

TALKING TECHNIQUE *with* Denis Ryan

After years as a commercial illustrator, this Royal Watercolour Society associate member has made the switch to fine art with his colourful paintings. He tells Steve Pill the secrets of his success



If the mark of a great painter is their ability to make viewers forget they are looking at a painting, then Denis Ryan should be considered a modern master.

Using an unlikely mixture of watercolour and acrylic washes layered over precise draughtsmanship, he has slowly but surely developed a reputation as a sensitive, perceptive yet rather graphic fine artist.

Born in 1948, Denis attended various London art schools, before eventually graduating in 1972. The son of a theatre set painter, he started his own career working freelance on film animation projects for studios across London's Soho, contributing to popular feature films like *Watership Down* and videos for the likes of Paul McCartney and Elton John. During this time, he moved into commercial illustration too, producing striking images to strict briefs. However, like many commercial artists, he yearned to create something more lasting, and in the last few years has turned his attention to developing his own work.

Unsurprisingly given the high level of detail in his paintings, photography plays a major part in Denis's creative process. "I've been taking all my own pictures all my life, just for reference or for fun," he explains. "When I used to work at Elstree Studios, you used to have to take copies of pictures yourself because you'd never get what you needed for commercial work."

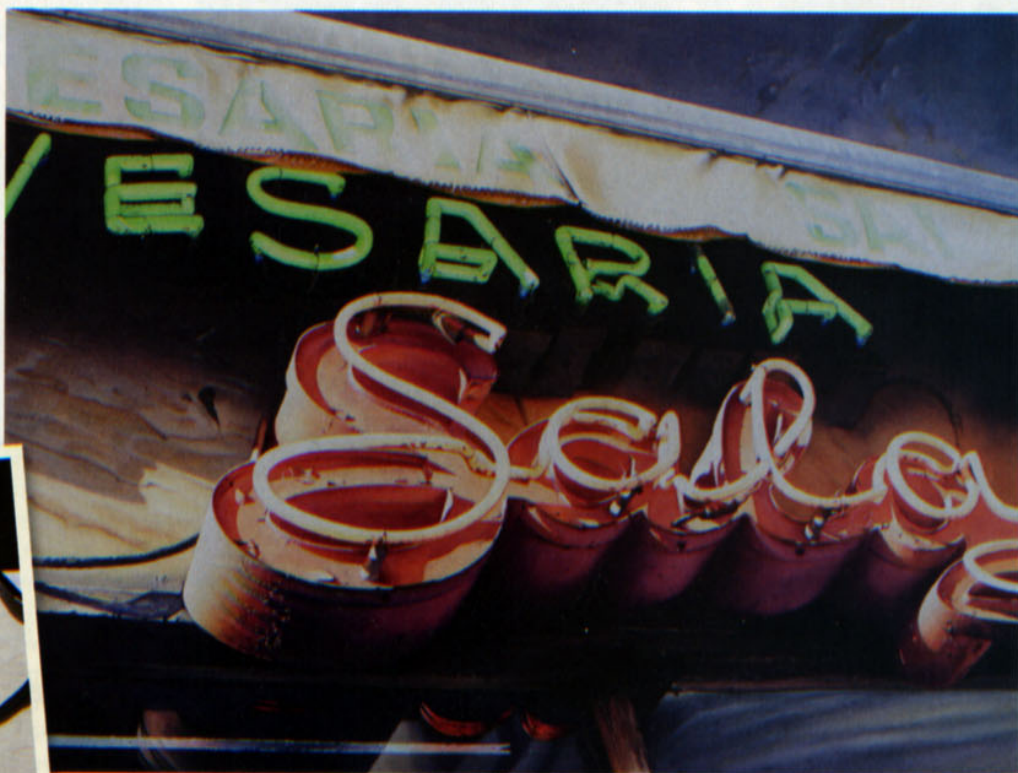
More than just a reference though, the work and influence of pioneering American photographers have shaped Denis's whole artistic outlook. "My whole kind of visual

kick stems from enjoying Photorealism and photographs by William Eggleston, Walker Adams and people like that."

Many of these photographers would shoot 'off the cuff', yet Denis is far more thorough when out looking for potential subject matter for his paintings. "What I usually do is take lots of photos of the same thing. I like it all to be in focus – some photorealists prefer to leave some areas of a painting in soft focus, like a camera would. I take a lot of pictures and then make a collage up of the ones I like. I might move things around at this stage, not a lot, but I might condense things or make things bigger to suit me."

Many of Denis's photographs are taken in the street, either in his native London or whilst on holiday with his partner. When he began painting for himself, he was drawn to wider urban landscapes but in recent years he has begun to focus on the little details, like reflections in shop windows or the complex abstract shapes that vintage neon signs make when viewed

BELOW *Esaria Neon, Lisbon, Portugal, acrylic, 34x46cm*
INSET Denis's original on-the-spot study for *Esaria Neon*
OPPOSITE PAGE *2Rs Neon, Lisbon, Portugal, acrylic, 35x21.5cm*



BELOW *Crossing the East River, New York*, acrylic and watercolour, 46x68cm

BOTTOM *All Day, Chinatown, London*, watercolour, 14x24cm

OPPOSITE PAGE Denis in his studio. All photos: Steve Pill

up close. He finds that nowadays he gets approached more in the street, especially when he is photographing other buildings. Luckily, he travels prepared. "I take my card with me and even one of these snappy folders with my work in," he says, pulling out a wallet with prints of his work in. "I tell them, 'this is what I do'."

