



A 21st Century Grand Tour



Continuing our look at artists who paint the urban landscape, **Ed Gray** pays homage to his artistic heroes on a global tour that has led to a prestigious commission for the football 2010 World Cup. Words: Martha Alexander

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Mexico City, Oaxaca, Bangkok, Tokyo, Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York. The route was set but what Ed Gray would find – or what would find him – in each city was impossible to plan.

His most recent exhibition ended up featuring a wide range of urban scenes; gospel churches in Harlem, graveyards in Mexico and Tokyo's crowded underground trains.

Gray made a name for himself painting scenes from London, the city he was born in, loves and where he still lives. Last year, he left to embark on a 21st century version of the Renaissance Grand Tour, making a pilgrimage to the countries that represent his own inspirations, to record all that he saw via his paintings. "I wanted to visit places that my artistic heroes came from," he says. "I was able to visit Edward Hopper's studio in Washington Square to get an idea of where he was working. He was someone influential, who I looked at from the age of 15 and who made me really want to be a painter."

Hopper is just one of many inspirations. There is also Wayne Thiebaud and Richard Diebenkorn in California, Utagawa Hiroshige and Katsushika Hokusai in Japan, and Diego Rivera in Mexico. "I was going in the footsteps of the people I had admired

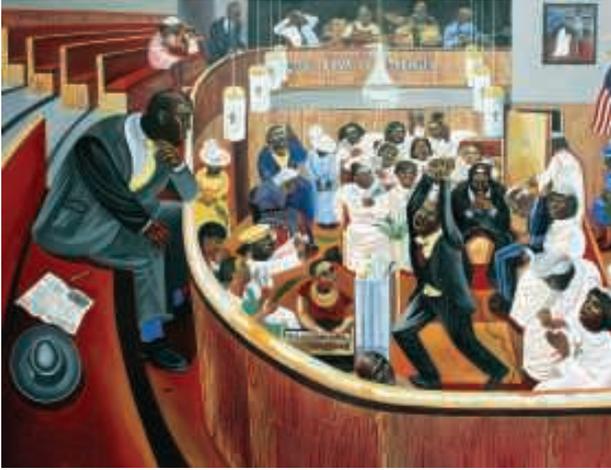
for a long time," he says. "It was nice to think that I was close to artists I admire even if my drawing skills might not be as good."

Although his trip was a salute to celebrated painters, the more mundane activities in the places he visited are what have crowded his canvases in such detail, as if he had a fear of missing part of a city's story. "I suppose there's a large element of journalism in what I do. I feel that I am reporting in some way from the places that I go to." His London scenes of busy night buses and East End

"I was able to visit Edward Hopper's studio. He was someone who made me really want to be a painter"

PREVIOUS PAGE *Jamaica Market, Mexico City*, mixed media, 160x120cm **BELOW** *Shibuya Crossing, Tokyo*, mixed media, 140x100cm **RIGHT** painted sketch of *Shibuya Crossing* **FAR RIGHT** *Palm Sunday, Greater Central Church, Harlem, NYC*, mixed media, 122x92cm





market stalls sowed the seed for his travels and the subsequent exhibition.

“When I’m out drawing, I see people everywhere trying to earn a living. This is why I want to paint cities because they are places of hope for so many. I have learnt that the themes of a city are universal: people going to work, to pray, to market.”

Road To Glory

It is this approach that prompted 2010 Fine Art to ask Gray to visit Cape Town in the summer. The company is in charge of all the artworks relating to the FIFA World Cup 2010 in South Africa and he has been commissioned to make a painting based on the event – a weighty acknowledgement of Gray’s aptitude for capturing the essence of a city.

For Gray it means being able to immerse himself in somewhere new. The piece has to incorporate both football and an English perspective of South Africa, and it will be auctioned during the event and made into prints to be sold there.

“It was a very open brief,” he says happily, having just returned from Cape Town, where he fell in love with both the people and the city. “It was a hectic week gathering drawings. We spent a lot of time in the townships, which was tough. I never know how I will approach work until I get out there, but I use the methods that I have always used, which are my way of finding some understanding of how a city works.”

Gray also includes some of his heroes in relevant paintings. A Mexican cemetery scene on the Day of the Dead – when the deceased are celebrated – shows painter Diego Rivera standing inconspicuously in the background between the gaudily decorated tombstones and a man dressed as Dracula. Meanwhile, a busy crowd at Tokyo’s Shibuya Crossing hurry in the rain, as Hokusai looks on from an electronic billboard.

As well as subtle cameos of some of the world’s most celebrated artists, both Gray and his wife Ingrid feature in many of the works, not only as a nod to LS Lowry but also in lieu of Gray’s signature. “There’s a lot of text in my paintings anyway and I ▶

GRAY’S ANATOMY

The artist’s large-scale paintings are the result of a detailed analysis of the smallest details of city life



One of the many stages of Gray’s development of a composition involves creating a big panoramic scene from about three metres’ worth of A4 pages ripped from his sketchbook. Despite the crude process and the size, the pages meet up perfectly, and ensure Gray has the city’s structural information recorded the way he wants.

The artist’s preoccupation with the details means that the small things become the big things, all telling the story of how the society operates. Looking at his sketchbooks, it is clear that he has gleaned so much information about where he has been, it is little wonder his paintings are so full. From different foodstuffs to the text on newspapers or the pattern on a woman’s apron, Gray manages to navigate the hazardous line between authenticity and cliché.



feel that my name might interfere with what I am already using,” he explains. “I try to copy text accurately as words and how they look are really important in my paintings.”

Gray selects where he should paint on gut instinct and a feeling of familiarity. He makes preparatory sketches and takes plenty of photographs. Back in the studio, he fashions a shrine to his subject matter on the walls all around his blank canvas, consisting of the drawings and photos, immersing himself in what he has seen. “Then I might use charcoal or chalk to draw out scenes. Sometimes I start using wet watered-down red-brown paint, using sponges to clean it off so that the canvas is almost soaking. After a few days I have done a rough line drawing, then I start to paint. Right up to the last minute people will be coming and going from within the painting so I use sandpaper to remove characters who are in the wrong place.”

His work not only holds mementoes of his visit – actual Mexican grasshoppers fry in one market-stall pan – but his approach to and composition of each painting is subconsciously dictated by where he’s been. “How I worked reflected the society, but it’s not something you can contrive. It was like I was somehow being told how to paint them so that they were a bit like the society itself. The Japanese paintings were very ordered. The Mexican paintings

were harder for me – the pace changed so much and, because of this, my work was messier.”

And what is the reaction to his work? “People

generally respond well to it. People from the Japanese Embassy came to the exhibition. It was a shock for them as they hadn’t seen anyone depict their culture like that.

They laughed when they saw the face masks, as those are normal in Japan.”

This way of life can’t be bad. Gray admits that this, nothing more, is his ultimate ambition and he intends to keep exploring great cities, bringing pieces of them back to be gathered together on canvas. [Read](#)

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Ed Gray was born in Putney, London. He studied Fine Art at the Cardiff Institute, University of Wales and completed a fellowship to the Masterworks Foundation of Bermuda. He now lives in

Bermondsey, South London, and works in Mile End. He has an annual solo show at the GX Gallery in Denmark Hill, London. www.edgrayart.com

ABOVE Coney Island Boardwalk, NYC mixed media, 150x110cm