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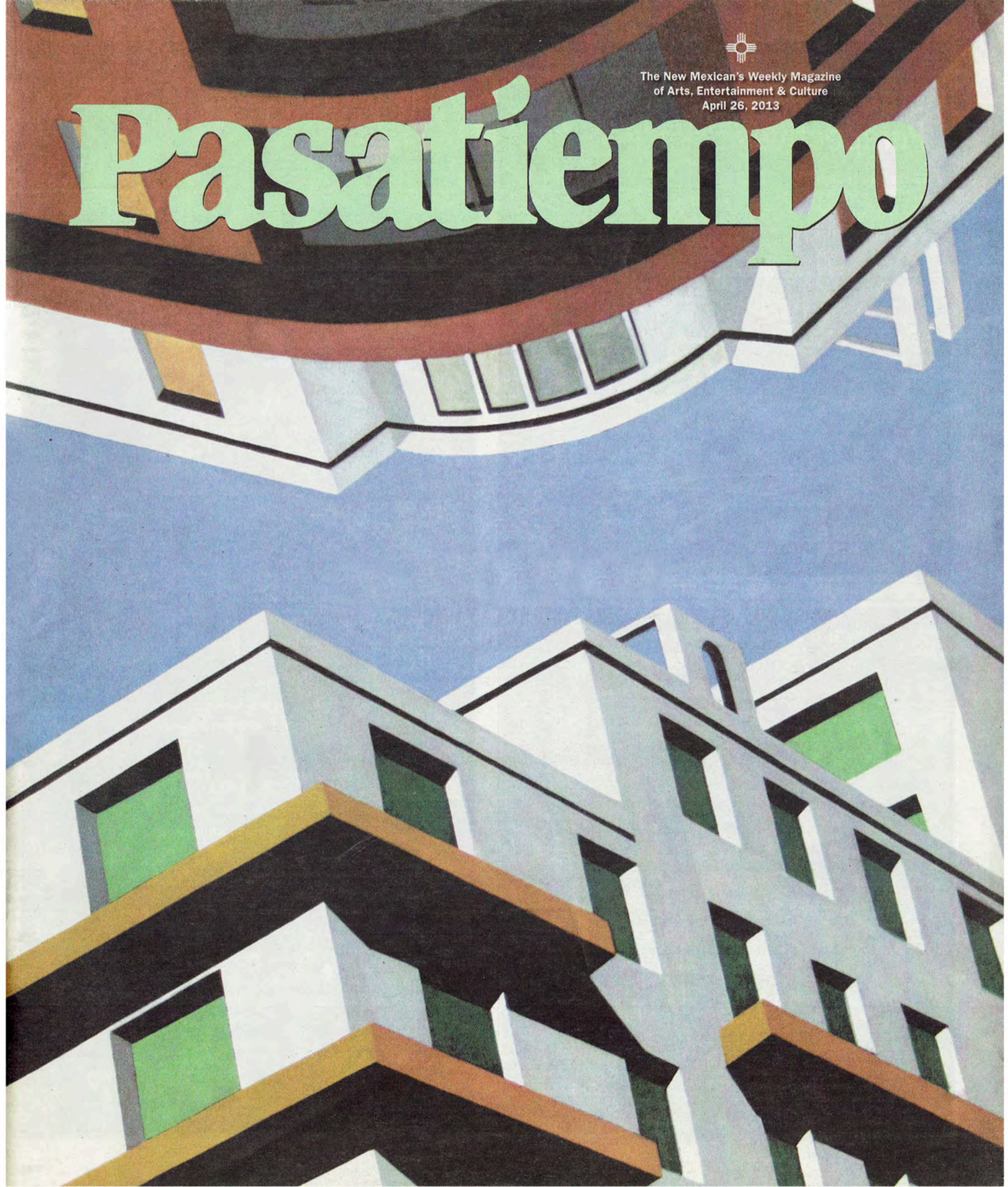
Pasatiempo



Paul Weideman | The New Mexican

In his visions on canvas, Italian artist Marco Petrus renders real-world urban behemoths of concrete, steel, and glass as colorful, people-less floating architectural fantasies. Ironically, the creative liberties he takes with angles of view as well as with hue may actually illuminate the essence of the architects' gestures by emphasizing the pure design qualities of the buildings. LewAllen Galleries at the Railyard presents the artist's first solo exhibition in the United States, opening Friday, April 26.

