




signs of the times



Denis Ryan races against the clock
to capture vintage neon lights and gritty
urban landscapes of yesteryear.

By Ken Gofton

Neon works in Arabic too, as *Road to Damascus* (acrylic and watercolor on board, 13x22) demonstrates. The quinacridone red is one of the artist's favorite colors.



DRAWN TO SUBJECTS THAT HAVE BEEN “BATTERED BY LIFE,” BRITISH ARTIST Denis Ryan has long found inspiration in the urban landscape—the more rundown the better. Racing against time, he aims to capture old bridges, skyscrapers, shop windows and vintage neon signs before they’re torn down, replaced or rebuilt—a quest that has dovetailed conveniently with another passion Ryan and his partner share: international travel.”

Armed with a sketchbook and camera, the artist discovered a trove of inspiration on a trip to Coney

Island. As he painted the Playland sign from the New York fairground back in his London studio, he was suddenly struck with the idea for a possible new series of paintings.

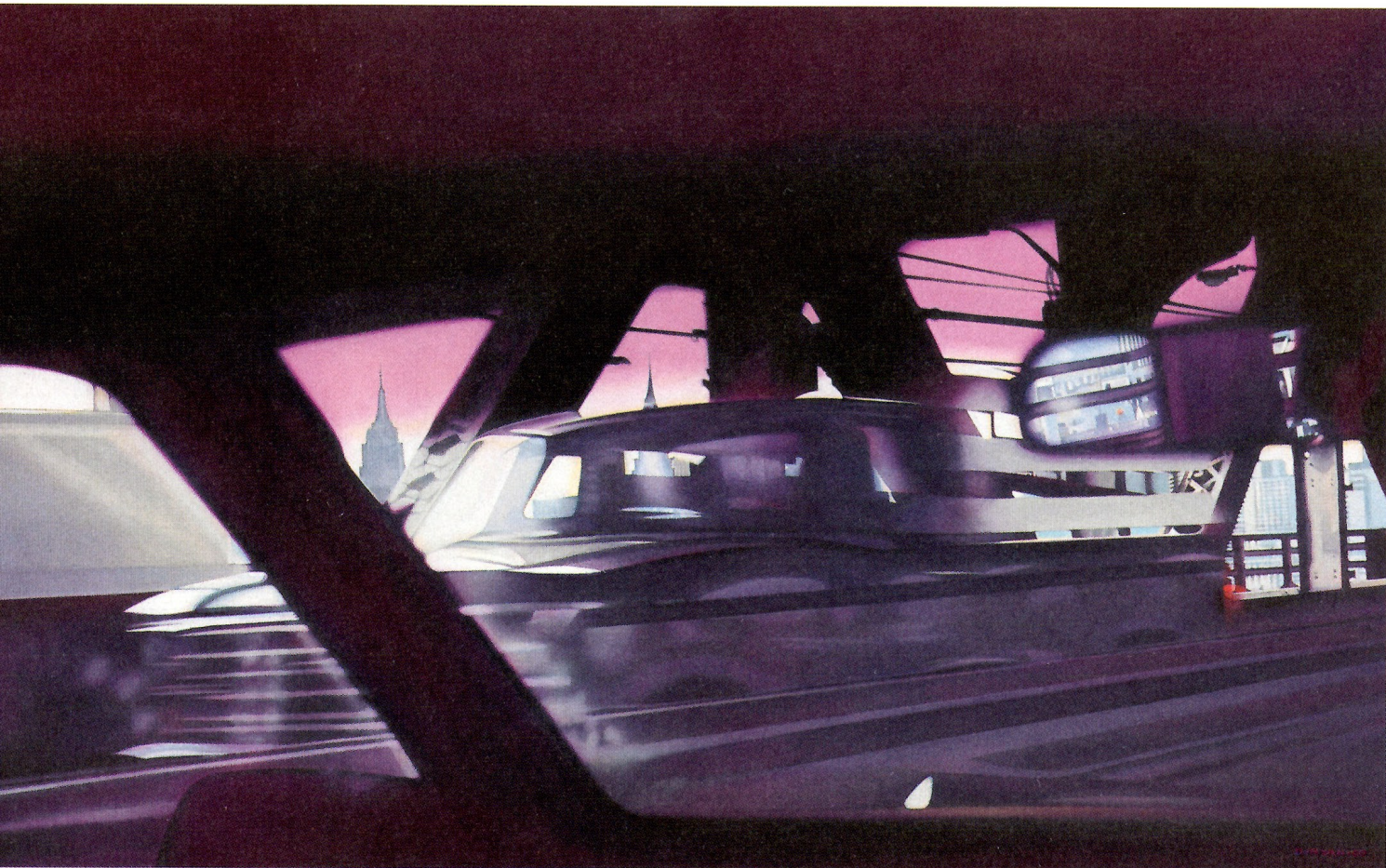
“That sign pushed the right buttons for me,” says Ryan. “I realized it had all the things I enjoyed painting—bits of rust, electric cable, worn-out plaster, the hard-edged shapes of the sign itself, the reflective materials and the deep shadows. Everything was in that little area, without me needing to paint the whole street.”



