

The Hartford Arts Pages



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Issue 1: Sept.-Dec. 2025

Can Max Coyer Get a Second Act?

80s-era artist remixed icons

Hip-hop was born from the reappropriation of existing sounds and styles. Hartford-born Max Coyer took a similar approach to his paintings. He modified and mashed up famous artists' work into what he called "synthetic art." He borrowed that term from Hegel's dialectic philosophy. "Synthesistic" seems better, though. 'Synthetic' is too inorganic and inhuman, and Max was very much human. Maybe even *superhuman*.

The extent of Coyer's artistic training was walking around the Wadsworth Atheneum in the 1960s. That's it. His mother would drop him at the museum while she ran errands or worked and young Max, born in 1954, would wander the wide-ranging collection, taking in art from every century and continent. "His whole introduction to art started at the Wadsworth," said Coyer's niece, Paula Pierce. "He saw all of this art as a child and [later] put all these things together." Her sister, Susan Mancarella, added: "It was otherworldly how he absorbed everything." It all became the visual vocabulary for a body of work Edward Albee later compared to Picasso.

Coyer had zero idea he'd be a celebrated painter. Poetry was his love. "He would transform his agony into sagas," high school friend Kathy Kenna wrote. And that's what he went to Trinity to study. He left after two years and never wrote another poem. "I'm totally traumatized about poetry," Coyer told curator Judy Van Wagner in a 1988 interview. School killed his poetic core. He didn't like being told what was right and wrong in art of any kind. "I don't see how anyone could decide on which theory today is correct," Coyer said in that interview, after he'd already established himself as a boundary-breaking artist.

Coyer had moved to downtown Manhattan in 1980 and settled in Tribeca with his partner, Harm Bouckaert, a financier who left his job and opened a gallery at 100 Hudson St. Coyer's studio was in the back. Brian Leyden, an African art collector and neighbor, visited Coyer often, and he always left in awe of Coyer's talent.

"He had the natural skill," Leyden said. "I've been involved in the art business for many, many years and rarely have I ever experienced anyone as talented as Max Coyer. He was magical."

Coyer's first large body of work, "The Cone" series, came from a dream of flying on a UFO over Paris. After completing about 30 pieces, Coyer recognized in them hints of Giorgio de Chirico's 1914 work, *The Endless Voyage*, a painting he'd loved at The Wadsworth. That painting from his childhood had worked its way into his original paintings, and it vexed him. He wanted to create something fresh, and here he was haunted by the past. "Is it possible to make a painting today that hasn't been done before?" He wondered. Then it came to him: "One way is to actually make works of art of other works of art."

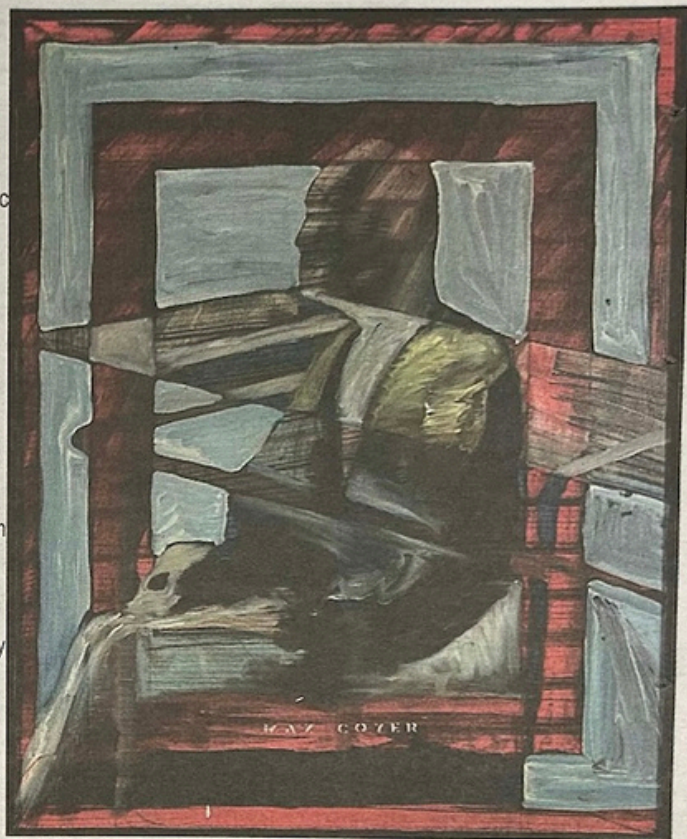
Like a hip-hop artist selecting samples, Coyer selected landmark images and elements to use as building blocks. His canvases, some as large as 6-foot-by-4-foot, became a who's who of altered art stars: Coyer riffed on Picasso; he turned French painter Ingres' delicate portraits of wealthy women into geometric studies and called them "Madame de Sade". Almost a dozen of his pieces star Coyer's favorite paintings from the Wadsworth. Coyer's *Endless Voyage* features a television obscuring Giorgio de Chirico's 1914 work version; *Rising Water* depicts Frank Lloyd Wright's *Fallingwater* threatened by jagged edges of de Chirico's *The Swimmer* – a commentary on modernism's doom. After seeing Leyden's African masks, Coyer integrated those into his work, as well. Pop art and spray paint – all was fair game for the self-taught painter.

