

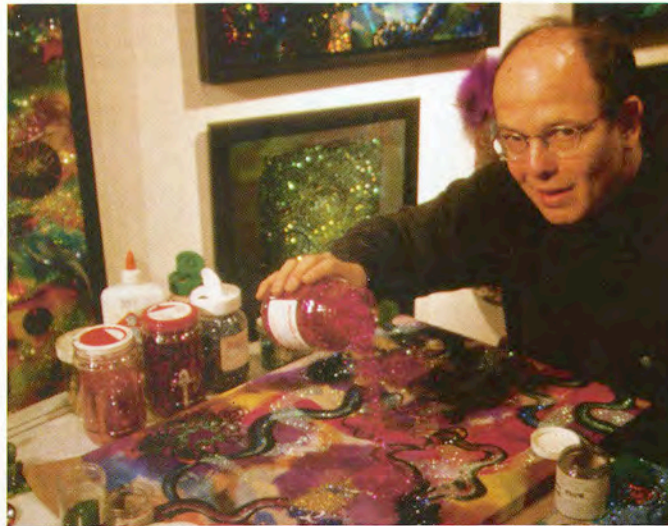
Art as Glamour

A painter points the way to a new pop abstraction.

Text and photography by
Edward M. Gomez

If comedy needs tragedy in the inexorable way that heat needs cold to measure it, define it and help reveal its spirit—then so, too, does the hard-edged, theory-driven, “serious” side of abstract painting need its impulsive, exuberant counterpart. Today abstraction’s more ebullient face can be seen in the explosive compositions and luminous textures of New York artist Christopher Tanner’s mixed-media canvases. At once dizzy and sumptuous, they carry the torch for an interesting strain of abstract image-making that is one part razzle-dazzle and two equal parts experimentation and resonant, funky soul.

“I’m constantly looking for myself,” Tanner says, with an infectious enthusiasm for life that clearly is communicated in his artwork as well as in his own performances. Tanner came to art from the off-Broadway theater scene. “Making my paintings has been and still is a journey” he explains. Burrowed away for the past decade in a basement studio in Manhattan’s East Village—long the home of bohemians both authentic and aspiring—Tanner has evolved a manner of painting that is rooted in theater, humor, notions of glamour and the irresistible allure of all that’s pop.



Tanner in his subterranean studio (left). His “Scenes from Christopher Tanner’s World” (below), circa 1998, is an installation piece with mixed-media paintings, drawings and video.



Like many artists, Tanner's motives and purposes are deeply personal. Born near Pasadena, California, in 1955, he grew up in the suburbs. His father was a custom shoemaker who later worked at a racetrack; his mother, a commercial artist, also worked on political campaigns. "My parents met

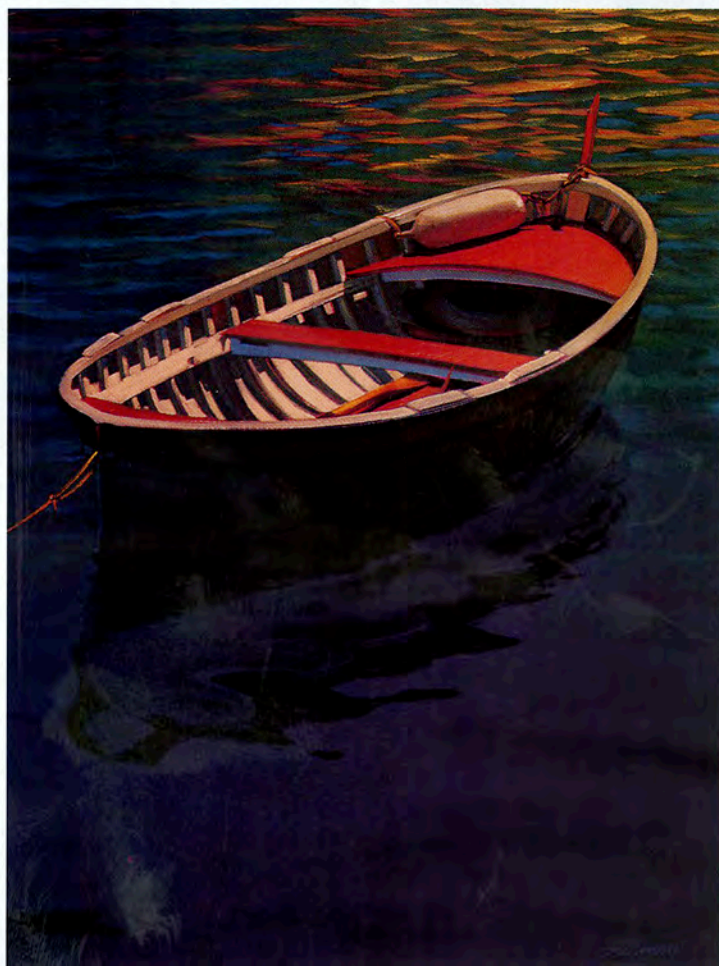
when my mother, who is still an active painter created a sign for my father's store," Tanner explains.