The perspective is different, but the sign in *Playland, Coney Island* (opposite; watercolor on board, 17x16) was the original inspiration for Ryan's neon series.

A surprisingly small study, *All Day, Chinatown, London* (above; watercolor on board, 6x9) ably expresses Ryan's fascination with the strangely twisted letters and varied textures of a restaurant sign.

There is a feeling of movement in *Esaria Neon, Lisbon, Portugal* (acrylic, 13x18)—as if the viewer caught this glimpse of the neon sign from a taxi window upon arriving in town.



Occasionally, the artist will use some airbrushing, as in **Crossing the East River, New York** (above; acrylic and watercolor on board, 11x21), where he used it to indicate the speeding car.

Egyptian Minx Neon, Lisbon, Portugal (right; watercolor, 7½x9½) captures the reflected glow of the red neon onto the patron of the establishment as well as the mellow mood.

Ryan revels in the challenge of a complex subject and found it in **Queensborough Bridge, New York** (opposite; acrylic and watercolor on board, 11x21). The detail reduces with distance but maintains the intricate illusion.





And so began a series of paintings featuring neon signs that continues to this day. Burning white hot or flickering out, these old-fashioned markers are giving way to more modern electronic versions—which, to the artist’s eyes, don’t have the same visual appeal. In his work, however, the old signs shine on forever.

A Big Step

After earning his M.F.A., Ryan spent his early professional life in animation and illustration. He worked on a number of major films, including *Watership Down* (1978), *The Wall* (1982) and videos for Paul McCartney and Elton John. Eventually, however, the industry’s move toward computerized animation and its outsourcing of work to low labor-cost countries drove him to make a career change. Having booked a West End gallery for a solo exhibition one year in advance, the artist lived on his savings while he created enough works to fill the space. The sales and encouragement he received from that show were enough to convince him he could make a living from his art.

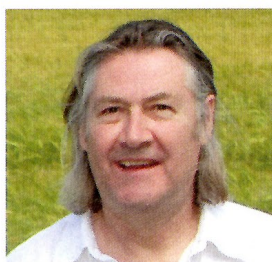
It was a big step to take, but not one that affected Ryan’s daily routine to any great extent. Throughout his career in film and publishing, he had rented studio space in various locations in London. For the past 20 years, he has shared a three-story building with colleagues in Stoney Street, south of the River Thames. The street borders Borough Market, which, until a few years ago, was an

old-fashioned fruit and vegetable market but now serves as a weekend foodie paradise, attracting huge crowds. “It’s gone from bits of cabbage lying in the street and no restaurants to sushi bars and up-market coffee shops,” he says, not altogether happily. “The whole area is being gentrified.”

His studio is on the top floor—a small room, but one with good light and enough storage space for his materials and equipment. Here he works from Monday to Friday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., sometimes into

Meet Denis Ryan

Denis was born in London and studied for an MA in Fine Art at Watford, Hornsey and Ravensbourne colleges of art. In 2008 he was elected a member of the Royal Watercolour Society (RWS). His career began in film animation and, later, illustration. Successfully combining both he worked on award-winning films as well as numerous TV and film commercials. Having worked in commercial art since leaving art school he is now painting for himself fulltime. He exhibits with the RWS and has exhibited in Cork Street, the Royal Academy, Mayfair and internationally in Italy, China and the U.S. (Charleston, Texas, and the OK Harris Gallery in New York, home of realist painting). See more of his work at www.denis-ryan.com.





