



THIS PAGE

**Moonlight,
Central Park**

by Mary Reilly, 2007,
graphite, 23½ x 18.
Collection the artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE

**Vacant Lot,
Manhattan**

by Anthony Mitri, 2007,
charcoal, 18 x 16½.
Collection the artist.



The Beauty of New York City in Black and White

For artists **Anthony Mitri** and **Mary Reilly**, who work in charcoal and graphite respectively, drawing is the medium that has helped them develop a personal vision and unique style. | **by Naomi Ekperigin**

New York City carries an allure that can be seen in television, movies, and many paintings and drawings by great artists. It is considered a cultural and artistic mecca, where creative people can express themselves and find their niche. Its neighborhoods, each with its own distinct smells, colors, and landmarks, have attracted not only tourists, but also painters, sculptors, and draftsmen from around the world for more than 100 years. However, many of the city's residents and visitors forget the history behind the imposing buildings and fast-moving streets, and many more long for the solitude and individual connection that such a busy environment often lacks. Artists Anthony Mitri and Mary Reilly create drawings that provide the viewer with these intimate moments of New York, allowing them to see below the surface while rendering the city's various faces in breathtaking detail.

Anthony Mitri: Drawing the Face of New York

San Diego artist Anthony Mitri creates charcoal drawings of cityscapes and landscapes so realistically rendered that many viewers initially mistake them for black-and-white photographs. Upon closer inspection, one can see that these drawings are the work of a finely skilled hand, an artist who slowly builds up layers of charcoal to create lifelike shading.

Despite Mitri's commitment to realism, the artist primarily relies on the feelings he has about a location when choosing a subject, and considers himself an expressionist in that respect. "My choice is driven largely by a feeling I have about a setting," he explains. "What I see is directly tied to what I feel. I need to 'discover' it, so to speak, with my eyes. I also think my mood at a given moment influences the way I see something, which in turn affects the way I feel about it."

As a youth, Mitri's first art lessons came from his mother, who worked as a commercial artist in department-store advertising. Other than two years of classes at the Cooper School of Art, in Cleveland, he is largely self-taught. He developed a love of music early in life and went on to study piano for several years at the Cleveland Music School Settlement. His path took a sharp turn in college, where he majored in geology. Although these studies seem to create a circuitous route to an art career, Mitri feels that they deeply influenced his creative style. "Studying geology, for example, afforded me a new pair of eyes with which to see landscapes," the artist explains. "And I listen to music while I paint. Mood in music and mood in a piece of art are the same for me."

Perhaps it is this focus on mood and not color that attracted him to working with charcoal. Mitri only began working in his current style within the last five years; he previously worked in ink, graphite, and watercolor—but mostly he painted in oil. "I continued working in oil—primarily landscapes in a heavy, impasto technique—through 1999, when I shifted to a different technique of oil washes and a more abstract style," the artist recalls. He says that he always favored cool colors, regardless of the medium he was working in, and that the lighting in his oil landscapes is not so different from the lighting in the pieces he now draws. "When I was an oil painter I always leaned toward subdued, muted color. Going from muted oils to black and white wasn't a huge jump for me.

"I began to work in this current style of charcoal in early 2002. The first pieces were experimental," he continues.

BELOW

Seward Park, New York City

by Anthony Mitri, 2007,
charcoal, 15 x 32½.
Collection the artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE

Space in the Lower East Side, Manhattan

by Anthony Mitri, 2007,
charcoal, 15 x 25½.
Collection the artist.

"Having used charcoal in a much looser style previously, I had much to learn about the medium in the context of a tighter, more realistic method." A three-year sojourn to France served as inspiration for this developing style. "I have always been moved by nature," Mitri explains. "I grew up in an area southeast of Cleveland; it's a largely forested landscape of rivers, hills, valleys, and small farms and towns, and I found similar settings in the Calvados region of Normandy. I love the feel of autumn fields in warm hues and of bare trees against cool, gray skies."





ABOVE
West 54th Street From the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY

by Anthony Mitri, 2006, charcoal, 36 x 16½. Private collection.

"A drawing with many architectural elements like this one takes much longer than a natural subject, such as a field of flowers," Mitri says. "This piece took about six months to complete."