By the time he was 13, young Chris was taking art lessons from Argie Taylor, a trained artist and the mother of one of his school friends, who died accidentally at age 15. Like Taylor

The evolution of his style and technique...led to the current visual language —call it “pop abstraction”— that he now employs.

TOM SWIMM

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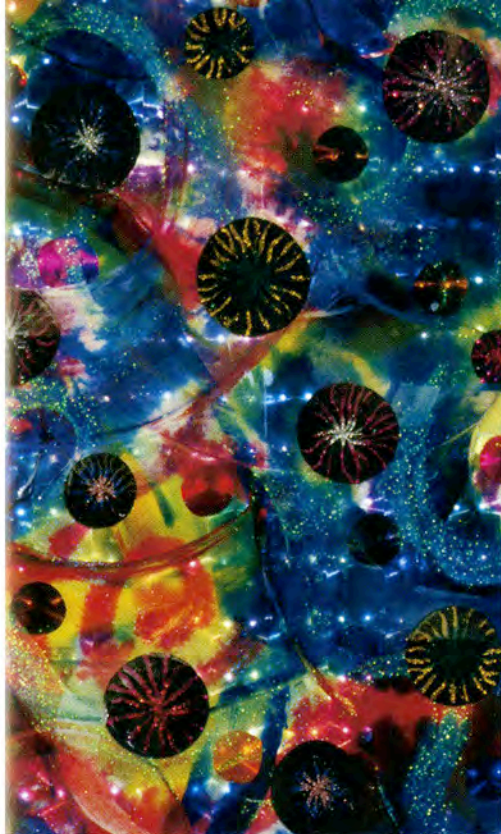
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Tanner was devastated. He found solace in drawing and painting.

Even though he would go on to study art formally, Tanner still fondly recalls: "Argie Taylor was the only real art teacher I ever had. She turned me on to working with unusual materials—spray paint, newspaper, burlap. She made a beautiful lunch after each lesson, then we'd talk about art history. She took me to museums, too."

At college in San Francisco, Tanner's major was neon sculpture. ("Remember, this was the early '70s!" he says drolly.) He played a Chinaman in a college production of "Anything Goes" and discovered tap dancing. He also played the Warhol "superstar" Candy Darling in an experimental troupe's staging of what he now calls "a rather tragic-fabulous play" and became hooked on the theater.

However, unsatisfying drama studies at the California Institute of the Arts and performing gigs at Disneyland



Sumptuous visual textures and an intriguing, multi-layered sense of depth characterize Tanner's mixed-media paintings, like "Untitled" (above), circa 1998, with hand-dyed silk presented in a wooden frame.

"pushed me to go to New York and prove myself," Tanner says. He arrived in Manhattan in time to catch the mushrooming of galleries, music clubs and performance-art venues in the East Village in the early 1980s. "But I saw it all from a theater point of view," he says. "Neo-expressionist painting was going on all around me, but I was doing my own thing."

