

MARCO SASSONE: TORONTO

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The expressionist paintings of Marco Sassone have a distinguished lineage: in his early twenties he studied with Silvio Loffredo, a professor at the Accademia in Florence who had been the pupil of the great expressionist artist Oskar Kokoschka. Influenced by these artists, Sassone relies on a thick application of paint, which acts as the conduit for his remarkably poignant treatment of people and landscape. The artist, now living in Toronto, moved from Italy to California in 1967; there he developed a career rich in achievements and awards, including being knighted into the Order of Merit of the Italian Republic in 1982. Throughout his career, whether painting the homeless in California, the canals in Venice, or the streets of San Francisco, Sassone employs heavy overlays of intense color; his outlook is both visionary and painterly. The long years of work have not diminished his energies in any way — Sassone remains someone deeply connected not only to the craft of painting but as well to the felt quality of experience, which is found in his landscapes as well as his empathic portraits of people. Sassone's concentration on his theme is borne out by the passionate force of his compositions, which often includes the immediate surroundings of the city he lives in. He is a painter for whom the primary impulse is intuitive, driven by his desire to identify with the people and views he paints.

Not surprisingly, then, Sassone's concentration on his subject matter is his immediate concern. First recognized for his landscapes of Laguna Beach in the 1970s, the painter later turned his attention to San Francisco, where he set up a studio in 1981. Frequent trips to Italy also supplied him with picturesque scenes, which he rendered with typical impasto and striking emotion. Expressionism is at heart an identification with the subject, one of such intensity that the act of painting the tableau or person becomes an extension of the artist's capacity to connect with his topic. Sassone's compassion becomes quite evident in his treatment of the homeless; in particular, his paintings and studies of a homeless man with blue eyes are riveting not only for their visual intensity, but also for the stoic suffering we see on his subject's face. The heavy surfaces of his cityscapes also tell a story in which Sassone's sensibility melds with the scene he is depicting, so that his studies of the twilight canals of Venice become meditations on Italian architecture, its air of historic, and historical, grandeur.

Most recently Sassone has turned his attention on Toronto, where he devotes himself to the city's skyline and broad thoroughfares. The painter remains a visionary, describing tall buildings and merging highways as he forges a rapport with Toronto. In *Toronto 6*, for example, he captures the buildings with splotches of blue and red color; behind them the sky is pink to deep red, enlivened by horizontal brushstrokes of white. The colors contribute to the impression that we are looking at the view just after twilight has set in, with the highway leading up to the distant buildings painted in longish stripes of slate blue, gray, white, and pink. Everything in the painting is alive with energy; it looks like the passion of Sassone's creativity has captured the city as a vibrant, living entity. The small patches of paint are expertly pieced together, with the result that they communicate their meaning clearly. *Toronto 4* comprises an overpass that is linked to a long perspective; one sees into the background as if watching from a dark tunnel. The subject of a single street passing into a far distance is consummately handled; the gray of the street, as well as the browns and tans of the overpass, is reiterated by the gray of the sky and the browns of the buildings lining the avenue.

Sassone's audience approaches his work knowing that the paintings are in dialogue with a tradition going back to the early twentieth century. His expressionism escapes the epithet of anachronistic, however, by being so sharply lived. While his works are not overly emotional, they gain success because they relate to a complete life of the imagination, in which feeling and intellect combine. I think it would be hard for Sassone to work any other way. Certain artists do not sum up so much as they embody the elements of their work; Sassone is one of them. His impassioned *Toronto 7* gives us a clear view of a wayward sky, thick with cumulus clouds, beneath which is a service road to a higher approach to a bridge. Buildings on the right of the canvas continue to rise darkly into the apocalyptic sky, while on the left we see the lampposts and guard rails of the lane above the service road. It feels like twilight again, that time when the atmosphere is mysteriously heightened; Sassone is profoundly interested in rendering a nearly mythic ambience, whose experience borders on the sublime. Indeed, the painter's view often exceeds the human, opting for a sense of life in which pathos, empathic identification, and mythic impulse meet.

In *Tracks*, Sassone offers a wide view of train tracks that split in the middle of the painting and go off into two different directions. Bare trees line up on the left, while a fence and buildings support the right. In the far distance beyond the tracks the outlines of buildings can be seen; the sky is a light tan with some dark blue clouds at the top of the composition. *Tracks* is a gritty scene that finds beauty in industrial corrosion; essentially a composition of blues and browns, the painting builds a striking tableau that is truthful to the grand decay of city life. The thick paint reminds Sassone's audience that the trueness-to-life is an artist's reading and not an absolute verisimilitude. Then there is Sassone's outstanding cityscape, *View from the Bellagio*, nearly impressionistic in its use of individual strokes, which conjure high-rise buildings that sit on either side of Bloor Street crowded with traffic. The individual windows of the skyscrapers are painted differently from one to the next, almost as if Sassone created a mosaic; the long road that essentially divides the canvas is a tannish brown in color; the headlights of cars are rendered by brushstrokes of white. Very much the romantic painter, Sassone opts for a dark blue sky that lightens as he comes near to the dark buildings that nearly overpower his composition. Here as elsewhere, Sassone takes his love of architecture and moody horizons to a high pitch, which is discernible both as skill and inspired feeling.

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