

Working Habits

Signs of the Times



Robert Cottingham's paintings bring back the marquees and neon glitz of midcentury America
by Ann Landi

Empire, 2008, watercolor on paper, is based on a sign above the Empire movie house in Montgomery, Alabama

Above a desk in Robert Cottingham's studio, amid pictures of family and friends, hangs a photograph of another studio: Franz Kline's, circa 1950. Like many painters, Cottingham says he enjoys seeing where other artists work. Kline's studio - a cramped, grubby room overlooking 14th Street in Manhattan - offers a stark contrast to Cottingham's airy atelier, a converted barn just steps from his 18th-century house outside a postcard-perfect Connecticut town. And Cottingham's meticulously composed paintings of vintage Americana - signage from earlier eras, typewriters, cameras, back ends of railway boxcars - are about as far as you can get from Kline's spontaneous explosions of paint. Still, Cottingham says of Kline, "I suspect that the graphic power of his work, however abstract, has greatly influenced my own."

Working as an art director at the advertising agency Young & Rubicam in the early 1960s, when Pop art and photorealism were first gaining traction, Cottingham recalls visiting galleries with friends on his lunch hour. "In 1962, we went up to Sidney Janis and saw the show called 'New Realism,'" he says. "And that was it. That just blew me away. That was the vision I'd been having, but I hadn't really done anything about it yet."

By the time he relocated to Los Angeles, in 1964, still employed as an adman, Cottingham es-

timates that he'd finished about "a painting and a half." But in L.A. he buckled down to the task of becoming a serious artist, working nights and weekends and taking as his subject the sun-drenched architecture of southern California. Then he began to look up, above the sidewalks of downtown America, and discovered the gaudy world of neon signs - the imagery for which he is probably best known.

Cottingham quit his job in 1968 to paint full time. He was preparing for a show in L.A. when his wife, Jane, an antiques dealer, traveled back to New York to visit her parents. She took along slides of her husband's work to show to dealers in the city, and, after approaching several galleries on 57th Street, she was advised to bring the pictures to Ivan Karp's pioneering gallery, O.K. Harris Works of Art, down in SoHo. Outside was a man sweeping the sidewalk; inside, behind the desk, was Patterson Sims, future curator of the permanent collection at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Jane thought Sims was the gallery owner; Karp - who turned out to be the guy cleaning up outside - thought Jane was the artist. Once the confusion was sorted out, Karp announced, "We're going to make your boy a star!"

In 1972, after eight years in Los Angeles, the Cottinghams decided to move to London with their two small daughters. "We thought, let's go to Europe. It took about 30 seconds to zero in on

London because we don't speak any other languages," Cottingham recalls. He made regular forays back to the States to photograph signs as the basis for his paintings. On one trip, traveling by Greyhound bus, he hit 27 cities in two and a half weeks, often visiting multiple places in a day. By contrast, he found, "London was a great metropolis, a great place to be, but as subject matter it just didn't happen for me; the signs just looked foreign." He regularly sent work to Karp in New York and soon established a reputation stateside.

In London, Cottingham became friendly with up-and-coming British artists, including Allen Jones and Patrick Caulfield, and played host to Americans like Richard Estes and Duane Hanson. Jane Cottingham even took John Kacere, famous for his hyperrealist cropped images of women in scanty lingerie, underwear shopping for his models on King's Road. But after four years the Cottinghams returned to the United States and soon settled in the home and studio in Connecticut.

At 77, Cottingham still puts in full days in the studio, where he works on prints and paintings (which usually start out as gouaches) and listens to classic and West Coast jazz. His voice retains traces of Brooklyn, where he was born and raised. From about the time he was ten years old, the artist would visit Manhattan with his father, a longshoreman. Cottingham remembers his first glimpse of Times Square. "I think that's when the seed was planted,

(continues on page 2)

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Working Habits Signs of the Times



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when I saw the kind of activity going on above the ground level." He also recalls a trip to the Whitney Museum as a teenager when he encountered Edward Hopper's *Early Sunday Morning* (1930). "This painting called to me - first drawing me into the small room where it hung, then speaking to me of stillness, isolation, and time. It was in those silent moments that I knew I would one day be a painter." Night classes at the Pratt Institute and nearly a decade in the advertising business honed his vision and gave him an unerring sense of color and design.

Cottingham often works from subjects that caught his eye on trips made years before, such as the Empire movie house in Montgomery, Alabama, which he stumbled across when he was having a show at the local museum. (Drawings and paintings of the Empire marquee were featured in his most recent exhibition, in February, at Forum Gallery in New York, where his paintings were priced from \$50,000 to \$350,000 and works on paper from \$5,000 to \$30,000.) The artist brings his compositions to completion through a series of calculated steps, including preliminary sketches, photo projections, and mapping with a grid. For a series-in-progress based on images of mysterious mechanical components culled from an engineer's manual, Cottingham even made paper models to help him decipher the geometric angles of the objects and then, dissatis-

fied with the results, hired a professional model maker to craft the shapes from wood. Nonetheless, a final resolution to a picture can elude him. "I've found a trick I've used over the years," he says. "I can go to bed at night with an image on my mind, but I don't try to solve it. And in the morning, the solution is right there. It's amazing."

Visiting New York City is Cottingham's favorite non-work activity. "I love walking, not on country roads, but in New York," he says, "doing the galleries and museums, browsing in antiques shops, and just getting from one place to another. It's always inspiring and revitalizing." But as he looks around his carefully organized studio, filled with art books and a couple of primed canvases awaiting his brush, he admits: "This is where I really want to be."

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