



# NEW YORK

Given his fascination with the way people interact with their environment, Manhattan has proved an irresistible subject for London-born, ex-illustrator **David FeBland**

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Anyone who has ever had the pleasure of walking through downtown Manhattan on a crisp Spring morning will know what a riot of visual inspiration it can be. The crowds, the traffic, the billboards. The long shadows and the vaulting skylines. The swarming yellow taxis, the fast food joints and the bustling subway exits. Sinatra called it the city that never sleeps but with so much going on, why would anyone want to?

For a natural observer like David FeBland, the goings-on outside his studio in the Tribeca district of Manhattan proves a constant source of fascination. "I'm in a place where I don't have to travel very far to see a great range of human behaviour," he smiles. "People are practically treading on top of each other. It's a miracle

that more people don't blow each other's heads off because they are always invading each other's space. It's quite remarkable how little conflict there actually is."

Despite being surrounded in potential subject matter when he steps out of his front door, FeBland remains attracted by the peripheries, preferring to take a walk along the banks of the Hudson River than wade through tourists in Times Square. "I think of myself as an outsider in many ways. I have a connection to another culture, I am an artist in a culture that is primarily about commerce and business, and artists are always peripheral in an environment such as this one. We don't really have the kinds of institutions and collective work environments that people in, say, theatre or music have. Even though there are many, many artists working in

ABOVE *Men with Toys*, oil on panel, 46x61cm

12 Artists & Illustrators





# STATE OF MIND

New York there is a great sense of isolation, a sense of swimming against the great cultural tide here.”

FeBland’s outsider status is due in part to the fact that he has maintained strong ties to both sides of the Atlantic. Born in London to an English father and American mother, the family soon immigrated to the US, though many of his relatives remain in Blackpool and he visits often.

FeBland’s mother was a professional artist who would spend all day in her studio and all night completing paperwork. Through her, FeBland began a fairly unorthodox art education, as he was dragged to major galleries like the MoMA and slowly indoctrinated in the tastes of his mother. “Where many families have a Bible on a pedestal in the centre of their living room and that becomes the book by which everything is referred,

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we had a pedestal but the book wasn’t the Bible, it was a book called *Art After 1945*. My mother was an ardent modernist and she taught me to recognise the difference between Robert Motherwell and Frank Stella by the time I was six or seven years old. She never bothered to

mention Michelangelo or any of the great figurative masters because when she went to art school that was absolute blasphemy. I had to learn that on my own.”

Before art was even considered as a career option, FeBland embarked

on a series of false starts. He quickly found out that he wasn’t cut out to take over his father’s toy business and instead signed on at the University of Cincinnati, majoring in political science. Degrees in landscape architecture and town planning followed, the latter in the UK at the University of Manchester, as FeBland

ABOVE David stands by his latest work-in-progress at his Manhattan studio





**ABOVE** *Seasonal*,  
oil on linen, 76x121cm

developed his interest in the way in which people move through the built environment. Painting and drawing continued to take a back seat. “My way of displaying interest in art was to date cute art students,” he admits. “I always *headed* to the art school but it was only with Saturday night in mind.”

Yet something clearly piqued his interest. “Very slowly, I began to move away from the struggle of differentiating myself from my parent’s expectations and the sense that there was only room for one artist in the family.”

### **A LATE BREAKTHROUGH**

FeBland’s breakthrough came in the late 1970s, when he taught himself how to illustrate after flunking art school and moving to New York. “I couldn’t really draw but I had good spatial awareness after architecture school,” he admits. “I started to work in illustration at a time when it was possible for people to claw their way into the field, starting with relatively modest assignments.”

FeBland quickly learned the golden rule of illustration: “One needs to differentiate themselves and those who find a signature style and like it enough to stick with it have a much better chance of success.”

He developed a distinctive, high-contrast style that enabled him to quickly build up a ‘successful’ practice, completing editorial commissions and corporate logos.

