

## ON THE COVER

*Construction Deconstruction 1* by Phil Vance

*Portions of the following are based on an interview with the artist on January 4, 2024.*

Our cover artist recalls a boyhood experience driving to San Francisco with his parents for the first time and seeing the spires and rectangles of the city come up and spread over the horizon. Phil Vance was awestruck by the height, mass, and complexity of the built environment after living in a small town at the edge of the Sierra Nevada in California. It was an impression that never left and inspired his “Abstractions of the City” series of paintings. One of these is this month’s cover image.

Vance is fascinated with the transition from order to chaos and vice versa, in cities but elsewhere as well. He sees the orderliness of urban systems in banks of geometric shapes in two and three dimensions, layered and ranked, each rectangle a window and, possibly, a person. But there are no people in the picture because, although they fill cities, people are too organic, nongeometric, and “messy,” in Vance’s words, to express order visually. Hence, the preference for rectangles, at least in the “Cities” series. And certainly, the order is exemplified in *Construction Deconstruction 1*, especially on the left side. It then comes apart and fragments into pieces on the right. The fragmentation, however, is not chaotic because the organization is retained. Its elements, looking like panes of glass suspended in ranks, remain orderly even as the superstructure falls away. Does the image perhaps express the beginning of the transition to chaos, not its endpoint of confusion? All of this takes place in front of a subtle tonal gradation in yellow greens across the picture plane. The piece was completed in watercolor and ink pen, not Vance’s preferred media, which are acrylic paints. Nevertheless, the choice of media complements the image and provides a bonus. Watercolor’s attractive “wet-in-wet” technique, dropping pigment onto moistened paper to create unique “bleeding” effects of color, is noticeable here and there in the background.

Speaking of transitions, the major one in Vance’s life was probably leaving his small, closed community for the University of California, Davis, to study computer science. He describes this move, a significant psychological as well as physical journey, and highly unusual among his peers, as a process of becoming a different person. His original academic purpose faded quickly as he sampled a broad array

of courses, eventually settling on a major in art. And in fact, this was just a recognition of his true vocation. Vance had always drawn and painted in childhood and during school years, his pictures collected by encouraging grandparents. Exposure to the illustrations of M. C. Escher in the eighth grade was a landmark event. He was captivated by Escher’s *trompe l’oeil* (“deceive the eye”) renderings, with their geometric patterns morphing paradoxically into living forms. The experience motivated his own artistic ambitions. Years later, it was hard to tell his parents about the decision to study and pursue a career in visual art. Nevertheless, they proved supportive. He eventually discovered the field of graphic design, and it became a viable and income-generating addition to his love of painting and illustration.

In addition to Escher, Vance was influenced by abstractionists like Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, and Pablo Picasso as well as by the Impressionists including Monet. The “Abstractions of the City” series stands as a counterpoint to a very different line of his art that focuses on portraiture. He completed a series of famous people from Einstein to Johnny Cash called “In Their Own Words,” using handwritten quotes varying in density and overlay to build up their portrait images. Vance likes both representation and abstraction in art and enjoys people creating their own meanings from his pictures. Along with exhibiting in local galleries, he has worked as a graphic designer, supplemented as necessary by casual employment in bartending. He is intent on moving into painting and visual art on a full-time basis, an ambition temporarily thwarted by the COVID-19 pandemic but now again front and center and strengthened by his wife’s confidence that he will succeed.

It is tempting to see *Construction Deconstruction 1* as a visual metaphor for our troubled times. The seemingly inexorable movement toward division and fragmentation, the loss of old structures and supports, and the sense of looming chaos and crisis, these are apparent in image and real life. Vance, however, insists that the process is bidirectional and can reverse itself, a more hopeful message in this challenging year.

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