“I use acrylics and watercolor in exactly the same way: by building up a series of thin washes.”



the evening if a painting is going particularly well. “But the concentration is really intense. Painting for more than eight hours is exhausting,” he says.

Drawing On the Past

At the start of a new work, Ryan assembles his sketches with notes and photographs exploring the

lighting conditions at different times of day. Some photos will have been deliberately underexposed to reveal deep shadow details.

“I’m a realist painter but not a pure photorealist,” says the artist. “I like it to be clear that my finished work is a painting, not a photograph, and I won’t go on adding detail beyond a certain point. Also, I play around with the composition to get what I want. I might reduce the space between elements, or stretch bits, and remove or change the background.”

Drawing on techniques learned in his earlier career, he makes photographic enlargements of the objects he wants in the picture, traces them precisely, and then transfers them to his painting surface (Daler-Rowney watercolor board), using a red oxide carbon paper. This provides a very clear but soft impression, which he then defines in pencil. Fortunately for the artist, he has a stock of the carbon paper, which is no longer manufactured locally.

“I really get to know the geography of the subject, so that when I reach for my brushes, I know every nut and bolt of what’s there,” he says. “The preparation before I paint is almost as important as the painting itself.”

A Series of Washes

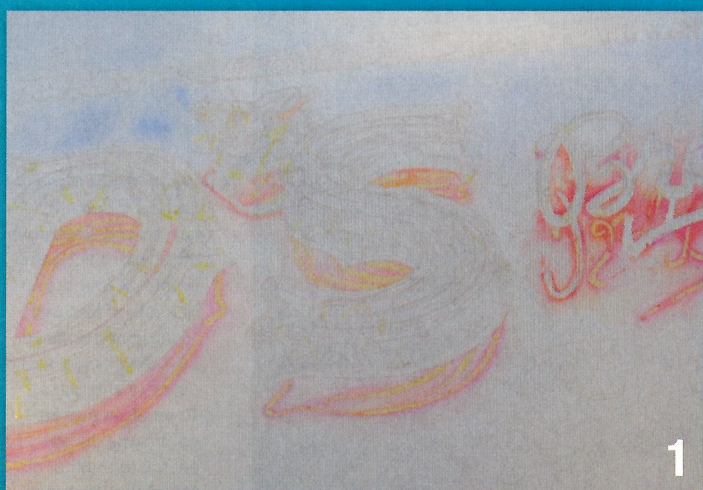
Originally an artist who worked entirely in acrylics, Ryan incorporated transparent watercolor into



Within *Clear Neon, Lisbon* (opposite; acrylic and watercolor on board, 13x22) the artist has found a rich mix of textures to intrigue the viewer, including brass, wood, ceramic and glass. Ryan often makes comments on his sketch (opposite) at the end of each day while painting, to remind himself what he'd like to change or add.

The artist enjoys the visual confusion that windows can create, as in *Night and the City, New York, USA* (left; watercolor on board, 14x10).

Demonstration: *Philadelphia Neon*, New York, USA



STEP 1: I added masking fluid and tape and began to drop in washes.

STEP 2: I added more masking fluid and started to build up my background wash—a mix of up to seven or eight colors.

STEP 3: I continued to build up the background wash and add more red for the glow behind the neon on the right.



STEP 4: I removed most of my masking, softened edges on the white areas and blended reflections with the background.

STEP 5: I began to lay in color on the large neon letters and red reflections. Then I strengthened the dark tones on the large letters and added washes of red under the large neon letters.