Things continued comfortably for the next 15 years, until a nagging doubt began to set in. “I had a mid-life crisis, even though I was only about 38 at the time. One day, on impulse, I took a lease on a place that was impractical for illustration. It was a very old building and there was paint falling from the ceiling. I had a lot of equipment in those days, a fax machine and a copier, and it would have been a mess. I realised that what I had committed to just wouldn’t work for illustration and I didn’t step into it for a month after that.”

Yet just as the idea of illustration had been so enticing, so the romance of this ill-suited studio proved too difficult to resist. Recounting the story now, it is as if FeBland knew that he wanted to be the sort of person who could work in that space, he just hadn’t worked out how to be that person then. “At that point in my life, I

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A period of intense experimentation and exploration followed. In his dusty new studio, FeBland tried out different mark-

making methods on a variety of pigments, grounds and supports. After years of monochrome illustration work, he became intoxicated by the emotional scope of his colour palette, working up with high-key, hot colours or laying down dark blue grounds.

In the search for subjects, he went back to the things



that he knew he was good at, like composition and conceiving space, but also challenged himself to improve his figurative work, adding lonely souls to his invented landscapes. The results were, by his own admission, far from perfect, but when a dealer dropped by his studio and was suitably impressed, it was enough. "I started a career in fine art at the age of 40," he says proudly. "It was probably about 20 years too late, but I did it."

Fast forward another 20 years and FeBland's career is going from strength to strength. He is represented by galleries in Dallas, Washington, Frankfurt and London, where his latest exhibition at Panter & Hall opens this month. For his new series, he has continued to mine themes that have preoccupied his art for the best part of two decades now, but his style continues to develop.

Signalling a break from the rigorous efficiency of his illustration work, FeBland has begun to encourage unpredictability. His latest trick is painting over the top of early failed canvases. "At first, I was partially covering them with a gesso or a ground but now I'm not even doing that. I just turn the paintings upside down or on their side and let the abstract material define the new subject matter."

FeBland's impractical studio has provided him with unexpected inspiration too. "I hear all manner of intimate things going on," he chuckles. "I've heard people having sex, I've heard people having intimate arguments and I've even heard three photography assistants get fired in the most callous kind of way. They are all moments that are not intended for public consumption and here I am in a public building with sound that carries and I hear it all. We have these experiences more than ever now with cellphones, where life has been turned inside out and most of the conversations that used to take place in your home now take place for all of us to hear. Some of my new paintings are about levels of privacy and the extent to which people are intentionally or unwittingly invited into a private moment in a crowded city."



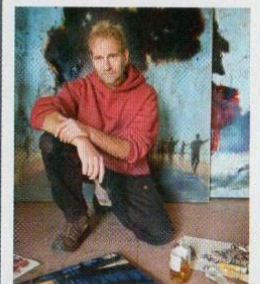
**ABOVE** *Two Views of Travel*, oil on canvas, 61x91cm  
**BELOW LEFT** *The Man who Lives Anywhere*, oil on linen, 76x121cm

FeBland's focus isn't just his native New York though. Every summer for the past 20 years or more, he has taken six or seven weeks off and travelled abroad with his wife – on a tandem bicycle. Together he estimates they have pedalled their way through more than 50 countries, from Europe, the Americas and beyond. Inspired by travel books like Bill Bryson's *Notes from a Small Island* and Paul Theroux's *The Kingdom by the Sea*, he makes for an inquisitive traveller, recording sights and situations in his notebooks with gouache.

"The purpose has evolved," he reveals. "At first I was just exhausted from carrying on a busy illustration practice and I needed to get away from it all. Now it's quite different. The trips are an opportunity to find parallels and differences in the life I live at home with the rest of the world. Wherever I travel, I am always thinking about paintings now; it is always front and centre." ■



## ARTIST'S BIO



**Name**  
David FeBland  
**Born**  
London, England, 1949  
**Training**  
University of Manchester, England; University of Virginia, USA  
**Next exhibition**  
Panter & Hall, London, 10 March – 1 April  
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