



## **The Urban made Poetic: In Conversation with Marco Sassone**

**Deidre Kelly**

I work in downtown Toronto, practically next door to the CN Tower which looms just outside my office window. I have grown up with this urban icon and it is now so familiar to me that I barely take notice of it. And yet one day, four years ago, when an artist's rendering of this upside down exclamation mark in the sky passed across my desk I couldn't help but stare.

This was the CN Tower as I had not seen it before – presented boldly, in a kaleidoscopic range of colour, which lent it a majesty that I, on my own, would never have discerned in this everyday object in my midst. The image graced the cover of a catalogue for a new exhibition of work by an artist I had never heard of before: Marco Sassone.

I grabbed hold of the catalogue making the rounds of my newspaper and impatiently flipped through its pages, eager to feast my eyes some more. On every page was a rendering of the Toronto streetscape, focusing on such banalities as an empty parking lot and the crisscrossing of railway tracks near the harbour, which I found intoxicatingly brash and beautiful. The paint was applied thickly and aggressively, drawing emotion out of the steel and concrete. Toronto looked mythic, poetic even – no small feat for a city whose enduring nickname is Hogtown, a reference to its brutish history as a place where livestock were driven for slaughter.

So who was this Marco Sassone, and why was he doing for Toronto what Balzac, in his own way, had once done for Paris – turning it into a work of art?

I found out when I went to the exhibition opening and there found a congenial and wiry man, smiling ear-to-ear as he basked in the praise of others likewise besotted by his work. Born in Florence, Italy in 1942, he had spent the past two decades living and working in San Francisco where he had a celebrity clientele. He told me he had come to Toronto for love – of a woman – and that the city held for him secrets that he was trying to unleash through the art style he had learned in Italy. In his youth, he had been embraced two distinct and often opposing schools of



Underpass, by Marco Sassone 2011 watercolor on paper, 22 x 30.5 inches



Marco Sassone, 2005. Photo by Richard Paradowsky

painterly expression: Impressionism and Expressionism.

Needless to say, we straight away became friends. I have since spent many an engaging hour in his Carlaw Avenue studio, sipping espresso and gazing upon the mighty canvasses depicting the interiors of Santa Croce in his native Florence, and San Marco in Venice, one of his favourite cities. Toronto, however, increasingly occupies him, as demonstrated by his latest exhibition of work about the city, a collection of watercolours on view at Toronto's Berenson Fine Art, 212 Avenue Road ([www.berensonart.com](http://www.berensonart.com)), until June 23rd. I recently caught up with Marco for a chat, and to ask him why Toronto continues to fascinate him. Here's some of that conversation:

**DK:** Toronto has been your home for a short while, since 2005 I believe, and yet in that time you have formed an intimate relationship with the city through your art. What is about Toronto that intrigues you as an artist?

**MS:** Toronto is a current end point in my journey. It's my home and yet I feel a sense of disequilibrium, a feeling that, for me, is often needed to paint. I have observed life on the streets since I moved to the United States in 1967; the streets of Toronto continue to engage my sensibility. The industrial sites, the highways, form a perspective towards a point of arrival which has often been synonymous with my life.

**DK:** You have worked with watercolour for this series of paintings, which I think is not a medium you usually work in. So why watercolours for these paintings?

**MS:** It was a spontaneous decision to begin painting in watercolour for this series. The decision to use this medium began, as always, with observation – this time at night. The rain reflections and illuminations viewed through the windshield of my car provided an immediate challenge. In an instant I resolved to use watercolours to continue the flow of the sights in front of me.



Bloor Street Night, by Marco Sassone 2011 watercolor on paper, 21 x 29 inches

**DK:** How do you make what is usually a delicate medium look so muscular and gestural?

**MS:** A writer in the '90's wrote in a catalogue that I paint in watercolour the same way I paint in oil. Even though the technicalities are totally different, I believe she was right, in view of the end results. The gestural aspect of my style remains there; it is present in everything I do, independent of the medium. The drive to paint this series in watercolour was as obsessive as it was challenging to portray muscular subjects with this delicate medium.

**DK:** You are originally from Italy, and from Florence, a world capital of art. How does your heritage influence your work? How does it translate to this new city?

**MS:** Florence provided the foundation of my work; the formation of the artist. When I arrived in

North America, I brought with me an intense sense of colour and a feel for the pulse of life. It is here that I found the intrigue, the contemporary, and the elements to continue my voyage.

**DK:** You lived in San Francisco for many years and there painted the homeless. How do you choose your subject matter when it comes to painting cities?

**MS:** The Western metropolitan cities provide an inexhaustible source of subject matter. I remember painting the beauty of San Francisco as well, but what caught me completely was the homeless population. I could not leave it alone. I did not choose it, the subject chose me; it became a part of me and I found myself immersed in that world for nearly four years. To paint these people I became one of them in many ways.



Lakeshore Drive with Moon, by Marco Sassone 2011  
watercolor on paper, 20.75 x 28.5 inches

**DK:** In Toronto you are painting monuments, streets, empty parking lots – never people. And yet your Toronto paintings have a similar emotional resonance as the San Francisco homeless portraits. What are you trying to bring to the surface in your art?

**MS:** In my new work, people – human beings – are just perceived. They are most often not visible, and yet they haunt the Toronto paintings with their presence. Yes, they do have a similar emotional resonance as the homeless paintings. Art is a creature that absorbs all of me, and when I paint it is often autobiographical. My personal history is probably resurfacing in my work.



Night Tracks, by Marco Sassone 2011 watercolor on paper,  
22 x 30.5 inches

**DK:** Your technique is muscular yet lyrical if not romantic at the same time. How do you achieve what I will describe as a feeling of battered heroism with or in paint?

**MS:** “A feeling of battered heroism” – what a fantastic expression – no one has ever described my work in that way before! I would say that to paint today is like an act of fate. My works are manifestations of my primal experiences. They originate from my core, my being, a being perhaps wounded by personal displacement and brushes with homelessness – but I find in my paint refuge and deliverance. I would have to trace back the elements of my technique to the new approaches learned in the mediated teaching of Austrian artist Oskar Kokoschka. My teacher, Silvio Loffredo, was his pupil. The violence of signs and tonality of colour typical of the extremely personalized expressionism of the Austrian master.

**DK:** You have said Toronto is a city with railroad lines and streets reaching into the distance, no end in sight. Do you feel that the city is a journey? If so, describe your own process of discovery.

**MS:** From the time I was a child growing up in Italy, I have always felt a strong desire to go, to depart from where I am and to arrive somewhere else. For me, Florence was the world of art, and I became an aspiring practitioner in that overwhelming city of the Renaissance. Still, the desire to escape the weight of the city's towering history was ever-present. On November 4, 1966, I watched as Florence was deluged by the Arno River in a disastrous flood that devastated the city. Soon afterwards, I left for California on a painting trip and ended up staying there for over thirty-five years.

My interest in urban landscapes is ever present. I am attracted by a street perspective, characterized by converging lines that visually draw the eye in on a voyage. For the same reason, I am attracted by railroad tracks. I began to identify with their appeal from the moment I moved to Toronto in 2005. I experienced a sudden resurgence of the feelings which time, necessity and routine had for many years been kept hidden from me. These strong sensations reside more powerfully in the depths of an artist's soul than his memory.

These railroad tracks in this city offer me a dramatic engagement with that old call of departure and arrival, the sense of loss and uncertainty about the future. They also invite the contemplation of decay, corrosion and, for my paintings, the exploration of a new chromatic scale.

(All images are courtesy of Marco Sassone.)