

# WHERE DALLAS

January 2000

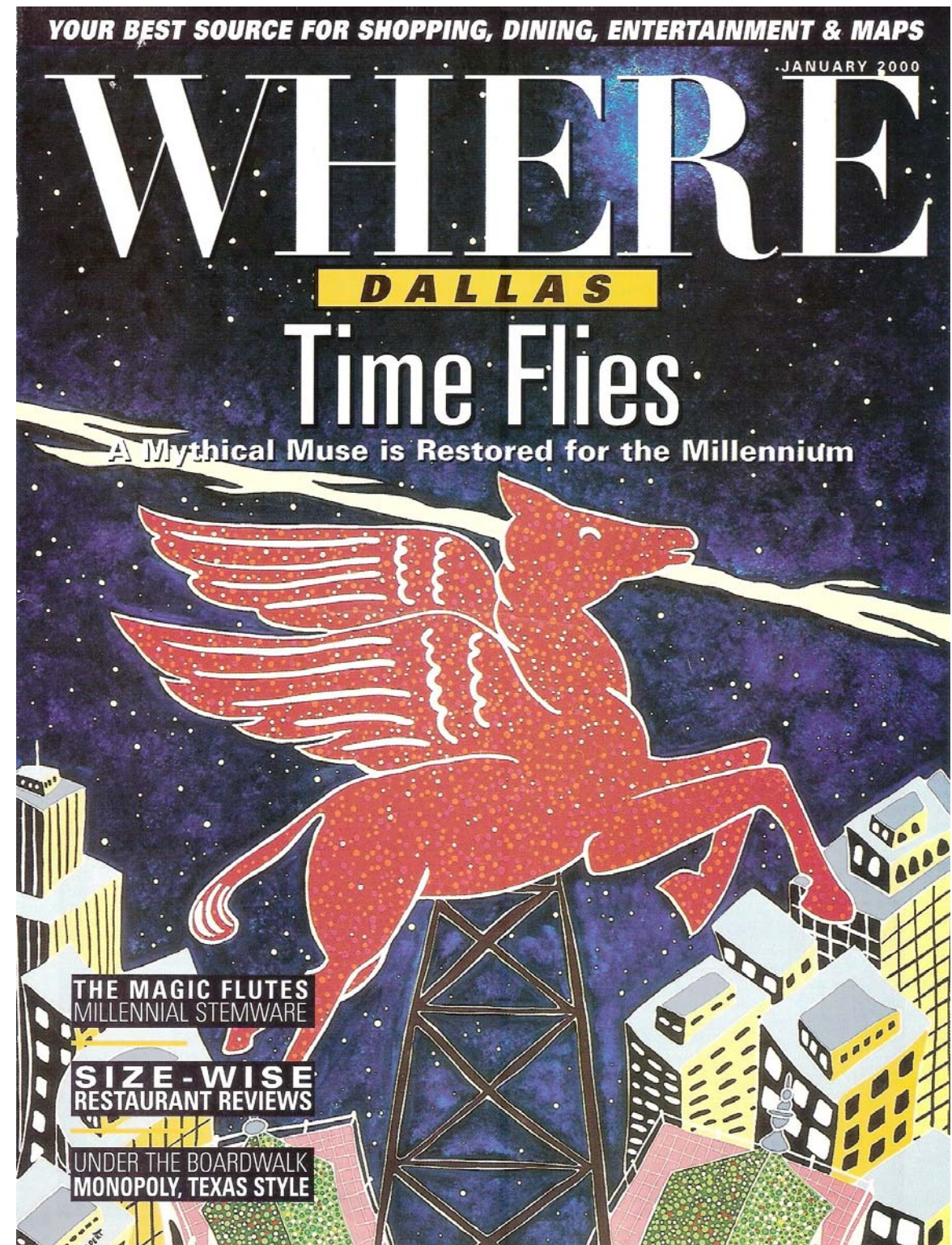
## Cover Art:

*Pegasus at Midnight*

40 by 30 inches, acrylic and enamel on canvas

## Inside Story:

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# Local Color

Alain Despert Paints the Town Red — and Blue, and Yellow, and Green . . .

by Kim A. Radtke

**M**aybe you have seen his demure smile, as he oversaw the likes of the acclaimed Biltmore Hotel or Hotel Bora Bora. Or perhaps you were leafing through *Arts & Antiques* or *Connoisseur* and saw his Absolut Vodka ad. Or maybe you read about the induction of his piece into the fine art collection of "Best Buddies," a non-profit organization founded by Anthony Kennedy Shriver.

