

# A Cacophony of Color

Megan Rye's compelling vision is unlike that of any other painter working today.

By Marya Hornbacher



**F**rom rural Maine, she writes: *I am working furiously on the Iraq painting—in the day, soft rain hitting my skylight, turning the grass lush neon green, the goats are happy, the red barns slick with color. My studio is the best part. It is a square monk's cell, clean, and spartan, with a pale gray floor, a skylight, and white walls.*

She, Megan Rye, sits bent over her canvases for hours each day, painting with intensity, at a place called Skowhegan, which offers one of the most important residencies to which a young visual artist can be accepted. She paints a world of abandoned subterranean spaces dense with objects. Her paintings are dark, contained, controlled, painted with a quarter-inch brush. From her tiny brush, explosions of color light up the dark spaces where her vision lives.

"Megan sees a cacophony of color and shape emerging from urban life," says Robert Fishko, owner of the influential New York and Los Angeles Forum Gallery. "She has a very fresh and different melody to sing, a new image to offer. In all of the arts, you have to produce what you produce with a real authority. I sense that this young artist has the kind of authority that will propel her toward tremendous success. I look forward to working with her for a very long time."

Fishko has taken serious interest in Rye's paintings, and Forum has chosen to represent her, showing her work to collectors, museums, and art critics. Next summer, she appears in a group show presented by Forum—an honor and a level of distinction that most painters never come near. For any artist to achieve the recognition of industry publications and major galleries is significant. To have that kind of attention when you are twenty-nine years old, as Rye is, is almost unbelievable.

**Rye** had an unusually rigorous education in her craft and has studied art since the age of five. Born in Seoul, South Korea, she met her adoptive family at seven and a half months. Her mother, Karen, with whom she is very close, remembers that her daughter was "always able to make something out of nothing."

"When she arrived from South Korea, she already had incredible fine-motor skills," says Karen. "She'd been left alone a lot, and not having toys and an enriched environment, she used her hands to entertain herself."

Not a social child, Rye retreated into a world of art early on, where she was comfortable and could create as freely as she liked. "She was always expressing herself in a wonderfully visual way," says Karen, who recalls when Rye was in grade school and made a clown for art class. "She made a fabulous clown, but it was not [the teacher's] clown, so I said, 'Good for you. Don't make Mr. Benson's clown. Make your clown, and

keep making your clown.'"