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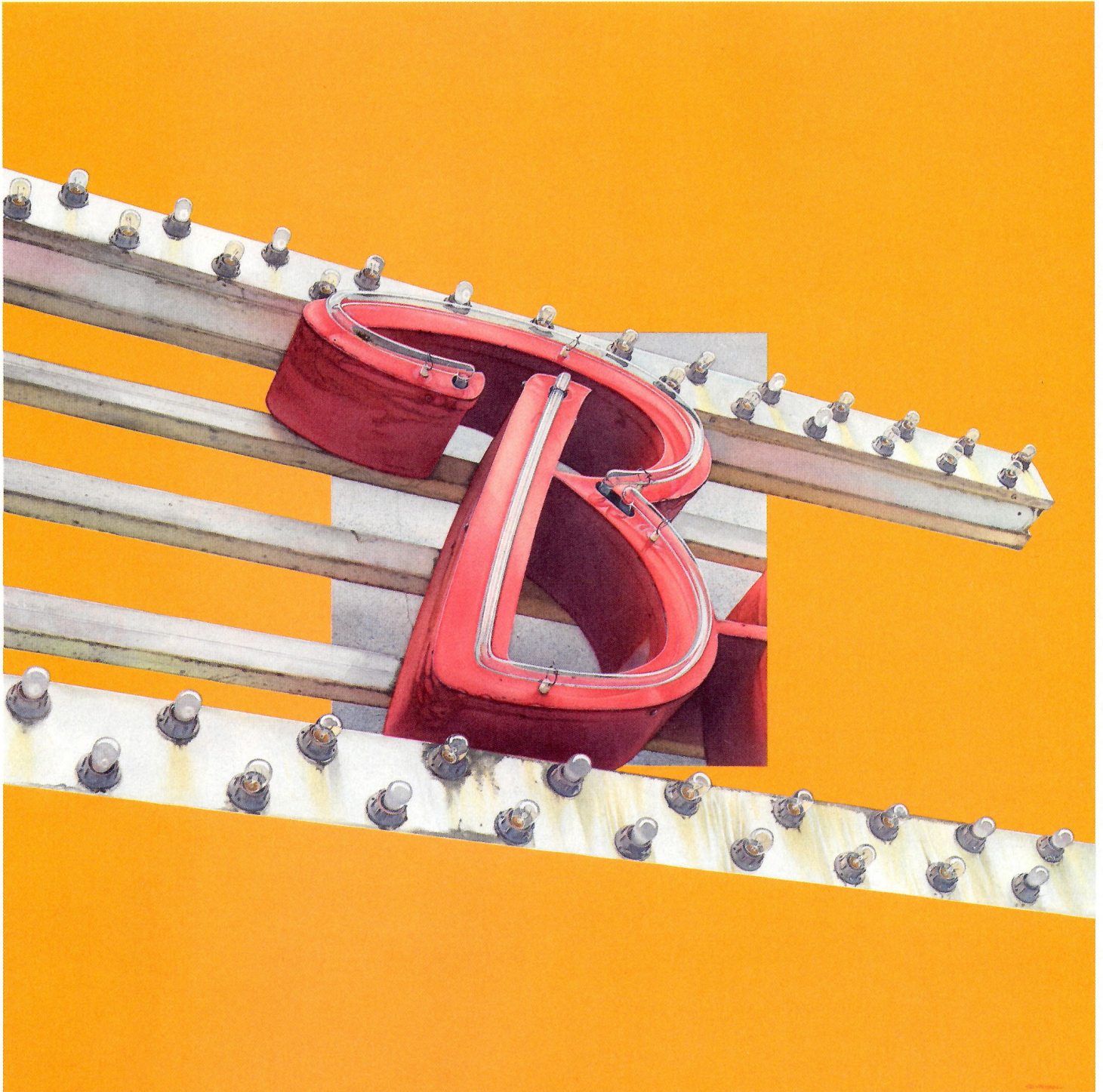


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STEP 6: I continued adding detail to the main letters, painting the heart shape and the background reflections. Then I began adding color to the neon part of the main letter 'S.'

STEP 7: I airbrushed parts of the letter 'S' to create definition and added washes of color to the letter 'D.' I then laid down washes in the top 'Philadelphia' part of the sign and in the letters 'CH.'

