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This Is New York review – exhibition captures the city’s unique joy, terror and exhilaration

The Museum of the City of New York has assembled everything from film clips to graphic novels

Ariella Budick 16 HOURS AGO

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“Another hundred people just got off the train,” Stephen Sondheim once reported in a song, though he neglected to point out that most arrive with a detailed, if possibly distorted idea of their destination. New York is nourished by the multitudes who churn through, some to stay, many to flee, all leaving their trace on the metropolitan spirit, the complex whatness of the city.

This Is New York, the title of the Museum of the City of New York’s centennial exhibition, contradicts itself, because no summary could possibly do justice to that accumulation of experiences. But the subtitle, *100 Years of the City in Art and Pop Culture*, makes it clear that it’s a digest of a digest. Simultaneously giddy, sober, meticulous and dizzying, “This” is Gotham as it’s been packaged, sold and distributed around the world — the one that so many new arrivals have engraved in their minds when they first disembark.

You can practically curate your own exhibition. Dustin Hoffman pounding the hood of a cab in *Midnight Cowboy*. Weegee's class photo of thousands of beachgoers at Coney Island. Aliens vaporising the Empire State Building in *Independence Day*. Grandmaster Flash serenading weedy lots and rusty see-saws in the Bronx. These images and sounds form a portrait of an imaginary world capital that also belongs to the real one. One room at the museum contains an exhilarating 16-screen panorama of quick-cut clips from hundreds of movies, all whizzing by in a syncopated, contrapuntal suite of locations and one-liners.



Berenice Abbott. 'Tempo of the City I' (1938) © MCNY98



Cheyenne Julien, 'Salsa Sundays at Orchard Beach' (2023) © Museum of the City of New York

Balancing infinite possibilities and cliché, the exhibition darts from image to film clip to artefact like an overscheduled tourist trying to pack it all into a couple of days. That's not because it was installed by undisciplined curators but because hurry and overload are part of the general topic.

Berenice Abbott's 1938 photo, "Tempo of the City I" (which gives a section of the exhibition its title), tracks striding pedestrians and inching cars, all obeying the ticking of a giant clock. In a similarly hectic vein, "New York Amusements", a 1934 painting by William Palmer, surveys a jammed panoply of theatregoers, dancers and passers-by, all trying desperately to dispel the Depression's gloom.

It makes a certain sense to focus on a mood, since the city seems to intensify them. The section labelled "Joy" announces itself with four life-sized, airborne kids playing jump-rope, sculpted by John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres; you can practically hear the shrieks and feel the sizzling asphalt. Melancholy and loneliness, too, lie thick enough on the megalopolis to form part of its structure. George Tooker's 1950 tempera "The Subway" gives us a subterranean station as a precinct of lurking, cadaverous commuters, with one woman in the foreground looking as though she's just witnessed a particularly drawn-out vivisection.



William Low. 'Chinatown Apartment Painting' (1997)

Solitude can be softer, somehow, as in Dennis Stock's classic photo of James Dean ambling, shoulders hunched against the rain, or an album cover showing Nina Simone pensively perched on a Central Park bench. But being alone is not just a solo activity; it's an ingredient of collective life. In an astonishingly perceptive page from the graphic novel adaptation of Paul Auster's *City of Glass*, the protagonist goes for a walk into a "labyrinth of endless steps". Bricks and streets dissolve into an abstract maze of lines, then squiggles, resolving into a fingerprint's whorls: "New York was the nowhere he had built around himself."