Tanner had always drawn, but a trip to Taiwan in 1985 triggered the evolution of his style and technique that led to the current visual language—call it "pop abstraction"—that he now employs. "In Taipei's notorious back streets, I saw garishly made-up people eating, drinking, handling snakes and carrying on in a bacchanal that was both intriguing and frightening," the artist recalls. "There was a mysterious sense of ancient ritual and theater in what I saw. Back in the United States, AIDS was breaking news. So I began making watercolors

that expressed the powerful reactions about life, about death that had overcome me."

Soon Tanner was making lavish, gilded frames for his drawings, then the frames became assertive artworks in their own right. SoHo dealer Paul Bridgewater and avant-garde venues

like La MaMa E.T.C.'s gallery showed his work, and well-known artists like Robert Kushner became interested in Tanner's ensuing experiments with such unusual materials as glitter and paillettes (large, coin-sized sequins), all in the context of making paintings.



BREAKFAST TEA

BY JAN PARKER

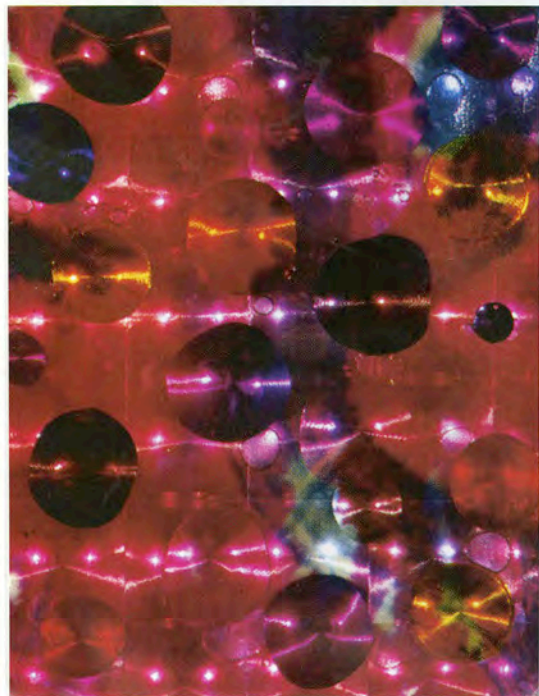
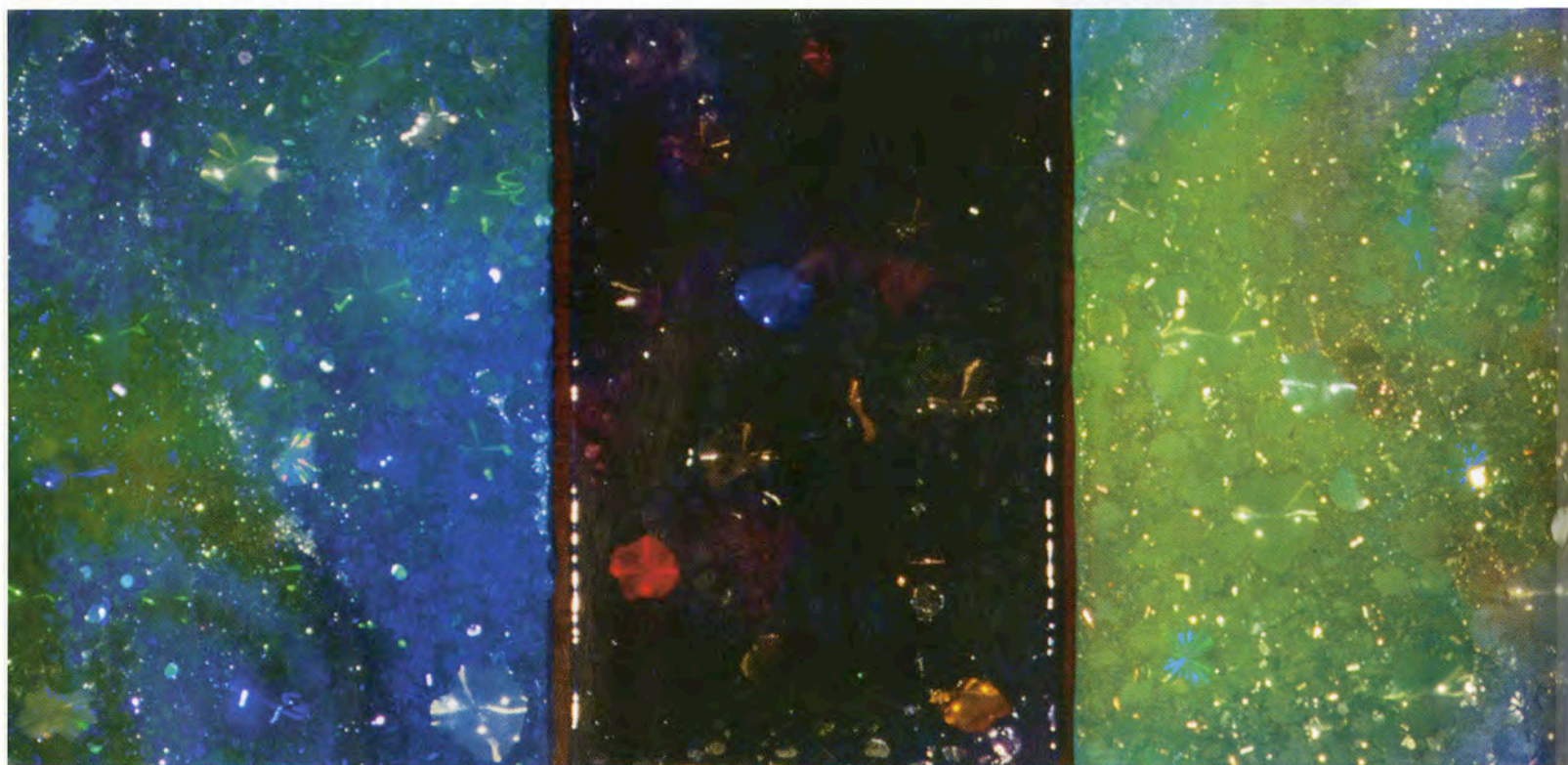
"Through my art I bring peace and harmony to the world!" —Jan Parker