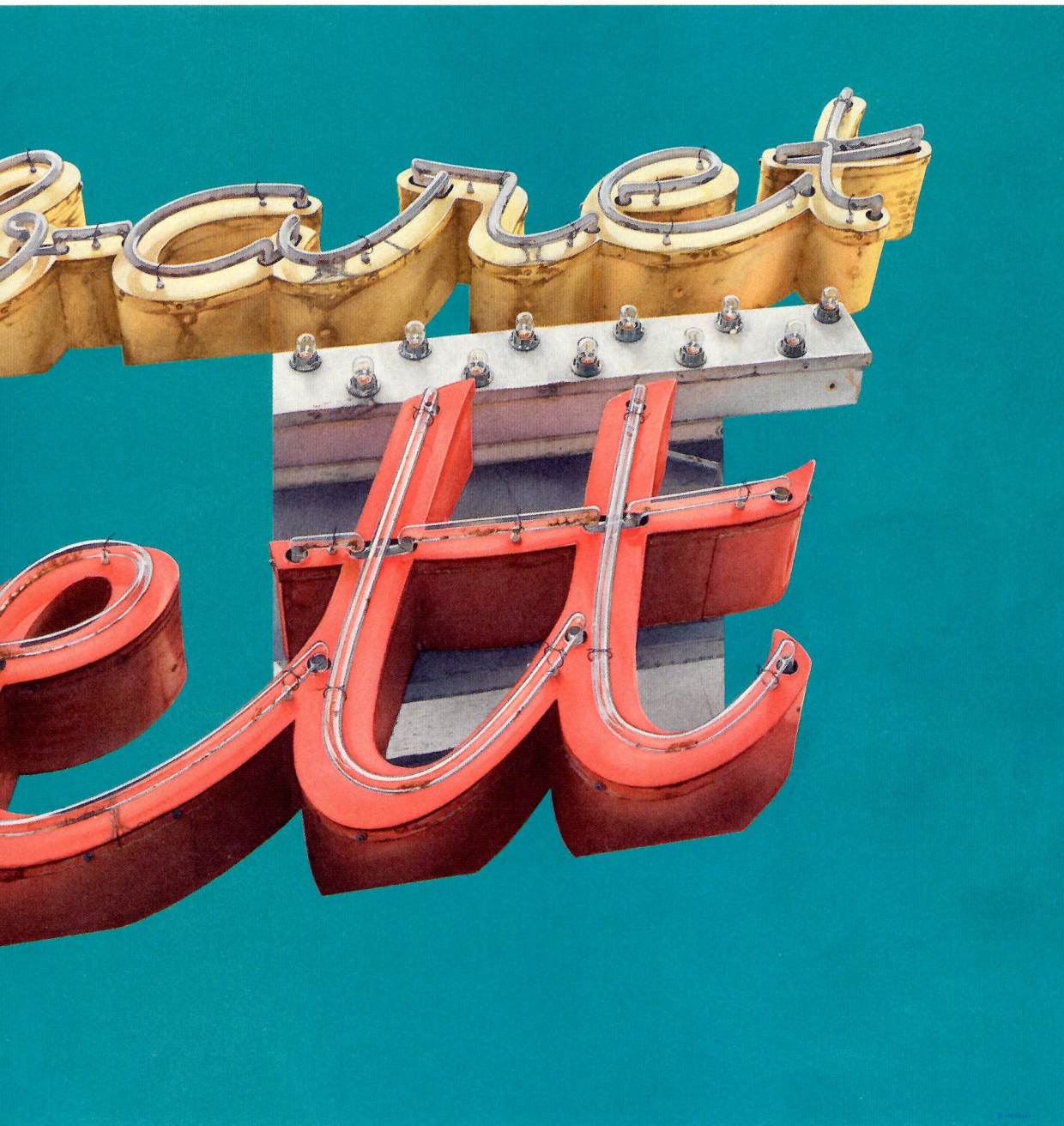
STEP 8: I continued building up washes on the 'Philadelphia' lettering, added some tones of blue and green to the background and continued working on all lettering and background reflections. Multiple layers were required to achieve the depth of color in *Philadelphia Neon, New York, USA* (opposite, top; acrylic and watercolor on board, 13x22).



his repertoire upon being elected to the Royal Watercolour Society in 2008. Today he creates paintings that are a mixture of both media. He may also use Caran D'Ache watercolor pencils and occasionally, perhaps in one out of six paintings, do some airbrushing between his first and final washes.

