

unplugged

to Oriana

The New York I know is devoid of veneer and more flawed than any outsider could ever imagine. The lens of my East Village friend René accompanies me in illustrating the scenes I come across in New York City. Beneath the grime lies the beauty.

UNPLUGGED

Who really knows New York?

The declaration “I’m a New Yorker” has been overused, misused, and abused. So you’re probably wondering who the hell I think I am to even dare judge something like that. Me, a Middle-Eastern slash European slash American. Well, maybe this “mélange” is what lets me view New York City from a different perspective.

Everybody has their own vision of New York. Is Woody Allen's New York the same as Martin Scorsese's?

Let's put this topic aside and enjoy the episodes I encountered while roaming the streets of this magnificent city. They include all typefaces, cartoon characters, pantone shades, and aromas.

ASTOR PLACE, BETWEEN LAFAYETTE STREET & COOPER SQUARE

It's always a delight when Sami and Yuri visit me in NYC, it's a real treat. They don't come often but when they visit I know an extraordinary adventure or unreal event always awaits me.

To document whatever we might encounter, I convince my accomplished photographer friend René, to accompany us and capture the goings-on in a Kardashian reality show manner.

Sami likes to stay at the St. Marks Hotel not far from where I live. Sami wrote this review in TripAdvisor:

We stayed at St. Marks this past weekend. Had a blast! It is in an excellent location within walking distance of many great places such as Soho, Canal Street, and of course my friend Marwan. The rooms are small, but very neat and clean. Who really hangs out in the hotel room in New York anyway? It served its purpose... a place to lay your head for a few hours and clean up!!! This is my go-to hotel anytime I visit NYC.

P.S. They do offer more than just porn and cartoons on the TV. Not sure what that was all about in some of the older reviews. LOL...

Anywho, we decided to all meet at 12pm at the Astor Place subway entrance. I can't help but take note of all that is taking place around me. I listen to the magical sound of an aspiring musician playing just outside the subway station: "...Mother Mary comes to me speaking words of wisdom let it be let it be..."

There are all variations of characters here: The loony lonely disciplinarian with a speech impediment banging on a window to be heard, an investigative reporter looking for a breaking story, a cape-clad Charlie Sheen wannabe. I turn hungrily taking it all in and there stand Sami and Yuri, smiles of pure joy greet me.



Astor Place, between Lafayette Street & Cooper Square: 2014, mixed media on canvas, 100 x 140 cm (39.37 x 55.12 inch)

GRAND STREET BETWEEN CROSBY & BROADWAY

Yuri is in the mood for a dim sum lunch and what a better place to go to than the many choices around Coco Canal, as we like to call it, aka China Town. We walk a block west to Broadway and take the downtown R train from the 8th Street station. Once there I convince everybody to take a little detour from Canal Street and walk a few blocks north to Grand Street where there's a quaint Italian trattoria belonging to a friend of mine. Actually, I needed to drop off some keys and my crew waited for me outside. Suddenly, I hear Sami shouting my name.

I grab a handful of sugarcoated chocolate nut treats from a jar on the counter and run out. "The Flash, The Flash!!!", Sami is screaming, "right there across the street". By the time I stumbled out of the trattoria he was gone. I look to René and he just nodded in his "Clint Eastwood" modus operandi. He got it!

Thank God he was with us.



Grand Street between Crosby & Broadway: 2014, mixed media on canvas, 140 x 100 cm (55.12 x 39.37 inches)

PELL STREET BETWEEN MOTT & DOYERS STREET

After seeing my ravioli painting gracing the window of my friend's trattoria, Sami and Yuri started chanting "Jiaozi, Jiaozi, Jiaozi" the word for Chinese ravioli. "Sorry, you must really be starving", I say apologetically.

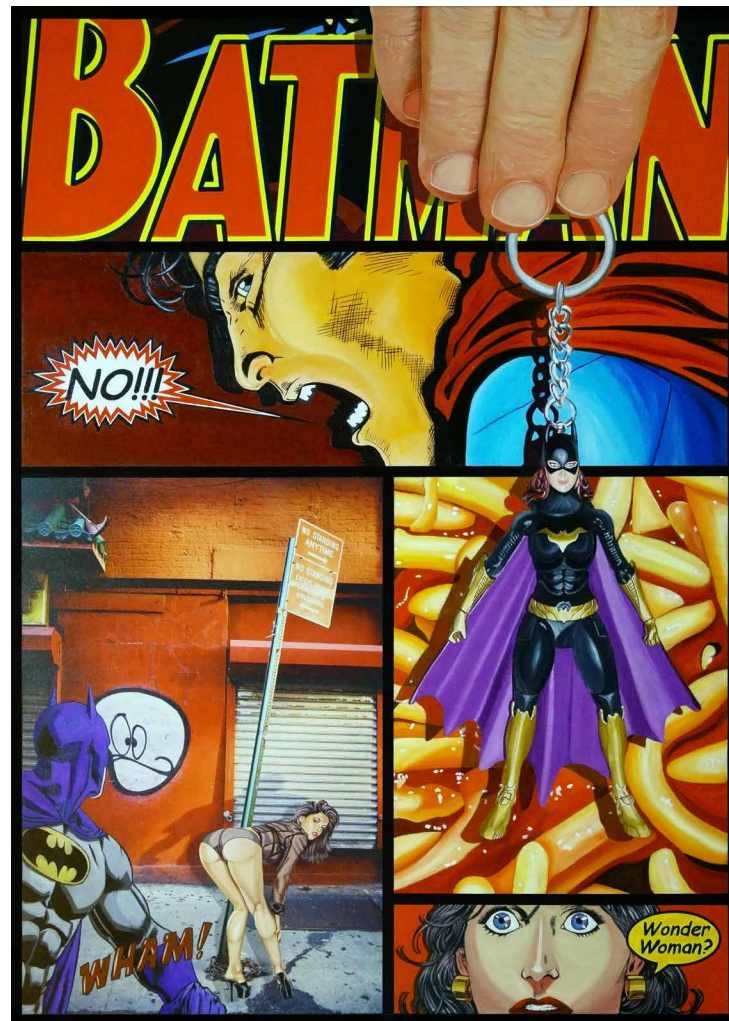
We pass all kinds of dim sum joints but no Jiaozi. Still on the lookout, Sami stops dead and whispers in my ear to look across the street. Is that a heartbroken Superman gawking at wonder woman seducing batman, his frenemy? No way! It can't be her! Is it? Is this what she does for a living? Oh well, I guess it's just another day in China Town.

