



# IN PURSUIT OF THE Big Picture

BY C. J. Kent

Whether depicting supersized multimedia scenes of New York's Central Park or portraits of friends and relatives, **Janet Ruttenberg** renders what she sees with both her outer and inner eye.

**O**n warm days, if you're walking along the north side of Sheep Meadow in New York's Central Park, you might see a woman creating a painting of people lounging on the wide grassy expanse with skyscrapers at the far end of the park seeming to peer over the treetops. She's there from about 11 a.m. until sunset, catching shadows and tricks of light on her 15-foot-long paper as the sun moves from east to west. The artist, Janet Ruttenberg, has been doing this for more than 20 years.

Many passersby pause to watch her. Occasionally, they have suggestions. One man used to stop by regularly with acute comments, the kind Ruttenberg thinks only another artist could have offered. He was "very critical and usually right" she says, although the validity of his observations wasn't always clear to her in the moment—or welcome. A woman once stopped Ruttenberg from making another stroke on her paper by saying, "Enough. You've done enough! You are torturing the picture." Ruttenberg laughs at the memory, although

the incident was startling at the time. Every so often, someone insists on giving her money, imagining she's a starving artist. Mostly though, people want to ask questions and chat. They ask what she's painting and how.

## Emergent Years

Ruttenberg isn't originally a New Yorker, although the city has been her home for decades. Born and raised in Dubuque, Iowa, she was drawn to art from an early age. The museums

**Rollerblades**  
oil and gold leaf on  
canvas, 82x180



**Wind (General Sherman)**

watercolor and graphite on paper, 48x89

PHOTO BY MALCOLM VARON

there weren't comparable to those in Chicago or New York, but the area, on the Mississippi River, was attractive, with big trees shading the streets, and the population was "kinda' arty," as she remembers it. Many plein air artists could be seen in fine weather, and a general enthusiasm for art and culture pervaded.

Even as a child, Ruttenberg wanted to make art and fill empty spaces in the world around her. She found the bare wall above the books and toys of the children's corner in her father's orthodontist office disconcerting, so she made a collage of the local funicular (a cable railroad) and asked her father to hang it, which he did. Her grandfather had a shoe and clothing store on Main Street with big windows on either side

of the entrance. She used to imagine what she might put in those spaces, but the family never let her go that far.

Looking at magazines and art books, she discovered Norman Rockwell. Having been encouraged in her art-making by her Uncle Buck, she showed him this new inspiration. "He doesn't push it far enough," he said in a comment that she wouldn't understand until she became familiar with Picasso's work some years later. Picasso did push things, and his example encouraged Ruttenberg to take risks, but her own style is more illustrative. "I see a vignette, and I want to say that," she says. There's a story in her pictures, but it's not a story to be told in words; rather, it's a sensibility that lets the imagination roam.

In 1949–51, Ruttenberg studied printmaking at the University of Iowa with Mauricio Lasansky (1914–2012), who established the internationally recognized Iowa Print Group. His approach to teaching was based on a traditional studio structure where students, working side by side with accomplished artists, learned to draw from nature as well as by copying Old Masters. Lasansky's training instilled a profound respect for the past and how it could inform the creative present for future work.

## Nods to Past Masters

Ruttenberg's playful allusions to art history appear in her older intaglio pieces and even more cleverly in her

paintings. The more one looks, the more one sees assorted nods to great moments in art history.

*Rollerblades* (pages 42–43), a painting in the artist's *Central Park* series, is filled with details referencing passages of canonical paintings that she transforms for a contemporary take. The woman in the center evokes Manet's *Le Dejeuner sur L'Herbe* (1862–63), but Ruttenberg has her putting on rollerblades after nursing a baby, who's laughing and trying to insert her own foot into mama's skate. In the upper right quadrant are two men kissing, a subtle transformation of a clipping she saw in a newspaper describing an image from an Egyptian tomb, ca 2300 B.C., of two men—Khnumhotep and

Niankhkhnum—embracing. A fair amount of information is known about these two royal servants, but scholars still disagree about why they're together. To the left of the central figure are three figures with a banjo, inspired by Titian's *Concert in the Open Air* (1510). Entering the scene from the far left is a man in a top hat, a nod to the familiar figure in Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (1884).

