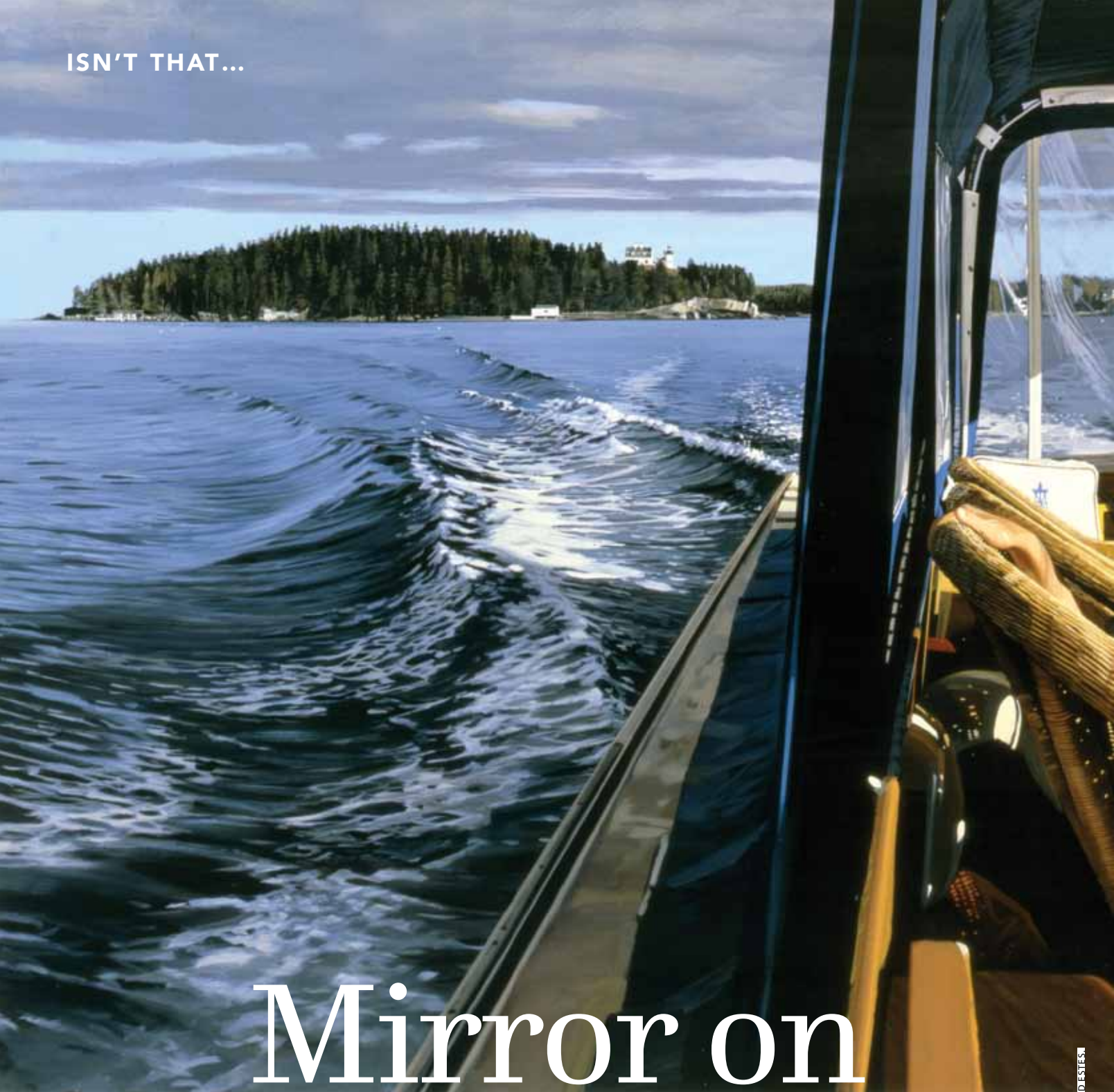


ISN'T THAT...



# Mirror on Maine

New York artist Richard Estes turns his exacting style on...us.

BY DANIEL KANY



COLLECTION OF THE KEMPER MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI, GIFT OF THE ENID AND CROSBY KEMPER FOUNDATION, 2002.13. © RICHARD ESTES, COURTESY OF MARLBOROUGH GALLERY, NEW YORK. PHOTO: OREN FLOR.

Painter Richard Estes has a place already secured in history books as the leading proponent of painterly photorealism—one of the last true “isms” in art and a movement that changed the way we understand realism: While “realism” had been gauged by accuracy and verisimilitude, its standard is now the photograph.

