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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

MAC JAMES

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GALLERY

On entering Mac James' crowded show the first thing I noticed—it would have been very hard to miss—was a bizarre and hilarious New York nocturne in which the Empire State Building and the moon that gives this painting its name ("Luna") are dwarfed by an enormous, leaping white shark that looks eminently capable of devouring the entire city in one gulp. This mother of all predators also bears a distinct resemblance to a wildly out-of-control blimp. Given that over the last year I have seen plenty of paintings I felt like laughing *at*, but few that made me feel like laughing *with the artist*, this is something to be grateful for.

But (as they say) what is it with James and sharks? In the oddly named *The Last Supper*, 1995, a shark like a battleship cruises through a disintegrating urban grid, and even paintings that appear at first to be abstract (*Girder*, 1994, and *Swanky*, 1995, for example) turn out to be infested with whole schools of cavorting sharks. It is true that James spent his early years in Florida, and was mightily impressed by the carcasses of these hard-to-believe creatures, but the "frightened by sharks as a child" interpretation seems a little crude; besides it is clear that his subject in these paintings is New York City, for which he abandoned Los Angeles in 1992.

In *Invisible Cities*, 1978, Italo Calvino imagined a city of the swallow and a city of the rat. James seems to view New York as the city of the shark. Nowadays, this would not be an entirely inaccurate description, and I intend no disparagement when I say that *Luna*, 1995, would make a superb *New Yorker* cover. James is keenly attuned to the city's bewildering contrasts—its harshness and beauty, its geometry and confusion. This is most apparent in a large, abstract oil called *Metropolis*, 1995, and a seductive series of nine, small "City Views." In all of these paintings, complex, interlocking forms suggestive of urban architecture and grid-plans are partly obscured by mysterious blurs and splatters of paint. The results are vividly evocative of those rainy Manhattan evenings when skyscrapers are wrapped in dimly illumined cloud, and the neon signs of liquor stores are reflected on the wet surfaces of sidewalks.



Mac James, *Luna*, 1995,
oil on canvas, 94 x 73".

In *Masquerade*, 1995, a group of mythological heads is superimposed on James' urban scheme, thereby linking the larger paintings to a series of profile studies James has been working on for some years. These range from the grotesque to the classical, and, as their titles imply, aren't so much portraits as evocations of archetypes—scholar, gargoyle, prince, satyr, Apollo, and so on. They seem timeless, yet they have the quality of spontaneous improvisations, and in them James contrives to give oil paint something of the fluidity and transparency of watercolor. Their tone of serene amusement would seem to be worlds away from the shark-infested cityscapes, but then (just when you thought it was safe to go back in the water) you notice that one of the profiles sports a prominent dorsal fin, and a set of needle-sharp teeth.