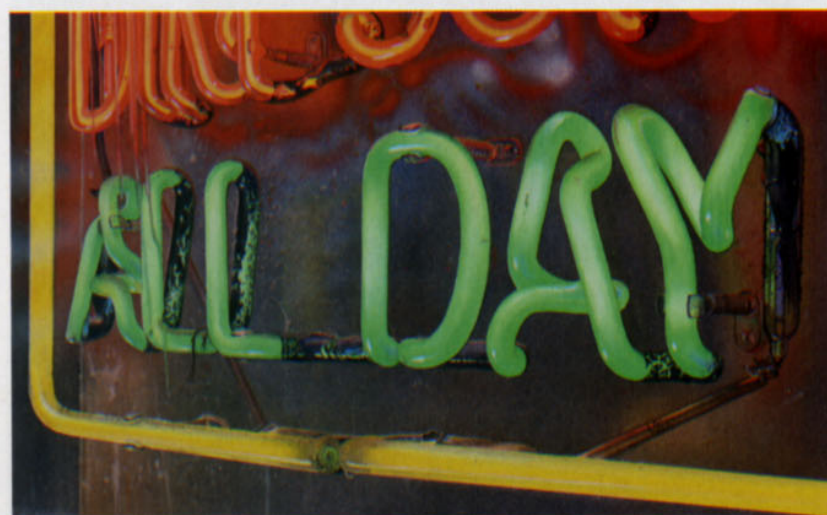
Denis has recently made the switch from 35mm film, swapping his old Olympus camera for a new Nikon digital SLR. The cost of processing and blowing up images became prohibitive but the new camera has freed him to take hundreds of photographs of a

subject. Nevertheless, he always makes a point of also making a quick, on-the-spot watercolour record of a subject in his notebooks for reference, such as the *Esaria Neon* sketch on the previous

page. And by taking the time to mix the colours while he is out, it ensures they stay fixed in his mind.

To start a painting, Denis first stretches a sheet of watercolour paper onto a board. He then traces the outline of one of his photo collages with Red Oxide tracing down paper and tidies it up with a sharp pencil, ruler and French curve. He begins painting with a few soft washes to suggest areas of colour.

Denis's paintings are filled with bold primaries: "Working in animation really taught me to not be afraid of colour"



Colour is clearly important for him. His paintings are filled with bold primaries, rather than the usual softer palette associated with a painter who uses watercolours so frequently. "Working in animation really taught me to not be afraid of colour," he says. "Some animation jobs I would be styling the colour on the film because I enjoyed doing it." Nowadays, Denis has a sheet of paper hanging next to his desk that contains a hand-painted swatch of every colour he uses. "I love colour charts because they jog your memory," he explains. "You can sometimes get stuck on certain colours, like I was always using a particular red, so I thought I better give it a miss for a bit."

In 2008, Denis was elected an associate member of the Royal Watercolour Society, yet he continues to use an unusual mix of Winsor & Newton's Artists' Water Colour and Liquitex Artist Acrylic, a combination he recommends. "Sometimes you can get a more vibrant wash over the top of dry acrylic with soft watercolour, which is not something a lot of people would think about doing. If you thin down watercolour and put it on acrylic, you get a really nice sheen to it." By avoiding the use of a thick body colour for thinner layers, Denis is able to create a rich and more realistic effect.

Despite being compared to the popular Photorealist painters like Audrey Flack and Richard Estes, his approach is very different. Whereas they often favour larger canvases, more than a metre in width, Denis often restricts himself to paper no bigger than A3. This allows him to work in a more meticulous way: "I've seen some up close and I was surprised how loose the brushwork was. They reproduce like photographs but they aren't close-up."

To get the cleaner lines and neat blocks of colour that characterise his paintings, Denis masks out larger areas with Scotch tape that he has cut to shape with a scalpel. "I do use masking fluid but I find it a bit clumsy," he says. "It's very difficult to get hard edges, however fine you try and use it."

Denis's father was a professional draughtsman and he grew up admiring his accurate pencil-based handiwork. The closest he gets to looser brushwork is through his use of an airbrush. For his advertising commissions in the 1970s, Denis learnt how to touch up photographs with an airbrush and he still uses one, when his faulty compressor behaves. For *Crossing The East River, USA*, he used the airbrush to suggest the blur of movement on the passing car and also for the detail of the red headlight. Unusually, the airbrushing is done at early on, before plenty of over painting. "I like to think of it sort of sandwiched in the painting."

Ultimately, Denis knows a painting has worked if he can get the smaller details to look right. This was particularly true of *All Day*, a neon sign found in London's Chinatown. Whereas the viewer is drawn to the bright lettering, the artist has fretted over the wiring underneath. "The key to the whole painting for me was the metal junction boxes," he says. "It was the most difficult area of the painting and required building up with lots of washes. I knew if I could get them to work, I could pull it off." ■



INFLUENCES

Photorealist paintings and 20th century US photography are Denis's two main visual influences. Photographer William Eggleston's 1989 book *The Democratic Forest* remains a favourite. "I was blown away by his pictures," he says. "Everything was off-kilter or with quirky framing."



WILLIAM EGGLESTON
THE DEMOCRATIC FOREST
REPRODUCED BY DENIS EGLESTON

TECHNIQUES

Denis works from photographs, tracing up his compositions and then adding thin layers of acrylic or watercolour paint. To cover white areas, he favours Scotch tape over masking fluid: "I'll rub the tape down on glass before I start using it. It can give you quite a hard edge but I can touch that up with acrylic at a later date."

MATERIALS

"I use Liquitex acrylics," says Denis. "I've always been on it, for about 40 years now. I think it's the greatest paint ever." He paints with a variety of small sable brushes and also favours Winsor & Newton Artists' Water Colour and Caran d'Ache water-soluble crayons: "They are good for getting background textures."