"I use acrylics and watercolor in exactly the same way: by building up a series of thin washes," he says. "To me, they're very similar. Watercolor is a little trickier in that it's more difficult to correct mistakes but, on the other hand, I get a more vibrant effect with watercolors. They give the acrylics that extra kick."

The artist begins with thin washes in the largest areas of the painting, often protecting some parts with masking tape shaped with a scalpel or masking fluid. He has a large collection of Winsor & Newton watercolors and Liquitex acrylics but always mixes his own colors, never using paint straight from the tube. Once the whole painting has received some color, it's a question of achieving the right balance by strengthening the picture, area by area. (See how he created *Philadelphia Neon, New York* layer by layer, on page 88). He may need up to 10 washes for the darkest shadows, including hints of unexpected reds and blues, which pick up reflected light.

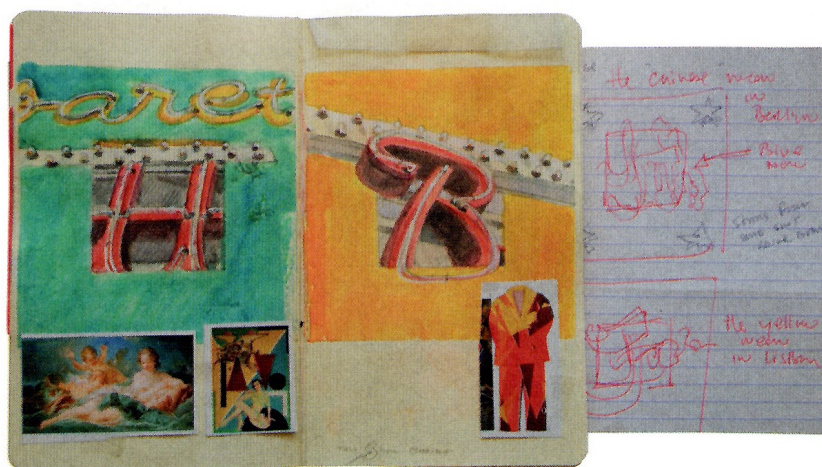


'ett' Cabaret, Berlin (left; watercolor and acrylic on board, 19x19) provides an intriguing look at negative shapes. The early watercolor sketch (below) reveals how the final painting changed. This image shows an extra page on the right with notes; the artist pastes ideas throughout his sketchbook to remind him of his original concept for a painting.

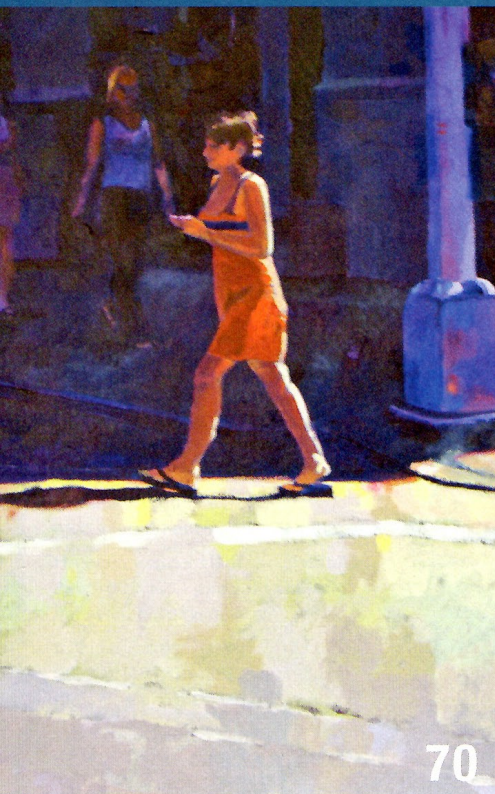
The flat orange background in **Berlin Neon** (opposite; watercolor and acrylic on board, 19½x19½), heralding a new direction for Ryan, signals that this isn't just any letter 'B,' but one that deserves our attention.