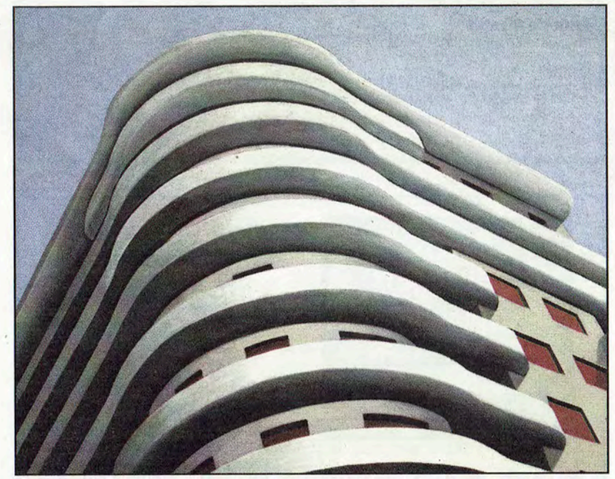
Petrus was born in the Italian coastal city of Rimini and was raised, from the age of 5, in the Porta Garibaldi section of Milan. There his artist father painted in studios rehabbed from old, dilapidated buildings. In 1984, when Petrus was in his early 20s, his father died, and he opened a printing shop, which became an artists' meeting place. By the early 1990s, he was working as a professional artist; his first solo exhibition was in 1991 at N.o.A., a gallery in Milan.

During the next decade he expanded his subject matter to the buildings of London, Shanghai, and other cities in Italy. One of his exhibition highlights came in 2003, when he participated in *Italian Factory: La Nuova Scena Artistica Italiana*, held during the 50th Venice Biennale.

The 26 works at LewAllen, which were done between 2008 and 2012, show the artist's predilection for painting details of towers, skyscrapers, and other types of buildings in Milan, Naples, Trieste, and Rome, Shanghai, Finland, London, and New York. *Pasatiempo* contacted Petrus in Milan, where he lives and works.

CHARACTER **BUILDINGS**

Painter Marco Petrus



Pasatiempo: Many of the buildings in your paintings seem to fall within the realms of postmodernism and Art Deco in architecture. Are these styles that are common in Milan, perhaps, or is it simply your preference?

Marco Petrus: I observe the city — and especially Milan with its many periods and styles of architecture — to be a community of vast possibilities. Each building with its own style of architecture is like an individual whose personality and physiognomy intrigues the artist to ask them to sit for a portrait.

The buildings are chosen in a similar way to become my "models." It is a question always of which shapes, forms, details, and arrangements of a building — its architectural personality and character if you will — will engage my aesthetic sensibilities at a given moment. However, there are some architectural styles that always have been more interesting for me.

I've found architecture from the 1920s to the 1940s to be especially fascinating. But it is still the sense of the personality of the form rather than its specific historical period that interests me most. I choose most often architecture with strong character and monumental volumes to inspire a sense that goes beyond the immediate subject, to allow thoughts of things greater than the buildings only.

Pasa: Your *New Yorker* is based on the 1930 New Yorker Hotel by Sugarman and Berger, but you have abstracted the letters off the face of the building — and the windows are reduced to black holes. Can you tell us a little about your ideas?