If you haven't encountered him yet, please do. Former hotel manager turned artist Alain Despert is a one-man show at The Fairmont Hotel's new venture — an in-house art space, the Arts District Gallery.

Painting, once a "hobby," is now a full-time job and more. He admits his mind is always at work, collecting images and creating stories for his paintings. Despert sees "inspirations" in his head for his paintings, explains Karen Brown, owner/director of the gallery, and "once the idea flows through him, he paints around the clock."

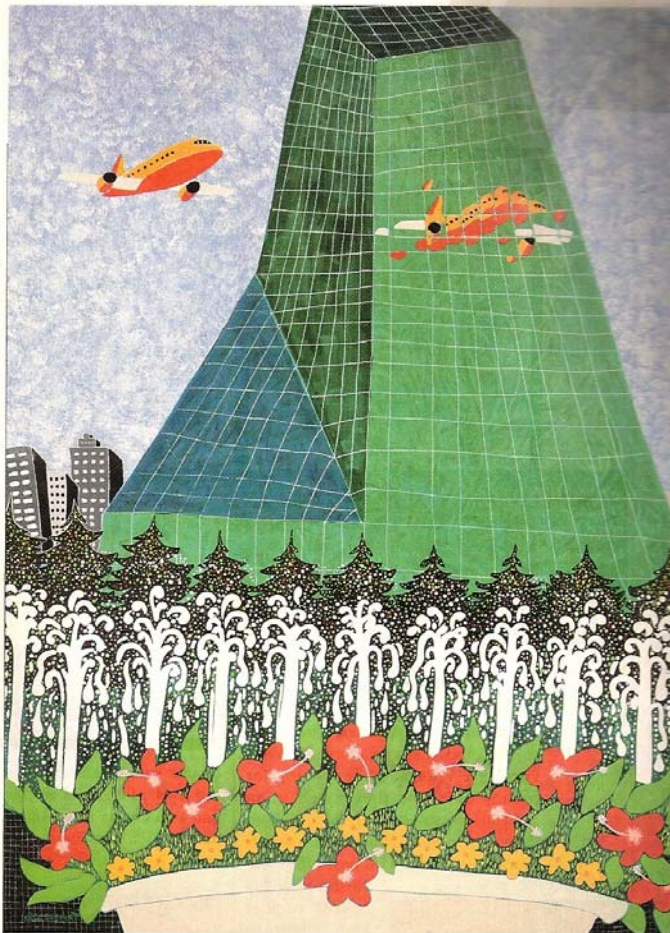
From the carnivals of Venice to cars of the 1950s, from life in the South Pacific to Miami's South Beach to even famous masterpieces, Despert puts his unique spin on places, people, and historical events.

**(Right) Fountain Plaza depicts Fountain Place as well as our own beloved Southwest Airlines. This is only one of several landmarks in Despert's Dallas series.**

Dallas has become the subject of his latest series. From playful renditions of Mayor Ron Kirk and Thanksgiving Tower, to the more serious tone of *Two Visitors*, a black-and-white portrait of President John F.

Kennedy and Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, he set out to capture the "spectacular lines, colors, and history" of Dallas.

After traveling extensively throughout the world, what Despert finds so attrac-



tive about Dallas are "the people, the skyline, the weather and the architecture — from old to new," he reveals. "I am fascinated with history — and there more restaurants here than in New York!" His favorite Dallas subject is the neon Pegasus sculpture atop the Magnolia Hotel (see sidebar, "High Art").