On a visit with Estes at his home and studio in Northeast Harbor, I discover a friend-

ly man with a warm twinkle in his eyes that accompanies his easy smile. He is not particularly forthcoming about his work. This is not because he is shy or secretive—in fact, he’s quite open and direct about his content and techniques—but rather because, like so many accomplished painters, he relies more on his eye and his sensibilities than on explainable theories or preset ideas.

Estes’s home is one of Fred Savage’s architecturally remarkable “cottages.” While

it is beautifully decorated, the house is more defined by its spatial elegance than by the objects within it.

The ostensible subject of our conversation is his Maine paintings, even though his artistic accomplishment was built on his paintings of New York. So we begin there.

I ask Estes why his *Paris Street Scene* looks more like a unified space, while the buildings in his New York City paintings (like *Jone’s Diner*) feel individualized and

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almost incongruently distinct from each other. I expect a discussion about “place” that will encompass his Maine paintings, but Estes turns our talk to a subject about which he is both passionate and deeply knowledgeable: architecture.

“I guess deep down I am a frustrated architect,” he says. “I was accepted to study with Mies van der Rohe, but I returned from a trip abroad too late in the semester to attend IIT. But I wasn’t too late for The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, so I enrolled in art school (1952 to 1956). I trained to be a graphic artist, and after art school I worked as a commercial illustrator for ad agencies and magazines.”

**E**stes has two studios in his home. One is an airy and open rectangular space (which Estes astutely indicates was a later addition) bathed in the light of north-facing windows that reach from the floor to the soaring ceiling. Above the mantel hangs a large square painting of the Brooklyn Bridge Estes made specifically for that space (“that pipe with the hard shadow in the front center,” he explains, “was the toughest challenge of the painting”) and he is quick to note the historic bridge’s many connections with Maine. The only studio accoutrement in the comfortable room, however, is a freestanding easel on which sits an unfinished painting of Columbus Circle viewed from a subway entrance. Lined up on the floor are four small, horizontal landscapes.



Richard Estes relaxes in his studio in Northeast Harbor on a recent Sunday.



Estes tirelessly scrutinizes quotidian New York City moments, as in this *tkts. Line*, 38" x 61",

**Are you still working on that painting of Columbus Circle?**

Yes. In fact, I am still working on all of these. [He points at the four smaller paintings.] They are for an upcoming show I have at Marlborough [Gallery in Manhattan]. Two of them are Africa, but one is here—Acadia.

**I thought there might be more reference materials around—photos and drawings—but I don’t see any, and your studios don’t seem to be set up for that.**

After a certain point, all of my decisions are based on what happens in the paintings. Even from the start, getting the values right is important for me, and that’s why I often do under-painting in acrylic [before finishing with oil]. I can work out the values and make changes far more quickly because the acrylic dries in minutes. I don’t use source materials for the details. When I make decisions about whether a piece is done, I don’t compare it to anything. It just has to feel right to me.

**Do you approach your Maine paintings differently than your New York scenes?**

No. I make them the same way.

**What about the multiple perspective systems of New York? Your city paintings typically have two or three vanishing points.**

That’s the way the city is. This is why I particularly like to paint Broadway. It cuts across the grid of streets and avenues. That is why the Flatiron building appears so often in my paintings. It was defined by these diagonal and multiple perspectives.

**So there are just different kinds of paths and reflections in your Maine paintings?**

Yes. [He points to an easel supporting a highly finished—but incomplete—painting of hills reflected in a Maine lake.] I want more definition here [indicating a sunlit passage of the far hills on the left side of the image], but I might keep this piece really loose. I’m not sure.

**So you wait until you know what your next step is?**

Right. My big paintings can take a couple of months. Patience is a big part of my work.

**Are there things you paint that rely more on what you have seen in other paintings than photos or direct observation?**

Water feels forced if you try to get it exactly like a photo. So I do it freehand. It’s all in the gesture. Sometimes when I paint leaves, for example, I tie a few small brushes together. If you try to paint every leaf, it feels tense or fussy.

**Is mark-making more important for you than accuracy?**

The gesture and the brushwork have to succeed for one of my paintings to be finished. My works are not finished until I think it’s a good painting. Some sit for months and some never make it out of my studio.

*As I leave, I thank my gracious host for taking time out of his schedule to talk with me on a summer Sunday. He laughs at this.*

*“Well, I wouldn’t be in the studio today. Never on a Sunday. I refuse to be a Sunday painter.” ■*

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