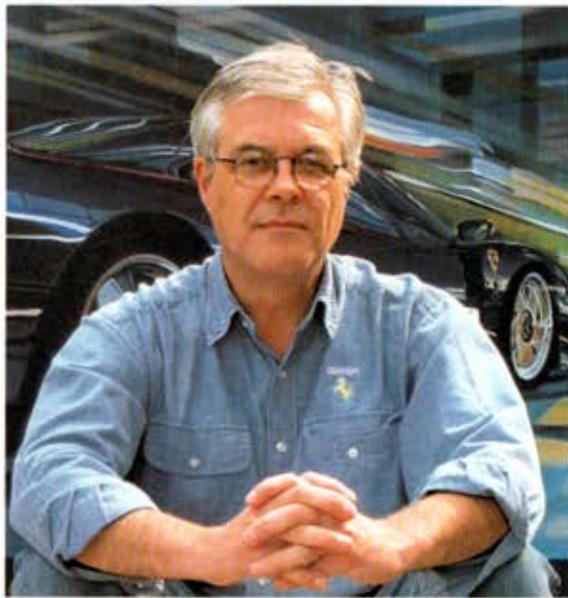

Composition, The Koka Way

Art Gallery
with

JAY
KOKA



The paintings of Jay Koka are ever changing in color, texture and composition, reflective of an artist who is continuously searching and evolving his style. Skillful manipulation of color and mood, with carefully considered composition and an occasionally impressionist style thrown in, represent signs of one who is never satisfied with the status quo. For the observer this is good news, as Koka's exhibitions always elicit a true element of surprise.

BY GERRY DURNELL



He was young, affluent and well-respected, an important cog in a thriving corporation that valued his multiple talents and paid him handsomely to indulge his passion for growling engines and whirring wheels.

"The tire business put me with cars," Jay Koka said, "which for me was like being in a candy store." But at 36, Koka turned his back on one sweet life to pursue another that has been even sweeter still.

Twenty years after leaving his job as director of marketing for B.F. Goodrich, Koka is still playing

with cars, flashing his talents and earning a decent wage.

Koka is among the most celebrated automotive artists in the world—and, in some respects, one of the most unlikely.

Though artistic skill runs in his family, and he displayed rare talent of his own early on, Koka did precious little painting prior to 1985, when he resigned his position with Goodrich and opened his own studio.

It was a bold move. A courageous move. A border-

line reckless move, Koka happily admits.

"When I look back on it, I think, 'My god! What was I thinking?'" Koka said. "I was paid a lot of money. I had a young family. I had a mortgage on the house. I must have been out of my mind."

Some people are born risk-takers. Koka's father was one of them. In 1956, Julius Koka took his 6-year-old son, Jay, and left Budapest, Hungary, forever.

"We left at the peak of the Hungarian revolution because my father was a freedom fighter," Koka said. "The Hungarians were trying to blow up the Russians every opportunity they could get. That's what was going on, and he was involved. ... We crossed the border on foot in the middle of the night, through barbed wire and everything."