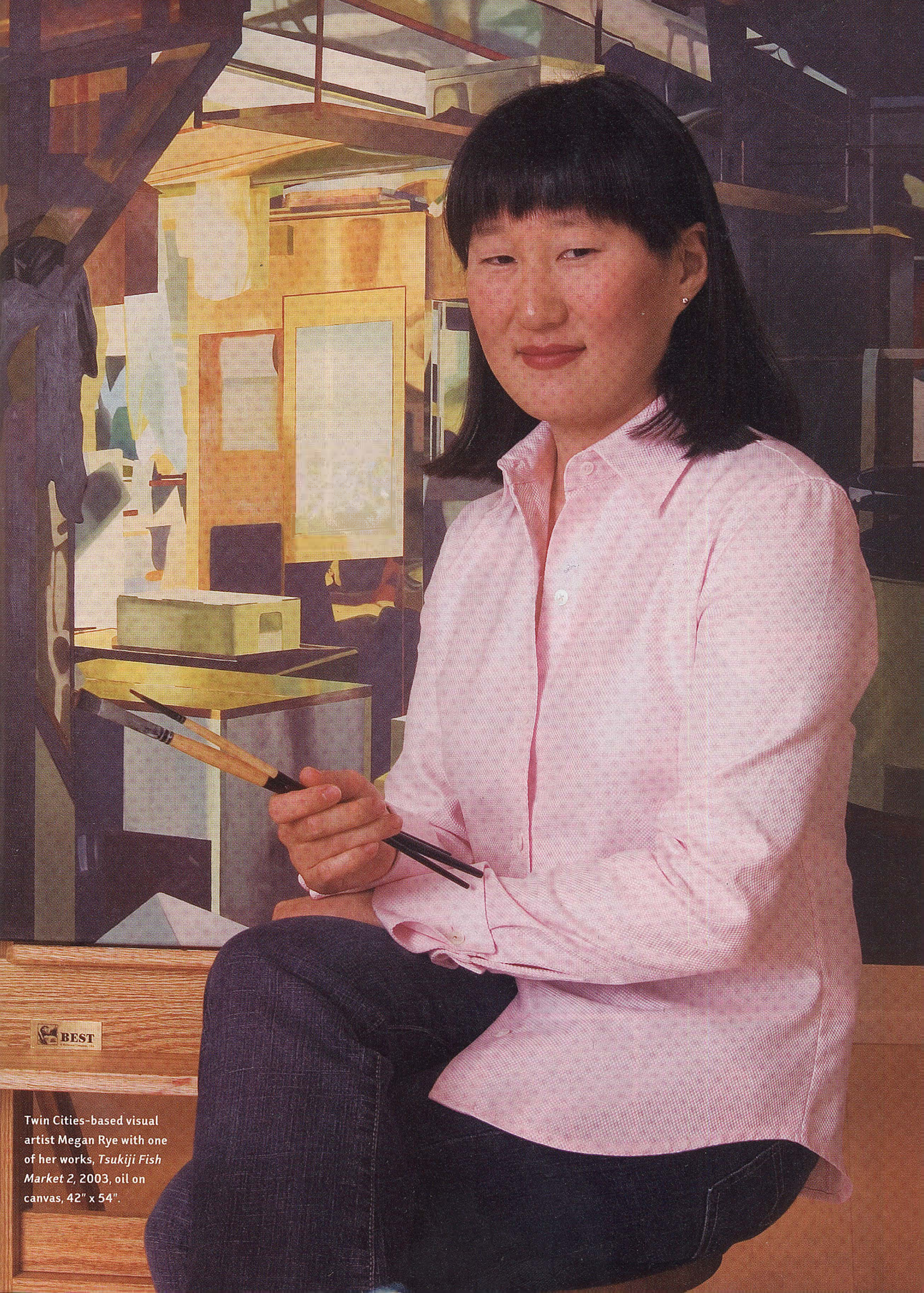
While attending Edina public schools, Rye also took classes at the Edina Art Center. She spent hours in the basement at her drawing table, drawing precise architectures, or in the kitchen, painting still lifes using pointillism. During her freshman and sophomore years in Edina, she also took classes at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, where she was approached by a faculty member interested in tutoring her privately. She studied closely with that teacher during her final two years of high school at the Perpich Center for Arts Education, graduating in 1994.

Rye studied art history and painting at Rhode Island School of Design, completing her BFA in Rome on RISD's European honors program and graduating with honors in 1998. She stayed in Rome to study for two more years before returning to the States. While completing her master of fine arts at the University of Minnesota, she received a graduate research grant and a graduate school fellowship from the U of M—and a lot of attention from artists and critics of note.

It was in graduate school that she feels she found her subject.

"When I went into Grand Central station, all I wanted was pie for lunch," she says, recalling an incident during her first year of grad school. "I was down under Grand Central station, in the food court. And I was just struck by how beautiful and strange and visually

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Twin Cities-based visual artist Megan Rye with one of her works, *Tsukiji Fish Market 2*, 2003, oil on canvas, 42" x 54".

complex that place was, and the light, and the subterranean nature of the space. I suddenly felt uncomfortable—and inspired, and almost physically sick—but it seemed so alive, such a heightened reality, that I took out my camera and started shooting. It was at least an hour later when I felt I could

ing or painting to count, so that if you took away one thing, any object, the painting wouldn't function."

Gary Fink, a Minneapolis-based collector who directs Louvre It or Leave It Museum, says, "The first time I saw her work, I was struck by how young she was and that the work was very professional, very striking in its individuality. I can't think of another artist, existing or new, where I had the same reaction. It

On the easel, countless precise lines cover a canvas.

Referring to her photographs, Rye first draws her subject in pen, then paints the work two or three times until she's satisfied that it's done. Her concentration, focus, and discipline are the product of a highly organized mind and personality, and her work bears out those qualities. Her relationship to her work is intense and private, just as she is.