#### WORK IN PROGRESS

Despert's zeal for life, sense of discovery, and desire for beauty, coupled with his

playful colorful contemporary style, make him one of the artists to watch in the 20th century, one Dallas is lucky to embrace. It is rare to have the opportunity to meet the artist on-site, having him work on the premises, but "people enjoy seeing him at work," says Brown. "Especially children — it inspires them."

Born in Brittany, France, near the home and school of Gauguin, Despert found himself surrounded by art. "I always enjoyed visiting art galleries and muse-

ums," says Despert. "And one day, I decided that since I couldn't afford [paintings], I'd do my own."

During his time off, he began transforming ideas he gathered on trips to cities such as Paris and Venice. These ideas became stories in his mind and sketches in his books, and eventually a series on canvas.

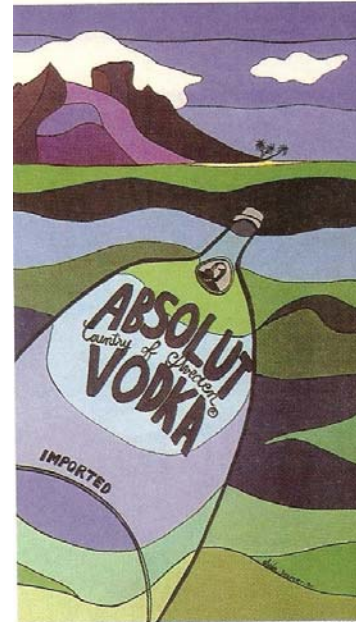
After 30 years and several five-star

hotels later, Despert moved to New York City in 1990 under the persuasion of an editor at *Town & Country* magazine, whose staff "discovered" Despert while covering an assignment at the hotel he managed, Hotel Bora Bora.

As New York City provided greater exposure, Despert began exhibiting his work throughout the United States and Europe and was selected for the renowned Absolut Vodka advertising campaign. After almost four years, Despert left New York to continue traveling and collecting "stories" for his paintings. From Miami to Venice to Santa Fe, he has completed more than 250 works.

When asked which is his favorite, Despert is cagey: slowly grinning, he replies, "I don't have a particular one — I think I like them all."

This self-taught artist's works are bright, fun, and dazzling, with brilliant colors and a whimsical yet formalized style. Collectors around the world hang Despert next to Warhol and Grooms; many admit that they can't have just one of Despert's paintings. There's a happiness that pours out from his canvases — not overwhelming, intimidating or staged — only natural, like his quiet and charming personality. **W**



**(Left) Despert's Absolut Vodka advertisement (Below) Chillingly, *Two Visitors* was completed just hours before John F. Kennedy Jr.'s plane went down over Nantucket.**



## High Art

ON A CLEAR DAY, DESPERT SET OUT TO DISCOVER DALLAS. High above the buildings he so admired, Despert was intrigued by this "red horse" sitting atop the Magnolia Hotel. It was on the 35th floor of the Southwestern Bell building where the fascination began. The red had caught his eye from below, but he had no idea of its magnitude and splendor until he was almost level with one of Dallas's most famous skyline landmarks.

He took out his sketch pad, snapped photos, and "took in" the view before being asked if he knew he wasn't supposed to be there. "I simply looked at the person and said 'No, I didn't know, but now I do,' and I left." But Despert had gathered all he needed. Three illuminating paintings later, he is like a proud father who is nervous to boast too much.

The first of his playful renditions of Pegasus captures the life and purpose that has been missed since the 1970s, when its lights were dimmed due to the energy crisis. The second, painted prior the relighting of the neon figure, celebrates its full glory and newness, complete with an illuminating full moon for the new Millennium, explains Despert. And the third has three white doves flying above it.

I asked why. "The horse has wings," says Despert. "It says come fly with me — it is such an interesting subject when you think about it. Perhaps I'll do one more where it is free, flying above the skyline."