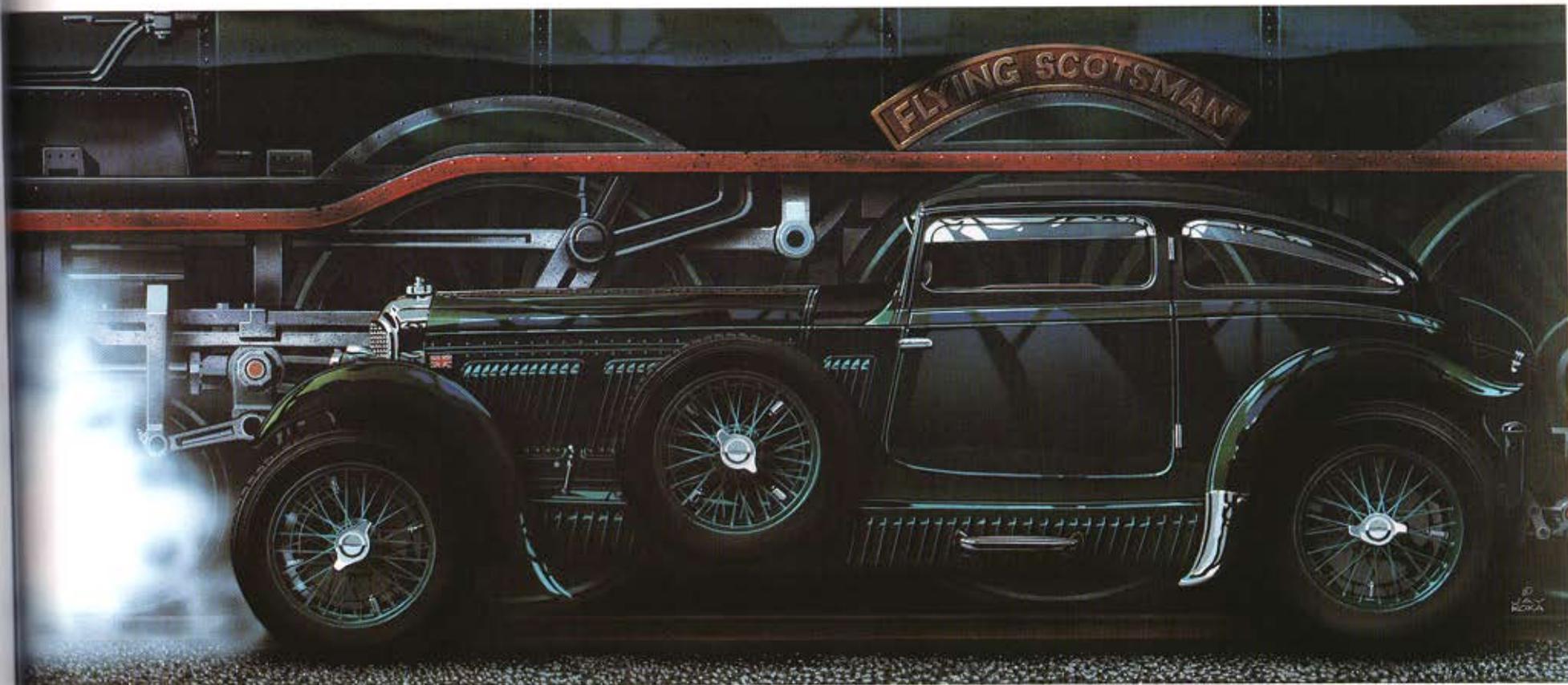
After almost a year in England, the Kokas emigrated to Canada, settling about 60 miles southwest of Toronto in Waterloo, Ontario. Young Jay was a gifted art student, which was no surprise to anyone who knew that his uncle, Koka Ferenc (Frank Koka), was a prominent painter with several pieces hanging in Hungary's national gallery.

As a teenager, however, Frank Koka's nephew had other interests—namely cars, girls and business.

"This sounds terrible, but I really did not have a huge interest in painting at the time," Koka said. "It



"The Shining," painted in 1994, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 60 inches.



"Trains," gouache on board, 19 x 35 inches.

just was not something I wanted to pursue."

College wasn't, either. Koka worked his way up the corporate ladder the old-fashioned way, starting as a receiving clerk at Sears. The money he made was plowed into a pair of gorgeous-but-dysfunctional Austin Healeys.

"They were two of the nicest cars I ever owned and also two of the crappiest," Koka said. "Mechanically, they were just a nightmare."

But they were not without some redeeming virtues, the 1963 Mark III in particular.

"It was absolutely terrific for picking up girls," Koka said. "That thing was like a magnet. But pretty much every nickel I had on the planet went into that car."

Koka was 24 when he went to work for B.F. Goodrich. In 11 years, he went from supervising the creation of retail ads for about 30 Canadian stores to running the company's marketing department.

Goodrich's performance tire division introduced Koka to the world of race cars, which he experienced firsthand by campaigning a 1972 Opel GT 4 in regional circuit races for three years.