OPPOSITE PAGE
Central Park at Fifth Avenue, New York, NY

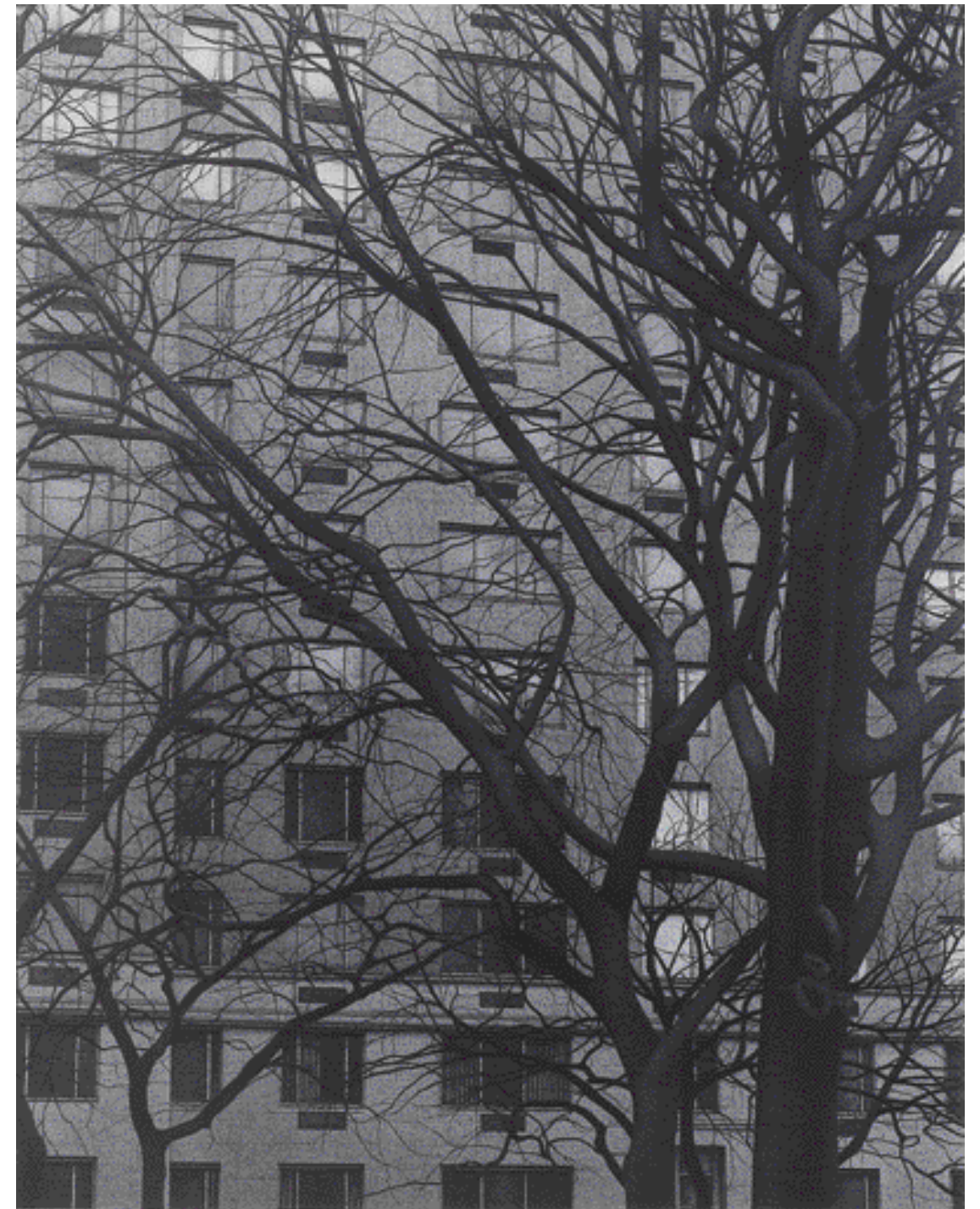
by Anthony Mitri, 2006, charcoal, 21¾ x 17. Private collection.

"I'm not surprised that some of my favorite moments are those spent in public parks in the heart of the city," says Mitri when explaining paintings such as this one. "Skirting the fenced boundary of Central Park, where city touches nature, I get a taste of both of the worlds I love so much."

His emphasis on the mood of a piece can be seen in his lighting choices, especially in his cityscapes. Like many artists, Mitri places great emphasis on lighting in a scene, and considers it to be his strongest tool for evoking a certain emotional response from the viewer. The artist's favorite season has always been fall, when the colors change and the weather cools. "The lighting in my drawings appears as though I am in my scene on a cool, overcast day in late autumn," he explains. "Even when I find myself at a particular location on a hot, humid day in August, I won't render that bright summer lighting in the final drawing—I'll draw that scene as if it's under gray autumn sky." The artist depicts the chosen scene in the way that is most appealing to him, even if the realities of the view do not dictate the use of certain choices—emotions trump the visual facts of a landscape, for his ultimate goal is to express his inner feelings about a subject.