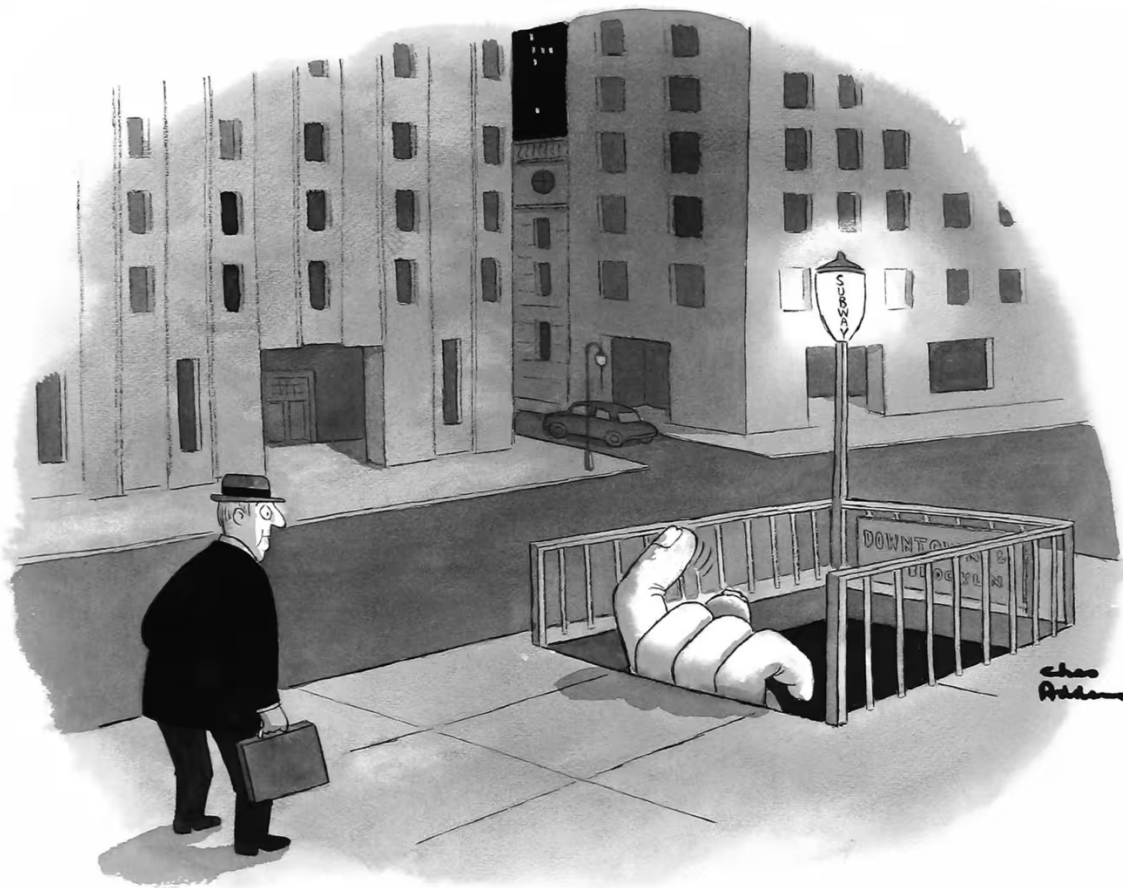
It's odd to call such an ornery and distinctive place a "nowhere", but then one of its hidden qualities is the ability to disappear into low clouds or fictional versions of itself. A wall text quotes Henry Miller's description: "A whole city erected over a hollow pit of nothingness. Meaningless. Absolute meaningless." New York is also defined by those who loathe the place.



Choreographer Jerome Robbins, centre, during filming for 'West Side Story' © United Artists/Photofest

It's become a political talking point to describe large American cities as the dwelling place of demons, to conjure sidewalks crawling with rats and rapists. Expedient caricatures aside, fear has always been a part of Gotham's mystique, and the show lingers lovingly on the creepy parts. The 1953 film *Little Fugitive* chronicles the adventures of a seven-year-old boy on the lam in Coney Island and his encounters with automatons, carnival barkers and an assortment of looming adults. The kid's a New Yorker, so he takes these terrors in his stride.

Economies and crime waves rise and fall but a sense of menace is forever. In 1986, Will Eisner created a ruthlessly Darwinian landscape in the panel “Angry Street”, from his graphic novel *New York: Life in the Big City*. The following year, Charles Addams (of Addams Family fame) drew a man in a suit quaking as a giant’s hand reaches out from a subway entrance to beckon him with one crooked finger. Even more primally terrifying is a 2022 Roz Chast cartoon in which a Gregor Samsa-sized water bug goes for a stroll along the sidewalk.



Charles Addams, 'Subway Hand' (August 1987) © Tee and Charles Addams Foundation

Scariness makes for good entertainment, and you come away from the exhibition with the sense that though New York can be brutal, lonely, hard and dirty, it is also full of people who are serious about having fun. Many of them are quite small. To make their 1948 documentary *In the Street*, Helen Levitt, Janice Loeb and James Agee ambled through East Harlem with 16mm cameras hidden in their clothes and recorded the sometimes vengeful exuberance of kids. With the streets as their playground, they dash through the neighbourhood, walloping each other with sacks full of chalk dust. There are tears.

But the film is much more than just a recording of children at play; it's a silent verismo opera of outdoor urban life. "The streets of the poor quarters of great cities are, above all, a theater and a battleground," reads the opening text, presumably written by Agee. "There, unaware and unnoticed, every human being is a poet, a masker, a warrior, a dancer: and in his innocent artistry he projects, against the turmoil of the street, an image of human existence."



Zun Lee's 'At Home in Harlem, New York with James Reynolds and Son Jerome Williams' (2011) © Zun Lee



Richard Estes, 'M Train on Route to Manhattan Approaches the Williamsburg Bridge' (1995) © Richard Estes, courtesy Louis K Meisel Gallery

To those who have lived here long enough to remember long-vanished landmarks and expired rituals, just about every photo and clip in the museum resonates as a fragment of memorabilia. You don't even have to wait decades for that mechanism to kick in, though: a two-month stint in a shared apartment is long enough to grow sentimental about how cool the city used to be.

The museum's curatorial team (Sarah Henry, Monxo López, Frances Rosenfeld and Lilly Tuttle) recognise the talismanic tower of the collection. Amid all their show's abundance, some scrap of something is sure to ring a bell for nearly every visitor, even those who have earned the right to call themselves New Yorkers by virtue of having landed a couple of hours ago.

To July 2024, [mcny.org](https://www.mcny.org)

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