An entrepreneur at heart, Koka flourished in the position and was well-compensated for his work. Goodrich paid for the lion's share of the 50-plus cars and innumerable motorcycles that Koka and his wife Catherin, have owned over the years.

It was a good job and a good life, but by 1985, Koka wondered if he hadn't already seen the best that corporate life had to offer.

"I looked at what was going on with people around me who were 50 years old or so, and, frankly, some of it wasn't real pretty," he said. "I asked myself, 'Is this what I want 20 years from now?' The answer was no, not really. Maybe I also felt some creative stirrings then, I don't know."

Koka is not one to suffer from paralysis by analysis.

With a supportive wife at his side—and two young boys to feed—Koka plunged into a new endeavor. He decided to stop selling tires for fast automobiles. He would paint those cars instead.



"Charlestown, No. 1," acrylic on tempered masonite, 20 x 24 inches, ©2004

It was a bold move indeed. But it was backed by prudence and funded by the fruits of success.

"Our financial situation was very good," Koka said. "I had the money that if things were to go absolutely south, it wouldn't be the end of the world.

"I took a pretty substantial amount of money and put it in the bank. I told myself, if I ever have to touch that, I have to start thinking that maybe I haven't made the right decision. But I've never touched it. It has turned out to be the foundation for a pretty good retirement plan."

Not that Koka, 54, has any intention of retiring soon, though he has amassed more than enough laurels to rest on already. His work has been honored multiple times by the concours of Meadow Brook and Pebble Beach. He has been the featured artist and poster artist for, among other events, the Ferrari Club of America annual meets, the Cavallino Ferrari Classic of Palm Beach, the Glenmoor Gathering, the Concours of the Eastern United States and the Reading Ferrari Concours. Koka's renderings of Ferrari's finest have been displayed on Christmas cards distributed by Ferrari Club of Italy, exhibited at the "Centario Ferrari" and presented to winners of the Ferrari Challenge Series.

But perhaps his grandest work was for the Chrysler Corporation. "Metamorphosis," an 80-square-foot, four-panel work completed in 1996, hangs in Chrysler's world headquarters in Auburn Hills, Mich.

Koka's style is as profusely kinetic as his subject matter. His paintings have evolved from realism to impressionism to a combination of both.

"From my perspective, for automotive art to be successful in a fine art sense, it must be more than just a picture of a car," Koka said. "The work has to justify itself by presenting a context for the car and an execution that brings elements of style, technical proficiency and creativity to the canvas. For me, slavish repetition of detail alone is, in and of itself, not art. I strive to provide a reason for the viewer to invest the time to view my work.



"ML Liquors," from 2004, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 36 inches.



"Altered Landscapes No. 2," a piece Koka exhibited at the 2005 Pebble Beach concours, is an excellent example of that philosophy.

"It takes realism and surrealism and sort of whacks the two together," Koka said.

The painting portrays a Lamborghini Gallardo flashing through an intersection in front of Harrah's Casino in Las Vegas. In the car's wake is a shock wave of exploding glass panes, flying gold coins and a fluttering ribbon of yellow paint. The Gallardo has ripped the lane divider right off the road. It makes for a circus-like scene.

"It is best described as 'insane,'" Koka said with a laugh. "The right half of the painting is perfectly normal. On the left half, as the car is going through, everything is blown all over the place. It's the longest I've ever worked on one painting, easily the most complex image I've ever executed."