Seurat's painting, at approximately 7x10 feet, depicting an array of Parisians enjoying an afternoon in the park, resonates in Ruttenberg's large-scale paintings of New Yorkers lounging in Central Park. Just as Seurat did many sketches and studies for his work, so has Ruttenberg

returned day after day to the same scene to take the picture where she wants it to be. The artist's commitment reveals a curiosity about the lives that return to the park year after year.

Ruttenberg's *Central Park* series captures the essence of what Frederick Law Olmstead (1822–1903), the park's chief architect, envisioned this grand space would be for the people of New York City: Citizens populate the landscape, but the overhanging branches are equally important characters. Monuments, fountains and skyscrapers remind the viewer of the achievements and creative bustle that are key to the city that never sleeps, but details of flora and fauna insist on the importance of nature amidst all that human hum.

## Painting in the Park

Ruttenberg's paintings are huge. Over time the artist realized that only by shifting to a large scale would she be able to convey the feeling and light of days in the park. Initially, Ruttenberg worked on canvases that she leaned against trees, but this method proved too cumbersome; she'd not considered the burden of carrying a wet canvas back home. Then, she tried multiple canvas boards, but that didn't work either; the individual pieces interrupted the flow. Eventually, she turned to watercolor. Now, the artist unrolls her 9x15-foot sheet of Fabriano paper at the park and paints what she sees.

Watercolor allows Ruttenberg to sketch separate vignettes within the work, and the medium requires a quickness that keeps her attentive and decisive. It also dries promptly, so she can carry her work home when evening falls. She returns day after day, watching as the shadows shift in order to find just the right moment for different parts of the painting. These huge watercolors are intended as studies, but they've also become finished works in their own right (see *Wind*, above).

In the park, Ruttenberg used to sit on the large roll of paper to paint the scenes across the broad expanse, but that approach kept her too close to the work. There's a reason that

**More Online!**

See a video of Ruttenberg's Central Park series at [artistsnetwork.com/go/ruttenberg-video](http://artistsnetwork.com/go/ruttenberg-video).

Sargent would step back after almost every brushstroke. He emphasized to young artists the importance of moving away from the painting in order to avoid overstating a tone. Subtle gradations at a distance constitute beauty for the viewer. With your nose

pressed against the canvas or paper, "it's easy to get lost in the weeds," Ruttenberg explains. To remedy the problem, she devised a method of painting from a farther distance by attaching her brushes to a long stick as thick as a broom handle (see Long

Reach, below). It took some time to hone her skills with this tool, but she can now deftly flick an eyelash on a figure's face.

### On Taking Risks

As the weather cools, Ruttenberg returns to her large studio where she sometimes works through the night (see Studio Work, at bottom). It's not uncommon for her to have five 10x15-foot paintings that she's developing from her studies. Here, she works mostly in oil, but other media have appeared as well. She decided to include cut-out photographs for *Judgement of Paris With Morning Glories* (pages 48-49). At first, the use of photographs seemed unacceptable, but she thought of the many respected artists who had adopted photography to their advantage. Edward Hopper used a camera to record architectural details that he then reproduced on canvas. Ruttenberg considered that,



**TOP TO BOTTOM Long Reach:** Ruttenberg devised a 40-inch brush handle so that she could more easily view the entire work while painting or step back from it for a longer-range view. PHOTO BY SARAH BERTALAN

**Studio Work:** As the weather cools, Ruttenberg references her on-site watercolor sketches to create large-scale oil and multimedia works in the studio. PHOTO BY SARAH BERTALAN

## MULTIVIEWS

Some of Ruttenberg's more recent works reflect a world increasingly populated with digital devices. In *Voyeur (Yellow Puzzle)*, along with painted and collaged figures, LED audiovisual screens dot the landscape of Sheeps Meadow.

