

# THEARTS

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## A New Jersey State of Mind

At this stage in his career, Tom Birkner RC'94 knows enough to let the moment come to him when hunting for a New Jersey subject to paint. Yet, after 20 years as a realist painter, even he was surprised by the ferocity of his reaction to the scene before him as he took his seat in Rutgers Stadium on October 18, 2007, for the



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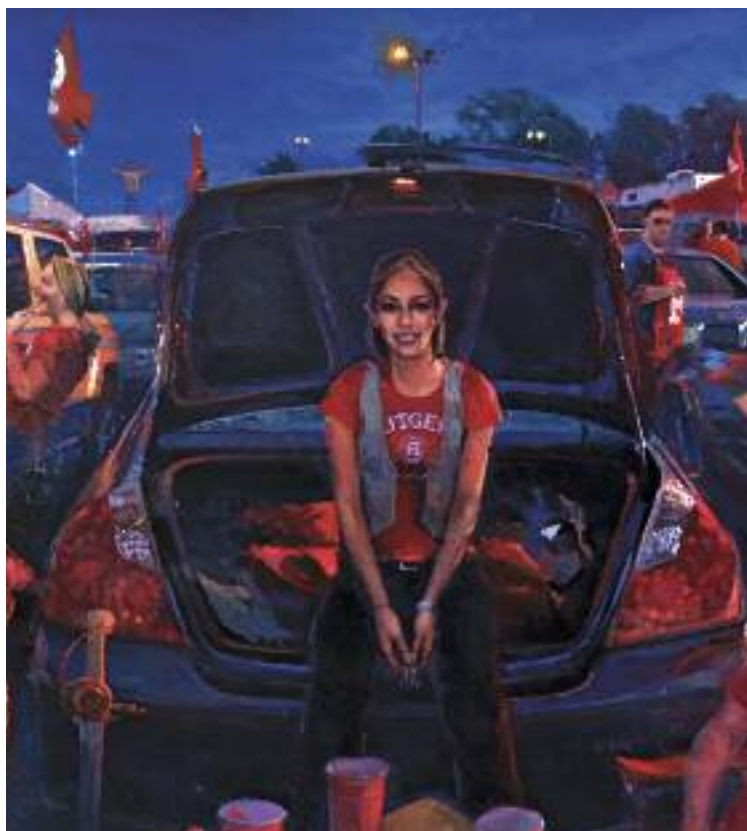
▶▶▶ game between the Scarlet Knights and the University of South Florida. There, in the end zone, not 10 rows in front of him, the Rutgers cheerleading squad was practicing. His eye went straight to the blond-haired cheerleader being hoisted into the Thursday twilight, high above the rest, her back and leg arched in celebratory defiance, an arm thrust into the air to summon victory. She was Athena, he thought, the Greek goddess of wisdom. The moment had everything, and Birkner knew he had to paint her. The result was his 2008 oil painting *Cheerleading (or Battle Cry)*, a pageantry of color and movement and atmosphere that, like his other painting born of that visit to Piscataway, *Scarlet Night*, carries references to many of the Italian masters he admires for the roiling emotion they convey in their work. The two paintings are among the hundreds of oils that Birkner has produced to critical acclaim since taking up art as a teenager growing up in Hunterdon County.

If, in his canon of music, Bruce Springsteen distills the ethos of the New Jersey experience, presenting the angst of youth and a panorama of the Jersey Shore, Birkner has created the visual equivalent. His paintings are big sellers in places as far away as Milan and Beijing, and his art is avidly collected for its evocation of New Jersey, warts and all, although its ultimate appeal may reside in the paintings having a timeless, placeless allure. Whether in his serial portraits of "Jersey Girls," or in scenes of towns and their inhabitants, or in his sprawling canvases of amusement parks and rusted industrial parks, Birkner is always in a New Jersey state of mind.

Birkner doesn't know any other way. He loves New Jersey and is proud of it: "Turnpike jokes are not funny," he announces. He jokes that he wishes he wasn't still so defensive about the state; self-deprecating asides feature prominently in his sense of humor. To his mind, the state is a rich microcosm of suburban America, with its malls and cars and tapestry of people and sense of place. All around him, he sees content, the kind of material that much of the art

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"The intricacies of life come out of these paintings and have these unintentional significances that I just love because I couldn't make them up. I am not smart enough to calculate them; I am just good at painting," says Tom Birkner. On page 25, Birkner is pictured before *Water Park*, an oil painting in progress. Clockwise from upper left (opposite page): *Cheerleading (or Battle Cry)*, 2008; *Stang*, 2006; *Waiting*, 2006; *Scarlet Night*, 2008; and *Wildwood Wawa*, 2008.

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world snubs as too parochial. One example is the automobile, which may be the definitive icon of post-World War II America, tracing the social dynamics of our culture and the physical growth of a nation. Yet, it finds little representation in fine art. To Birkner, for whom the appreciation of art shouldn't feel for the viewer like having to break a code, it's a gaping omission. But so is much of the quotidian, dismissed as unworthy in art circles.

But that is, precisely, where the intrigue lies. "The world is a far more



**Tom Birkner loves painting a subject largely overlooked by the art world: automobiles. *Ice*, 2007–2008.**

interesting place than are my thoughts about the world," says Birkner, wearing a New Jersey Devils T-shirt and speaking from White Flag, his Lambertville studio where he is surrounded by canvases in varying stages of completion. "I like painting things that appear visually as people see the world. I find subjects for painting in vignettes and scenarios that occur by accident. They are far more interesting than my conceptualizing or dreaming them up. Long ago, I stopped intellectually questioning stuff and became the painter I was supposed to be: a realist painter. I have no choice; this is what I happen to do well. Painting is hard, though; I don't necessarily enjoy it."

Birkner long ago lashed himself to the mast of art. By his early 20s, he was making a living from his paintings. By then,

he had graduated from Hunterdon Central High, had attended a school of illustration, and had taken classes at the Newark School of Fine and Industrial Arts. It wasn't enough, and he developed the burning urge to attend college. After cramming for SAT exams and walking around with vocabulary flash cards in his back pocket, he was accepted, at the relatively late age of 23, at Rutgers in 1989—to this day his proudest achievement. (He later attended The Pennsylvania State University, where he received his master of fine arts.)

As a kid, he had demonstrated an artistic precocity, revealed in his exacting replicas of intricate album covers by the rock band Yes and his propensity for drawing cars, all clean lines and pinstripes. But when he came across the impressionist art of Claude Monet and William Merritt Chase, Birkner was blown away. "The art had so much action, and there wasn't a straight line in it. Yet, it all came together somehow," he says. "There was a freedom in painting things in this manner."

The freedom was a double-edged sword: Birkner had the ability to paint anything. He was flooded with choice, and it took him the better part of his four years at Rutgers to sort through the competing impulses. Shortly after graduating from college, he created a successful series of paintings that depicted the coal mining towns of Pennsylvania. The point of view of the paintings was from behind the windshield of a car and conveyed a sense of detachment, a moment glimpsed, and an urge to move on. The paintings led to Birkner introducing the subject of women and cars together, a combination still popular with him because of the story implied in each of them.

"My work has a tendency to have a psychological charge to it, even if it's quiet," says Birkner. "But there is a suggestion that something is going to happen. And that's what I love about the Italian masters' work, which is so emotional. My stuff ties into that." — David W. Major