

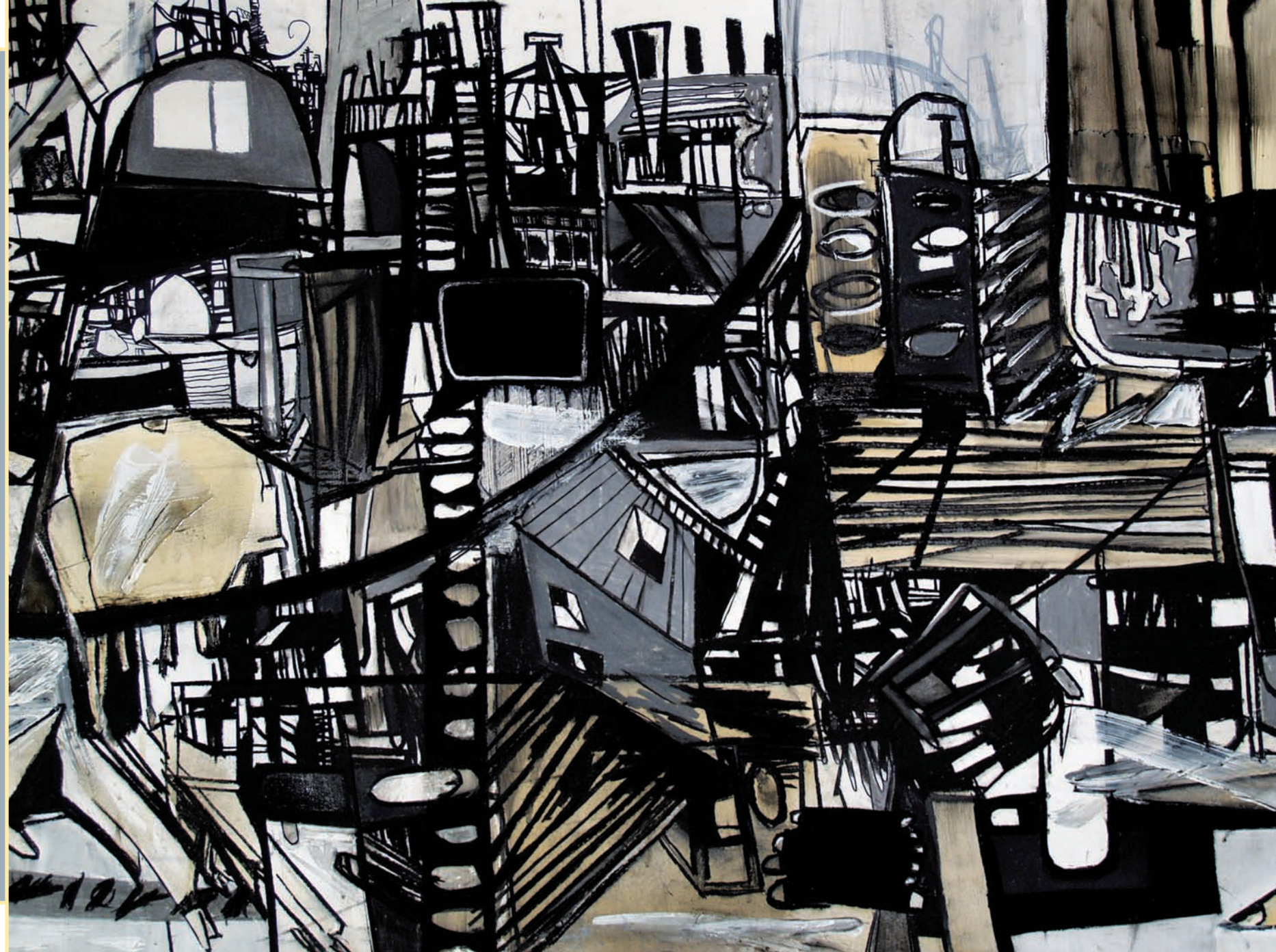
Street Retreat Fragments

ESSAY HUGH MCGINNESS | DRAWINGS LUKE O'SULLIVAN

The author took part in a four-day street retreat organized by the Zen Peace Makers and the Village Zendo to allow sangha members to experience the barest glimpse of what it is like to live on the streets of New York City.

We arrived, unbathed for a week, at Washington Square Park in New York City in mid-October with no money in our pockets, one form of identification, the clothes on our back, and each with a small backpack. We are not penniless or homeless or pretending to be homeless, but we will spend the next four days eyebrow to eyebrow sleeping in parks and alleys and basements. We will beg on the streets for spare change and collect cans to return. We will eat in shelters and soup kitchens. We will see what arises.

Attempts to dress the experiences and feelings of those four days in words now sit before me as a collection of fragments on scattered scraps of paper defying coherence like so many opposing magnets and no truer to the experience than the picture of a bird to its song. Of course there is really nothing to say, and I've waited too long to say it.



Sometime after 3 pm, twelve of us sit in a circle; we discuss concerns, thoughts, and other matters. Some passersby take pictures. They take pictures of the squirrels, as well.

In the Bowery Mission — a new world, almost as if there were worlds to leave and others to enter. All must be in the chapel before the door closes or no dinner. The congregation grows restless waiting for colorless food generously served.

Shuttling in pairs from the alley where we tried to find sleep to a nearly all-night McDonald's past two padlocked porta-loos, the reality of the evening burrows in.

The alley, an adventure on arrival, loses its charm as rain reconstitutes the urine of countless past wanderers. No pretending that I can't sleep for the smell.

Early dump trucks provide a morning call and the week dissolves into a discontinuity of paths and stops connecting the next place to eat or rest or sit or beg or chant with the next place to sleep.