"It's interesting that my life is predicated on rituals, and that the kind of painting I'm doing right now is so in tune with that," she says, fishing her tea bag out of her cup, pressing it dry with a spoon, and reaching for the sugar bowl and pitcher of cream, which she uses and then wipes with a towel before setting them back in precisely the place they were. "But I wouldn't read too much into that.

"As a person, I'm fairly understated and subtle. [In my paintings] I want the more disturbing qualities to be understated and resonating. I think of Jonathan Franzen's essay, 'Why Bother?', where he talks about being contained by the darkness, but not being immobilized by it. Beauty, strength, sustenance, those things that are difficult or complicated, are very close to my life."

"She is young and brave, exactly like her work," says Walker Art Center director Kathy Halbreich, who first came into contact with Rye and her work when Rye was a teen participating in the Walker's Listening Project, where students work with artists and study the center's underground collection and library. "There's a quality of film in her work, something film noir. There's a quiet electricity, a quiet rumble."

The viewer of Rye's paintings finds that he or she has stumbled into a world beneath a world, spaces that are devoid of humanity, but where there is evidence of human activity that seems to have been suddenly abandoned. The works are cluttered with objects, architectural angles, and reflective metallic surfaces. The icy cerulean blue of glowing, ethereal fluorescent lights creates a kind of hum and haunts the spaces, bringing the luscious reds,

oranges, pinks, greens, blues, silvers, and blacks into blinding relief.

These paintings close in and contain the viewer. There is a palpable sense of being both trapped and safely held, a tension between anxiety and comfort. Rye recognizes in her work an "abyss" into which the viewer falls without knowing that his or her step has slipped. These dark, detailed spaces are steeped in the dense silence of isolation. And yet, there are astonishing colors and shimmering, tactile surfaces that beg to be touched.

"Her work uses extraordinarily rich images," says David Frazer, a RISD professor who directed Rye in her senior honors project. "She has a fantastic ability to create spaces of great beauty and specificity."

"There is a kind of earthy, primitive aspect to her work without being overly ferocious," says Fink. "It's not hard to look at her paintings. It's hard *not* to look at them for a very long time. You need to live with them for awhile."

**At Skowhegan,** Rye is painting a piece dealing with the war in Iraq. She's immersed in a work on a scene in Mosul, not far from where her brother was stationed. "I woke up in the morning, I opened the paper, and I looked at this photograph and thought, 'This is heaven,'" she says. "There was this tent, where people had been eating, that had been attacked. So what you see is all this light streaming through these holes where the tent had been destroyed, and it looked like heaven. But then I realized what it was, this horrible thing. There's this beautiful, ethereal light within this utter destruction."

Walking the fine line between the dark of her vision and the light, the uninhabited and the full of life, the earthy and the sublime, it may be her best work yet.

From her studio in Maine, she writes: *I am thinking about my work, and seeing that through all the darkness and death implied, that the other side of all that is this undercurrent of life, and so much beauty.* ▲

Marya Hornbacher is the author of *The Center of Winter: A Novel* (HarperCollins).



Megan Rye, *Tsukiji Fish Market I*, 2003, oil on canvas, 24" x 30"

relax again. That's what happens—I go into a space and feel this heightened sense of things, and until I finish photographing, I can't relax."

That same thing happened in the Tokyo fish markets at four in the morning. And in the Tokyo subway system. And in the catacombs under Columbia University, where the atom bomb was developed in secret, and in basements and places where the patterns and the light hold her captive and inspire new work.

"There's always a moment in the paintings that is, for me, *the moment*," she says. "Everything else around it is built to support that moment. It's not important to me that everyone sees that moment; everyone has their own moments. You want everything in a draw-

was so different from anything I'd ever seen before." Gazing up at the museum wall where ten of her paintings hang, he says, "We buy art that makes our heart sing. Megan's work certainly did that for me. It's almost like when you fall in love with somebody. Looking at a piece of art is the same thing. If you can continue looking at it and find out why it's alive and important and germane, that's where the love begins."

**In the basement** of her immaculate Twin Cities house where she paints, only a tiny window high on the wall allows any light into the room. Dabs of brilliantly colored paint on palettes are neatly covered with plastic wrap. Every brush is scrupulously clean.