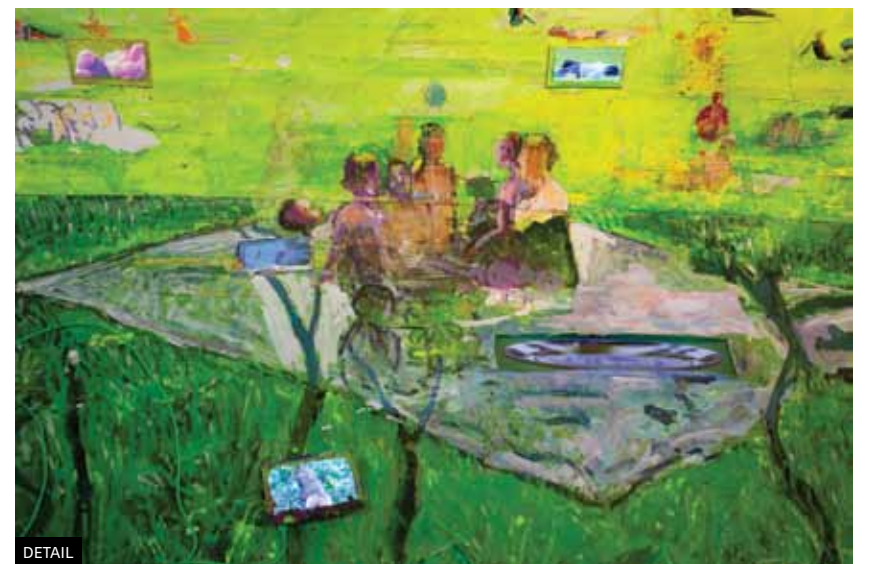
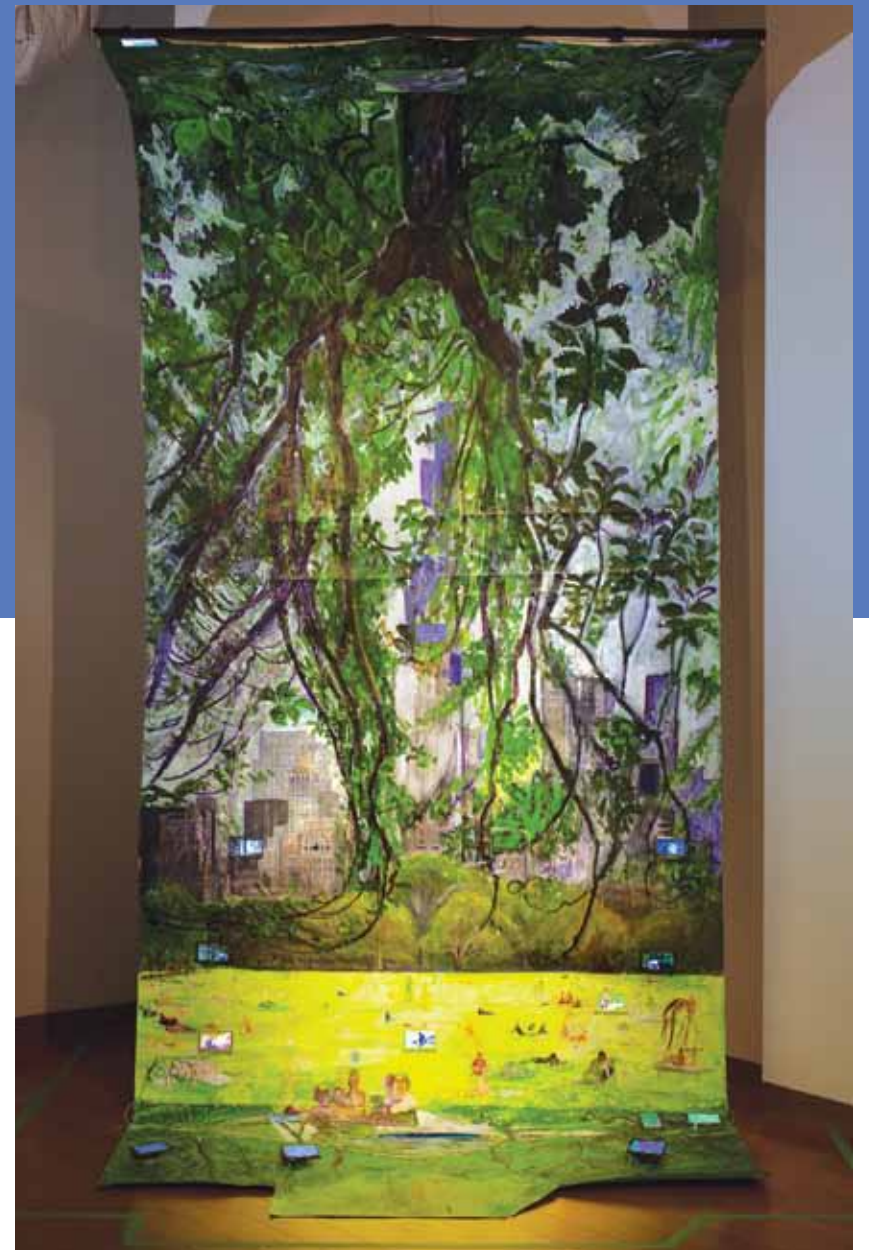
**Voyeur (Yellow Puzzle)**  
watercolor, fluorescent acrylic paint and paper collage with audiovideo on embedded LED display screens; 123x71x34  
PHOTOS BY FIONN REILLY

