

New York City

Estes moved to New York City after graduating from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1956, although he returned home to Chicago for a time before permanently relocating to Manhattan in the summer of 1958. He was able to make a living by working part-time for advertising agencies and as a freelance commercial artist. He quickly learned that he had no desire to work full-time or in an office, but he also learned to transform photographs made by agency staff into sketches and advertising paste-ups. At that time, photography and drawing were intertwined artistic processes in the commercial-art industry, and employees translated publicity and advertising materials between media fluidly. By the mid-1960s, Estes had developed his distinctive process of creating finished painting surfaces that on first impression recreate the look of photographs, but upon closer inspection reveal his mastery as a painter. He had a difficult time finding gallery representation in New York during a decade in which abstraction and Pop art were ascendant, yet he sold out his first solo gallery exhibition in 1968 and continued to do so in the decades that followed. Estes' earliest paintings included people, but within a short period of time he began painting the city in its periods of quiet emptiness such as—in the era of restrictive blue laws—on Sundays.

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title wall)

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Estes has been making photographs throughout his life. They are the foundation of his career, yet their value for him as an artist are as working materials, and as such, he does not consider them artwork in and of themselves. Making photographs and using them as the basis of studio practice, he has noted with humor, is his version of painting *en plein air*, or in the presence of his motif. In the 1960s and early 1970s, Estes used color slides as the basis for his paintings; later, he began making his own color prints. The dye coupler photographs along this wall portray a variety of Estes' best-known subjects: cars, plate-glass windows on city streets, subways, and bridges. Although these photographs do not correspond directly to paintings in the exhibition, you can see that in several cases Estes has scored the photo into a grid, in order to isolate and translate both composition and detail onto his canvas. Estes' paintings tend to transform photographs in several ways, including heightening the allover detail (whereas analog cameras capture such detail only in particular spots). Also, Estes often uses two or more photographs—as you can see in the diptych of the subway train interior—in order to create a sweeping perspective on a given subject. In many of his paintings that contain deep perspective, Estes compresses imagery from multiple photographs in order to achieve his desired look in the completed paintings. In this gallery, you can also see two photographs (one of Rome's Spanish Steps, the other of New York's Union Square) alongside watercolor sketches of the same subjects—an intermediate step that he sometimes, but not always, employs as preparation.

Estes as a photographer

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45" wide

Estes depicted anonymous urban residents in his earliest paintings in the mid-1960s, but he quickly ceased to include people in his compositions and did not reincorporate the human figure for over a decade. In 1976, he made a self-portrait by retaining his own reflected image from the source photograph in the finished painting of the façade of a diner, rather than editing himself out as he had previously done. In the mid-1980s, he began making portraits of friends and acquaintances in Maine, mostly by commission. These paintings offer rare glimpses into Estes' personal experiences and his circle of friends. Around the same time, Estes began including figures in his views of New York City. His 1989 painting of young people relaxing on the rocky outcroppings of Central Park, *Sunday Afternoon in the Park*, presaged a renewed attention to his fellow urban residents. In every case, his subjects' context in the natural world or the dense urban fabric of New York is an integral aspect of the painting—his figures are immersed in their environments rather than distinct from them. Estes has continued his pattern of regularly including people within his compositions in his more recent paintings of the past decade, particularly those paintings in New York in which residents appear to continuously and anonymously pass through the city.

Figures and portraiture

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Estes traveled to Europe for the first time in 1951, after he graduated from high school, and has traveled to Europe on a regular basis ever since. In 1972, he painted a European subject for the first time in *Paris Street Scene*, and he continued to depict major European cities in the 1970s and 1980s. In the late 1980s, he began to paint bridges in cities throughout the world, including those in Venice, Paris, London, Hiroshima, and New York. Slowly, his repertoire of motifs expanded and he incorporated new imagery into his work. For instance, Estes acquired his home in Maine in 1975, but was uninterested in painting the state's dramatic landscapes on a consistent basis until the late 1990s. Although New York City remains his most enduring subject, the state of Maine—along with landscapes captured in photographs from his travels abroad—have become core imagery within his artistic oeuvre. Estes' engagement with landscape painting over the past two decades creates explicit connections with historical painting, and in particular the work of American landscape painter Frederic Edwin Church, who painted both Mount Desert Island and Mt. Katahdin in the 19th century. Estes has paid indirect homage to Church on multiple occasions, but did so directly in 2011, when he painted the view from a terrace at Olana, Church's grand estate in the Hudson River Valley. Just as Estes has consistently offered his own audiences the opportunity to see the world from his perspective, Estes' painting of the view from Olana suggests a feeling of kinship and shared tradition with his predecessor.

Maine and travel abroad

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“I think the popular concept of an artist is a person who has this great passion and enthusiasm and super emotion. He just throws himself into this great masterpiece and collapses from exhaustion when it’s finished. It’s really not that way at all. Usually it’s a pretty calculated, sustained, and slow process by which you develop something. The effect can be one of spontaneity, but that’s part of the artistry . . . I think the real test is to plan something and be able to carry it out to the very end. Not that you’re always enthusiastic; it’s just that you have to get this thing out. It’s not done with one’s emotions; it’s done with the head.”

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