

Painting the Towne



A mural in midtown by Sarah Morris has Hollywood roots.
By **Andrea K. Scott**

Midtown is about to get a little less colorful. Sunday 3 is your last chance to see Sarah Morris's architectural intervention at Lever House: a prismatic abstract mural that skims across the 19,744-square-foot ceiling of the building's ground floor, both indoors and out. The 39-year-old, who divides her time between London and Manhattan, is a filmmaker as well as a painter. Her last film was shot in L.A. during the week of the Academy Awards and while there's no celluloid in the Public Art Fund-sponsored project, its title, *Robert Towne*, makes a Tinseltown reference. It's named for the screenwriter whose movies include *Chinatown*, *Shampoo* and *The Parallax View*. TONY met with the artist to discuss her piece and the Hollywood legend who inspired it.

Is it true that you first considered doing a mural in the Seagram Building?

It was more about the Four Seasons than the building itself. In the '50s, Rothko agreed to make murals for the dining room, but ended up returning the money. His relationship to that nexus of power and his rejection of it fascinated me. But in the end, I decided that the Seagram Building wasn't problematic—or public—enough.

What's the appeal of Lever House?

It's a perfect site because of the nature of the problems with the building. It reminds me of a Kippenberger

sculpture. It seems to be a passageway, but it isn't. People get out of the subway around the corner, but they can't cut across from 53rd to 54th because there's a glass lobby.

Why make a Los Angeles reference in midtown Manhattan?

I was working on a series of L.A. paintings when the Public Art Fund approached me and I liked the idea of pitting the two cities against each other. New York is pretty arrogant in its attitude toward Los Angeles and there's something preposterous about placing a rogue figure like Robert Towne in midtown. Lever was a soap company, and I started thinking about issues of the body—the skin of the building. In a way that's what got me to *Shampoo* and then to Towne, who wrote the screenplay. It made sense to bring an iconoclast into such a corporate, midtown context.

How is Towne iconoclastic?

He defined a new role in Hollywood. He won an Oscar for *Chinatown* in 1974, but nobody really knows how many projects he's been involved with. He's worked as a writer, a producer, a director, an actor. His first credit on any film was "special consultant." He's like a portal into Los Angeles, which functions on this multiple role-playing track of collaboration—what filmmaking is all about. It connects to how I think of myself as an artist. How do you negotiate being part of something that's larger than you, that's more powerful than you, that you're complicit with, and still retain your sense of authorship, individuality and creativity?