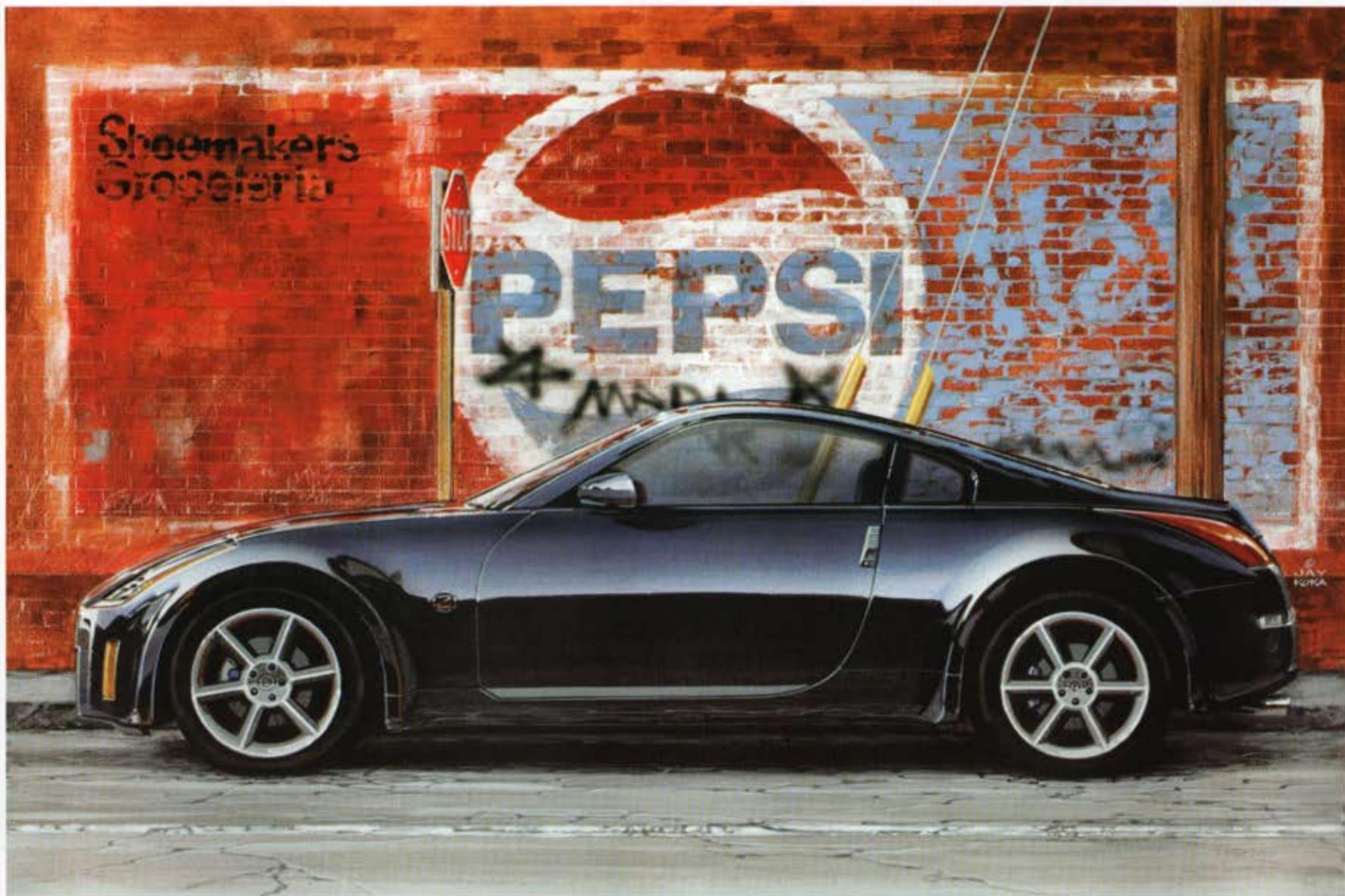
His labor is not likely to go unrewarded. Koka, a self-described "computer geek" who designed his own state-of-the-art Web site (jaykokastudio.com), has the technical savvy and marketing prowess to make the most of his formidable artistic gifts.

Yet he chalks up a healthy portion of success to good luck, good timing and the company of a goodly number of similarly gifted peers.

"I think there was a group of us who were pretty talented, and we all set our sights on the same goal at the same time," Koka said. "We sort of jumped in at the start of a bull market and lent it some real momentum.

"Thanks to a bit of very, very good fortune, I got going in automotive art when automotive art got going." 

A Lamborghini Gallardo blasts through an intersection in front of Harrah's Casino in Las Vegas in "Altered Landscapes No. 2."



"Refreshing," acrylic on temp masonite, 16 x 24 inches.