Losing ourselves in the alleys of China Town, we finally see a flashing neon sign: Hop Shing Restaurant, your Jiaozi is awaiting you.

Yuri said happily "チャンネル通りで最高の中華料理 best Chinese on Canal".

By 4pm we were done with the Asian mezze and we're all in need of happy hour drinks before continuing our adventure. Anyway, René decided to give his Leica a rest. First stop was Old Man Hustle Bar in the Lower East side, then The Whiskey Ward and Attaboy and well we just kind of lost count.

Not so suddenly it was 9:30pm and we still had a rendezvous in Time Square.



Pell Street between Mott & Doyers Street, 2014, mixed media on canvas, 140 x 100 cm (39.37 x 55.12 inch)

CORNER 47TH STREET & 7TH AVENUE

It was a drunken ride on the uptown F train from the 2nd Avenue Station.

At the 42nd Street/ Bryant Park station we unanimously agreed to sit a bit in Bryant Park and savor the lovely night and recover from all the spirits. After an hour or so we ambled the few blocks west to Times Square to imbibe of the energy that overflows there. After a long day and night walking, drinking, and feeling a bit famished, I promise to take Sami to Captain Foul's Food cart at Union Square for some late night Hummus. The poor boy was craving authentic Hummus just not available in his hometown.

It's a long way from Times Square to Captain Foul, so I convinced them to share some MacDo fries that we could snack on our return subway ride to Union Square.

Low on cash, I decided to get some money from an ATM on the corner of 47th Street & 7th Avenue. As I folded the money into my pocket, we turned to witness a surreal scene. A live match between what looked like Spiderman and a Bruce Lee look-alike. They appeared to be engaged in mortal combat but with so many superheroes, Elmos, Sponge Bobs, and Mickey Mouses in Time Square we couldn't tell if they were fooling around or if this is for real?

“これがニューヨーク this is New York City”, Yuri mused.



CORNER BROADWAY & EAST 14TH STREET

كبتن فول: حمص - فول - فتة - فلافل

Finally Union Square, we made it! Captain Foul was blaring his signature “tishtik-tam” tunes from a small radio duck-taped next to the ketchup, mustard, and tarator containers. I was still lost in thought pondering Bruce Lee and Spiderman when I saw a shadow tossing a newspaper in a trashcan next to the food cart. He was a tall man in what appeared to be a Captain America outfit. After an exhausting 12 plus hours excursion I approached the cart not really thinking of anything other than ordering some food and heading to bed. Sami and Yuri ordered an assortment of chick peas puree dishes, Yuri asks me already knowing my answer, “ファラフェルが好き?” I grinned like the Cheshire cat, and said “Yes I do like Falafel, thanks Yuri”.

Then I remembered the trashcan. In it, face up, the front page of the New York Post screamed out printed in a bold tabloid headline: “Who is Captain America?”. Was that Cap’n Winghead I just saw? Is someone playing a joke on us?

It’s time to head over to my place for a nightcap and call it a night before things get any weirder.



CORNER 2ND AVENUE & EAST 6TH STREET

At 2am the streets were still busy with sirens-blaring fire trucks, speeding cabs, weaving drunks, passionate lovers and hot dogs. Walking down 2nd Avenue past the East Village Cinema, we grab a bag of popcorn from the Korean deli on the corner of East 9th Street just across the street from Veselka, the Ukrainian diner, then through “little Tokyo” as I like to call it.

A mist had started to settle over the East Village and further down the Avenue standing on the corner of 6th Street in front of Block Drugs is Superman comforting Robin. Robin was sobbing “でも彼が大好き” in Japanese, Yuri translated “But I love him so much”.

I had no idea who Robin was referring to. I guess superheroes have their soft spots too. René quips from behind of his hand, “Man the tights they’re wearing these days sure are tight. In real life”.

Popcorn gone and after multiple glasses of Porto wine I say my fond goodbyes to Sami, Yuri, and René. Brushing my teeth and getting ready to sleep, I switch the flat screen to NY1, the 24 hour news station, and mute it. The crawling news ticker screams out “Breaking News: Spiderman arrested a few hours ago by Bruce Lee in Times Square for allegedly groping a woman and breaking into a currency exchange. More as the story develops”.



Corner 2nd Avenue & East 6th Street, 2014, mixed media on canvas, 140 x 100 cm (39.37 x 55.12 inch)

I can't wait till Sami's next visit!



Little India, 2014, mixed media on canvas, 110 x 140 cm (43.31 x 55.12 inch) unframed, 127 x 157 cm framed

“...it’s probably the only city which in reality looks better than on the postcards, New York”.

Milos Forman

Marwan Chamaa's
art spans over three decades
of thematic interpretations of the word
around him.

MY THANKS

to René for sharing my excitement about this project
to Yuri for the Japanese translations
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