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A Perfect Home for Harms in the City

"Some Trees," at Steven Harvey Fine Arts Projects
By [Jennifer Landes](#) | January 17, 2018 - 1:00pm

What a perfect home Robert Harms's recent paintings have found at Steven Harvey Fine Arts Projects, adjacent to the pocket park on Forsyth Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The streetfront windows with their western exposure let in abundant natural light, underscoring the translucency of his paint application and the delicate and deliberate use of color. Seeing these paintings under these conditions, it's hard to imagine viewing them in any environment other than one with strong natural light embellished by the gallery's own fixtures, not unlike how they would be seen in his studio.



"Washington Square," from 2016

Although known for the past several years for the abstracted views he found around his home and studio on Little Fresh Pond in North Sea, he has been spending more time in New York City of late. The effect on his work is obvious, but has left it no less sublime.

The source of some pieces in the show, which is titled "Some Trees," is obvious, such as one, "Washington Square," that evokes a kind of rainy city murkiness, the sound of taxi tires hitting wet asphalt, and the mellow pink of old brick. At lower right, is that a reference to the Washington Square Arch? It no doubt makes sense and yet the arch is low, more of a tunnel entrance than the grander reality. The work suggests something painted from memory, after his having sat for a long while on a bench contemplating the scene.

It would be easy to say the more somber paintings were all inspired by city vistas, but it seems more complicated than that. Surely "Starfish," with its saturated blues, aquas, and magentas infused with yellow, came from a Caribbean vacation. A couple of pieces appear to have been influenced by the South Fork as well. But all of these canvases seem grayer, browner, less imbued with light. Even his watercolors in the back room, which are often ebullient, are subdued.

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Mr. Harvey noted a hint of Chinese landscape paintings in some of them — beech trees, for instance — and once noted it is impossible not to see.

A few of the paintings have “Plane Tree” or “London Plane Tree” in the title. Catching a glimpse of plane trees in situ in city streets or parks or in viewing reproductions of them, it is much easier to point to them as the subjects and see the paintings not so much as an emotional response, but in some ways a direct representation. The branches and trunks provide the linear elements, the leaves appearing as swaths of green or brown, depending on the season.



“London Plane Tree,” from 2017

The gallery points out that these paintings resemble watercolors, with the oil paint so thinned it looks like a scrim. They also fill most of the canvas, which has been true for much of Mr. Harms’s work over the past couple of years. At one time, his work was dense and intensely marked. Then, he pulled back, a lot, and gave very little to the canvas, leaving the outer limits devoid of anything. This is a potent middle ground, not a compromise but a synthesis. The white space is not gone, it has just been incorporated, even accented with the washes of color.

While the Drawing Room Gallery’s shows of his art here have always been expertly installed, it is instructive to see it in the midst of an urban art enclave. It reminds us that Mr. Harms’s work is not our treasure alone, but something that holds up well across the broader art scene.

The show will be on view through Jan. 29.

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“Plane Tree,” from summer 2017