Petrus: I'm interested in the composition of the building as a subject, in what I see as the essential personality of the building rather than all its little details. By reducing the image to the relationships between space and form, full and empty, light and shadow, I hope to make more intense the experience of that form in a deeper way and to give it the power to inspire new thinking. In the case of *New Yorker*, the building is an icon as well, so I liked to leave also the letters, even if simplified in this way.

Pasa: With *Florin Court* [based on the 1936 London building designed by Guy Morgan and Partners] you have preserved the pane patterns in the windows but changed the brick to simple bands of color, which accentuates the sense of rhythm; is that right?

Petrus: You are exactly right. I do not paint brick by brick. In this case I was interested in the movement of the curves, in the plasticity of the building, in the modulation of the light. These are the essential parts of what gives this building in my eye its unique character and its energy. I strip away the superficial things that distract rather than inspire. In a sense, my process is partly abstraction, an effort to get beyond the detail and expose the mystery.

Pasa: Are the structures you depict in *PSM 12* taken from a real building?

Petrus: Yes, of course. All my paintings begin from existing architecture. PSM is the acronym for the Palazzina San Maurizio in Rome, designed by the famous if controversial architect Luigi Moretti in 1962. There are two paintings of PSM that will be

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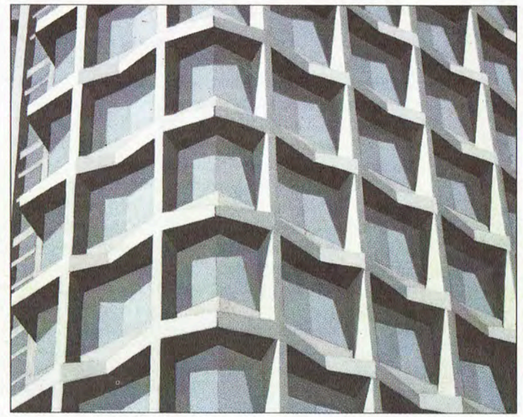
Marco Petrus: *Florin Court (London)*, 2010, oil on canvas, 31.75 x 39.5 inches

Opposite page, top, *New Yorker*, 2012, oil on canvas, 31.5 x 39.5 inches; below, *Casa del Vento*, 2011, oil on canvas, 15.75 x 19.75 inches



Quelli che stanno 1, 2011, oil on canvas, 15.75 x 19.75 inches

exhibited in the show at LewAllen Galleries. They are part of a series of 12 independent works of this fascinating building.

Pasa: What are you trying to do with your art? What do you want your viewers to experience?

Petrus: For me, architecture is a universal subject through which I can explore ideas that are of the world, not just of a particular place or time. Architecture is a way to connect different places and various times. People everywhere can relate to the built form, and I use it to begin a conversation from a point of seeming familiarity. But then I want this appearance of the real to open a deeper looking, for mystery to become evident, and for the building to become the object of contemplation.

My goal is to start a meditation, without crowds of people in the pictures to distract. I paint from unusual angles to suggest new ways to see and to think about the world. From the appearance of a real place I want my art to help move a viewer to another place, to make a transformation to the place of ideas and imagination. In this way, I search in my art to reinterpret modernity in the context of the contemporary.

Pasa: How has your palette changed over the years?

Petrus: It has evolved as a technique for focusing attention by the viewer. Deeper color prompts deeper looking. Color in my work has grown from shaded tones early on to a purer, brighter, flatter, and more intense part of the painting process.

Pasa: What are you working on now?

Petrus: I am just completing two very large canvases that collect the various architectures of Milan that I have painted individually over the past years. In these compositions the buildings are tangled and stacked one between the other. They are part of the new series *Dalle Belle Città* that comes after the *Upside Down* series, two examples of which will be presented in the LewAllen exhibition, where two buildings are overturned and placed one against the other. ◀

details

- ▼ *Marco Petrus: Bella Città*
- ▼ Opening reception 5:30 p.m. Friday, April 26; through June 9
- ▼ LewAllen Galleries at the Railyard, 1613 Paseo de Peralta, 988-3250