if an element is better described realistically by a photo, perhaps using a photograph for certain elements could push her to try other types of renderings with her painting.

"Taking risks is so important," she says. While making a portrait of her mother, the artist struggled with moving the picture from an illusion of the outward appearance of her subject to a revelation of her mother as a heroic figure. She had an idea but worried it would destroy the painting. For more than six years, every time Ruttenberg visited Palm Beach, her mother patiently modeled. What would she say if Ruttenberg botched all that work? The artist relates the turning point of her anxieties, first wondering, "Will it disappear?" and then thinking "What's the difference?" She has taken that moment with her ever since. Even if she ruins a painting while trying something new, she has still learned something. The destruction is worthwhile.

### Multi-Tech Media

In 2009, Ruttenberg made many sketches of dancers surrounding the Central Park statue of Shakespeare, created in 1872 by John Quincy Adams Ward. Every Saturday night they assembled for a milonga, a dance much like the Argentinian tango but with more relaxed movements. At twilight, the artist was there as the music started and the dancers moved.



DETAIL



Working on the painting later, she found the medium too static, so she developed a video overlay with music to help the piece capture the sensation of those enchanted evenings.

She brings that same spirit to her more recent multimedia pieces. *Voyeur (Yellow Puzzle)* (see Multiviews, page 47), wraps around its exhibition space vertically so that a canopy of leaves suspends from the ceiling and the grassy foreground rests on the floor. Embedded in the work are screens conveying video and audio clips by the artist. Similarly, *Magician Video Wall* (2018-2019), a large multimedia work of figures at ease on Sheeps Meadow, includes more

than 50 small screens along the bottom edge, with wires linked to a glass shelf where other interactive screens sit—evocative of people relaxing in the park as they use their phones to share items of interest, read news and stories, and play music. The piece also includes an audio component. Another work, *Stand Clear of the Closing Doors* (2019) introduces neon lights surrounding the image.

Ruttenberg thinks she may be coming to the end of the *Central Park* series. It has taken her 20 years to process the lay of the land and the people who come to relax. She thinks she may have finally solved the composition. She still paints there,

but increasingly she finds herself turning to portraiture—she has so many grandchildren and friends to paint. Portraiture offers a different challenge because, on some level, these works are always for someone else. The risks are greater as those dear to her may refuse her vision of them. But there's something there for Ruttenberg to discover. There always is for an artist. ♡

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JOSHUA BRIGHT FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

**Judgement of Paris With Morning Glories**

oil, photographs, graphite, charcoal and wood on canvas; 80x180

After painting in Central Park for 15 years, with no interest in selling or showing her work, Janet Ruttenberg, at age 82, exhibited her paintings for the first time in 2013 at the Museum of the City of New York. ArtYard, in Frenchtown, N.J., presented her second exhibition at the end of 2019.

▶ **LEARN MORE ABOUT THE ARTIST AT [JANETRUTTENBERG.COM](http://JANETRUTTENBERG.COM)**