Being Stretched

Ryan was fortunate to have a chance meeting 35 years ago in London with one of his art heroes, Robert Cottingham (American, 1935-), another realist painter of street signs. Other influential artists include classical photographers Walker Evans (American, 1903-75) and William Eggleston (American, 1939-), Pop Art pioneer James Rosenquist (American, 1933-) and abstract colorists such as John Hoyland (British, 1934-2011) and Al Held (American, 1928-2005). In fact, it's the very strong use of color by these last two artists that has set Ryan off in a slightly new direction. His latest paintings, such as *Berlin Neon* (opposite) and *'ett' Cabaret Berlin* (above), combine a realistic treatment of the signs with large areas of flat color. "I'm always seeking a fresh challenge," he says. "If I'm not being stretched, I don't see the point. I want each picture to be better than my last." /aa



KEN GOFTON is an arts writer living in Kent, in southeast England.



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70 / The Same but Different

BY MARK MEHAFFEY

Not all watermedia are created equal, but this devoted watercolorist has found much in his process that bridges the transparent and opaque divide.

80 / Signs of the Times

BY KEN GOFTON

Denis Ryan races against the clock to capture vintage neon lights and gritty urban landscapes of yesteryear.

92 / Pour it On

BY NANCY REYNER

Apply paint without tools to give added dimensions to your art using these 9 techniques.

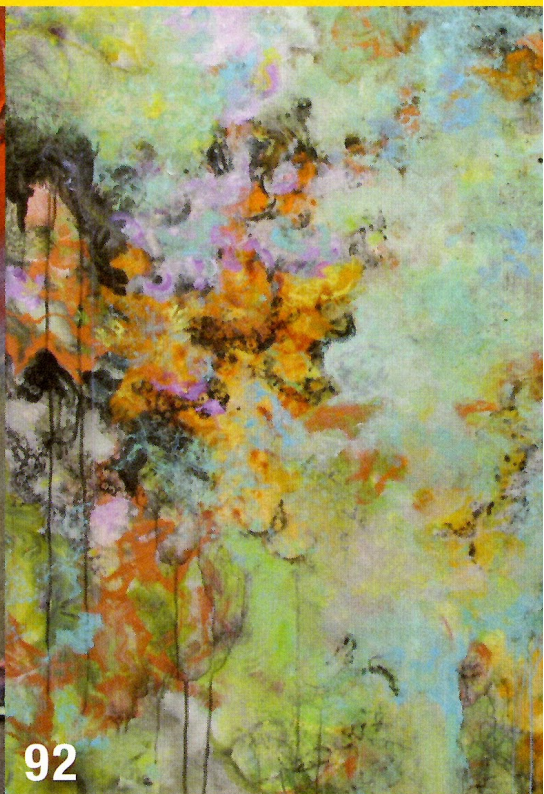
112 / Looking Ahead

A sneak peek of artist **Kim Ellery's** paintings which will be featured in an upcoming issue of *Acrylic Artist*.

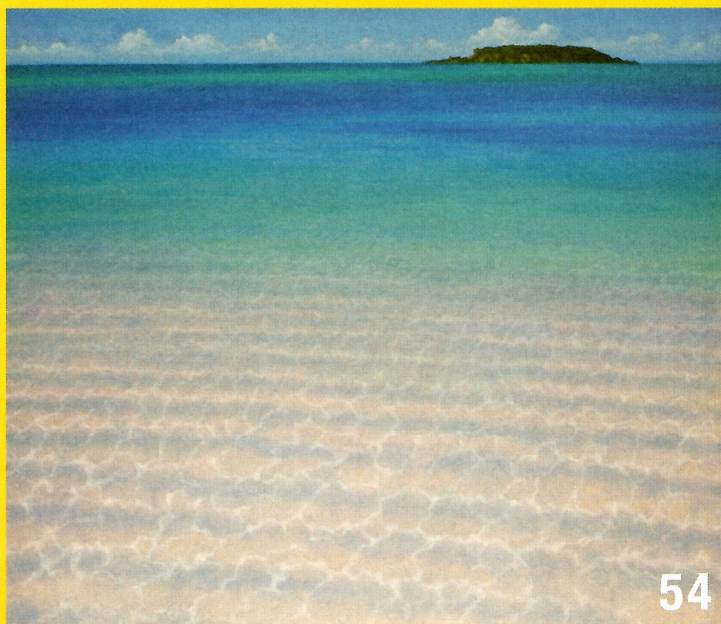


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On the Cover



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Islands #45 (acrylic on canvas, 36x42) by Rick Bennett