This visual appropriation, or "quoting," as Coyer called it, was meant to "defuse" epochal images. Rather than running from the influences that were embedding themselves in his work, Coyer embraced them. "I could defuse de Chirico influence by actually painting a de Chirico, by actually quoting it directly." Masterworks became like any other shape. "You would be using it like a square or cone or rectangle. It becomes an abstraction." In this way he deflated art masters' gravitas, making them more accessible.

Coyer wanted people to view his paintings and see through the painting – for you to know it was a painting. Pieces therefore feature objects existing on different planes and layers, as when a flat-bottomed vase sits level on a tipped table. Coyer's "Icon" series takes this to the next level: gold-gilded wooden pieces jut out beyond the frame, distorting portraits of, among others, a Chinese princess and Jean Cocteau, an artist around whom Coyer created an entire *other* series.

This quest for relatability led to another of Coyer's trademarks: stenciling 'Max Coyer' at the bottom of his paintings in spray paint. In doing so he defied modernism's disdain for signatures while creating a visual anchor. "It helps pull the painting down."

Coyer himself had become more anchored over the years. The Met bought his work, so did Coca-Cola; press from the *New York Times* to *Creative Loafing* lauded



Loud Waters

among the voices
in my head
there's this one
sometimes very gentle
but usually
so much louder
than all the others
screaming
at the top of its lungs
you're not good enough
just remember
not everything
that's loud
is true
not everything
that's quiet
isn't a force
to be reckoned with

-Michaela Dengg



him. He showed in new galleries. He and Harm were still together and had a fluffy, flat-faced cat. Coyer's mother visited often, and he returned to Connecticut when he could. All was great — until Coyer was diagnosed with HIV. Testing positive back then almost certainly meant death. There were few safe meds, and the GOP-led government gave fewer shits about the disease. Rather than cowering, Coyer doubled down on his work; he churned out self-portraits based on Van Gogh's work; he made a series of cut amaryllis, a symbol of death; he opened new shows and gave talks and was full steam. "He did gorgeous things to the very end," Leyden recalled. "He knew that time was running out." Coyer died on November 28, 1988, just shy of his 35th birthday. Harm closed the gallery soon after.

Other artists of the era's legacies rose, and Coyer's presence faded. "It's been a struggle," niece Mancarella said about reviving interest in her uncle's work. She and her sister have talked to galleries, state leaders, museums — no one's bitten. Yet.

Today is much like Reagan's 1980s: Arts are under attack, books are being banned, science is being silenced. This type of repression sparks thoughtful, pointed, engaging art.

Coyer's work should be a guide here— maybe even an abstraction. Either way, Coyer should be reassessed as a lost great who formed something very much of his era: raw art that embraced the past by remixing it.

A final note from Coyer to all: "I don't think that you can see anywhere in history where the individuals held a cynical attitude and created anything of worth." In other words, believe in magic.

Five Places to Love in Hartford

Local writer celebrates his hometown

Hartford has always been consequential. For those of us who call it home, the city offers countless reasons to love it. We find places that inspire us, that connect us to the city's history. We find hidden gems that assure us we are part of something greater. Here are five places worth loving in Hartford.

The library in **Barry Square** was always special to me. Growing up near there, I often admired the mural that presides there: a memorial to the power of words. Mark Twain, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and others stand alongside historical and fictional characters. The voices of the past carry into the present, reminding me that a writer can shift thoughts and shape new realities. There's nothing more powerful than words on a page.

A stone cottage, **The Pump House**, stands in a corner of Bushnell Park. I would skip class to read against its wall, knowing that no one would disturb me there. I'd let the current of my thoughts take me to the days of G. Fox, the Majestic, and the Hotel Bond. They overlooked a city that was once loud, busy, and boisterous. I wondered when the city would find that energy again, even when I was only distracted by the song of a bird.

The gardens on **Oxford St.** hum with life. Behind them stand lovely Victorian houses, tended by generations of caretakers. I walk by them on my way to work, in awe and in envy. I've never had a house; I may never have one. But even in passing, I draw comfort from standing in this in-between place. I connect with parts of myself: the child that lived in a rougher part of the city that now takes in the charms of his neighbors' homes without an invitation.

Riverside Park is one of the few places to access the water. Many families, including mine, have found comfort and serenity under the trees there. We, like many here, are from an island, but we are more familiar with rivers than with the sea. A river is a familiar artery, assuring us of its presence and its power. It ebbs and flows. It shapes the land and a city. It can bring life at times and death at others. How will it continue to shape our story?

Spring Grove Cemetery calls me to amble among the headstones. Farms used to exist there, then came railroads and factories. Now, it's a vibrant neighborhood, whose residents went from Irish and Jewish to African American and West Indian. And many were, and will continue to be, buried here. Some are visited by their loved ones. Some aren't — because their loved ones have also faded from memory. I'll find myself in a place like this too. And I may be forgotten too.

The city will remain; it'll change. It isn't the same city I remember. It isn't the city that any of us remember. It goes on with and without us. Time doesn't circle back. It lingers in the corners, in the sway of a leaf, in the pause before dusk. We all carry it—sometimes to briefly return, but always to remember how it felt to belong.

-Omar Acevedo

Above: Coyer's "Figure of the Night"; pg. 8: Schebell, Aldridge, Stenson's "The Scarlet Letter"; Right: Detail of Stenson's "Unbridled Entrance", Rochester's "Give Them Hope"