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The exuberant color of Christopher Tanner's "Untitled Triptych" (top), circa 1998, comes from glitter, reflectors and unusual media. "Untitled" (above), circa 1998, incorporates mixed media on dyed silk and wood.

Kushner a key figure in the 1970's pattern-painting movement, noted in a 1995 review that Tanner's highly reflective tableaux, with their loving exaltation of the showy tawdry and over-the-top, embodied "a gritty contemporary glamour." Even as he incorporated ever more dazzling ingredients into his luscious surfaces, like holographic plastic reflectors, hand-dyed silk and giant, fake-pearl glitter flakes, Tanner devised an ingenious method of encasing entire canvases in shiny clear-epoxy coatings.

For all the whirling dervish of unlikely materials and the unabashed lust for luxe that Tanner packs into each piece, his recent works can and perhaps should be viewed in the broader tradition of color-field or monochromatic abstract painting. Tanner's American collectors include architects and designers who appreciate his art's balance of high camp and high style. In Europe, he has shown his work at Galerie Oz in Paris and at the Flatland Gallery in

Utrecht, Holland. "In using bits of fabrics from costumes in his works, Chris literally embeds a part of himself in them," observes dealer Kathleen Magnan of the Liebman Magnan Gallery in New York. Early this year Liebman Magnan showed an extensive installation by the artist that incorporated his childhood drawings, videotaped performances and small-format, mixed-media paintings.

Preparing for a big epoxy-pouring session, Tanner assembles his tools, including a blow torch to smooth out the coating surface. His newest works in-progress feature bold, black lines that swell and curl with Miró-like mirth, hinting at flower or octopus shapes. Asked where they may lead, Tanner grins and thinks aloud: "I can never tell. I follow my heart, and so goes the art." Then he pauses and adds, with the sigh of someone deeply familiar with the tug-of-war of abstraction's split nature: "Or maybe it's the other way around." □