Although Mitri initially focused on rural landscapes similar to the ones in which he grew up, the artist finds himself equally moved by the symbiotic relationship between city and nature that exists in large cities such as Paris and New York. He has never lived in New York for a significant period of time but he has visited frequently with his wife, who lived and worked there for 13 years. They took two weeklong trips in 2003 and 2005, during which they strolled through neighborhoods in downtown Manhattan, and Mitri took the photographs that inspired his latest series of New York cityscapes. The artist is excited by the variety and sharp contrasts that exist in these drawings. "There's a diversity of architectural interest in the city," he explains. "Just as a portrait artist may be inspired by the face of a certain individual, a specific setting may inspire an artist of a cityscape. The 'architectural face' of an old city such as New York—at once aged and young—possesses a personality as much its own as that of each individual who has come to be a New Yorker." When Mitri describes his favorite New York City locations, it seems that he seeks out the best of both worlds: city and nature, found in the major parks and in areas of the East and West Village. Take, for example, the drawing *Central Park at Fifth Avenue, New York, NY*. "This space caught my eye as I walked the boundary of Central Park in the autumn of 2003," the artist remembers. In this piece, Mitri highlights the interface of art and nature, as the architectural complexity of the skyscraper contrasts with the natural simplicity of the tree branches on a crisp fall day. Both the building and the tree are rendered in intricate detail, one no less vital because of the presence of the other.

In the drawing *Vacant Lot, Manhattan* the artist focuses on an empty space nestled between several tall buildings. "This scene was striking to me for many reasons," Mitri says. "The obvious void created by the demolished building, the graffiti on the sides of the buildings, the variety of architectural styles present at that location, and the old, dark building



OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE

**3:15 p.m., Penn Station,
New York, NY**

by Anthony Mitri, 2005, charcoal, 12¼ x 18¾. Collection the artist.

“The Penn Station drawings gave me the opportunity to experiment with another aspect of the charcoal medium: texture, and how a relatively large area looks and feels in solid black,” the artist says.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW

**10:37 p.m., Penn
Station, New York,
NY**

by Anthony Mitri, 2005,
charcoal, 12¼ x 18¾.
Collection the artist

“Just as a portrait artist may be inspired by the face of a certain individual, a specific setting may inspire an artist of a cityscape. The architectural ‘face’ of an old city such as New York—at once aged and young—possesses a personality as much its own as that of each individual who has come to be a New Yorker.”

—Anthony Mitri

in the center, which I could see on the next block over through the empty space.” As one can imagine from the great detail, Mitri’s charcoal cityscapes take several months to complete, and he works at home in his studio, using reference photos taken on-site. When on location, the artist spends most of his time walking around the space, viewing it from different angles to find the most effective composition. When he is moved by a particular perspective or angle, he looks at the scene through the viewfinder of his 35-mm Minolta camera and snaps as few as three photographs before moving on. This may seem surprising to other artists, many of whom take hundreds of photos and take elements from several of them to create a single drawing. But Mitri does not find this method suitable for his style, because it is the mood and emotion evoked by a location that pulls him in and stays with him long after he’s left the site. “By the time I take out my camera, I already know what I want; all I have to do at this point is frame and shoot,” Mitri explains when asked about his process. “When I’m working on a drawing—which can sometimes be months after taking the photograph—it still feels like I’m getting up and going to work on that site.”

To maintain this feeling, Mitri develops his photographs in full color, even though he works in black and white, because that provides him “with as realistic a memory of the location as possible,” he says. “It’s that particular moment on-site that I seek to capture back home, and that includes the colors.” The artist compares his process with charcoal to his previous experience with watercolor and oil painting and finds he approaches the media similarly. “Just as paint can be applied in a series of glazes, one can begin applying charcoal lightly and gradually add successive layers to achieve the desired value,” he explains. “There’s also a limit to how much charcoal can be erased, depending, in part, on how much pressure I use to apply it. Because of this, I still think like a painter—I constantly think ahead and visualize the value contrasts I wish to achieve.”

Mitri prefers 300-lb Arches hot-pressed paper for its smoothness and weight. Before beginning his drawing, he drags fine sandpaper vertically and horizontally across the surface. This creates a linenlike texture, a kind of cross-hatching that he feels lends the piece a sense of roughness and history, similar to an old film strip. Although he creates highly detailed work over a long period of time, Mitri does not spray his drawings with fixative until he is completely finished. “Fixative makes the paper grainy,” he explains. “The charcoal that’s been sprayed ends up having a different texture than the previous layers.” To prevent smudging as he draws, the artist uses a makeshift mahlbridge he made with wedges of wood.

Mitri’s technique for executing his drawings is fine-tuned, but he still is tested when working in charcoal. “Exploring the different ways to use charcoal and the different effects that can be produced is the most challenging—and the most exciting—aspect of the process,” he says. “A painter must choose values and hues and must consider relative temperatures and the emotional effects of different hues as they prepare their palette. Likewise, I choose which charcoal will enhance or detract from the desired emotional effect, illusion of distance, or other devices. For example, blue-gray charcoals will create the illusion of greater distance from the viewer, whereas warm yellow-gray charcoals tend to pull the viewer’s eye relatively closer to the foreground.”

Guiding the viewer’s eye is the goal of every artist, and Mitri strives to not only move him or her through the piece but also create a sense of intimacy between the viewer and his subject. He considers himself a portrait artist who works one-on-one with his subject and engages in a dialogue to get a sense of the personality of a building or area. “My goal is to present the face of my location undistracted by other elements, the way a portrait artist might—and truly convey its essence.”

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