact, most of the work was painted with shapes made with single swipes of the brush.”