

DENIS RYAN RWS /// INTERVIEW

Denis Ryan was elected as an Associate Member of the Royal Watercolour Society in 2008 and became a full Member in 2011. His work explores the urban environment, particularly cities such as New York, Berlin and London. His photorealist paintings require a high level of expertise and focus. Here he discusses his influences and working practice.

What was your early art education like?

My father was a commercial artist and then mostly a scenic artist in the theatre. He always encouraged us to paint and draw and as a teenager he arranged for me to go up to the scenic studio in Soho and work there in the summer holidays. I would be cleaning brushes, mixing paint, just generally helping out and eventually I did get to do some painting, i.e. rocks and tree trunks - props! But it was great fun.

I consider myself very lucky to have been able to go to art school in the late sixties and early seventies, a time when there was an explosion of creativity in all the arts: painting, photography, music, fashion, architecture and design. I was immediately introduced to Warhol, Rosenquist, Hendrix, Coleman, Coltrane, Fellini, Altman, Buckminster Fuller and Neil Armstrong still found time walk on the moon! It was a really exciting time to be an art student.

My course was a five year MA in fine art studying painting, printmaking and photography. I think we had a great selection of terrific tutors: Peter Schmidt, a very clever and generous man who regularly took groups of us into London to see what the latest art galleries were showing, then entertain us at his London flat listening to his incredible record collection (Terry Riley and Ornette Coleman). Mark Boyle, a leading light in the avant garde, a performance artist involved in happenings, would take us up to the UFO club to see his pioneering light shows at the height of the psychedelic revolution. Alan Green, a highly regarded abstract painter and David Spiller, a pop artist.

The sheer generosity of these guys and the variety of ideas that came from them just knocked us out. I owe them a huge debt of gratitude, they really did open our eyes to all sorts of possibilities.

Your work is described as 'photorealist', tell me about this art movement and the way in which it has influenced you...

The term 'photorealist' or 'photorealism' is credited to Louis K Meisel, a New York gallery owner. He said in 1970 a 'photorealist' was an artist who used a camera instead of a sketch book, and transferred images to the painting surface by means of a grid or a projector and had the technical skills to make the painting look photographic.

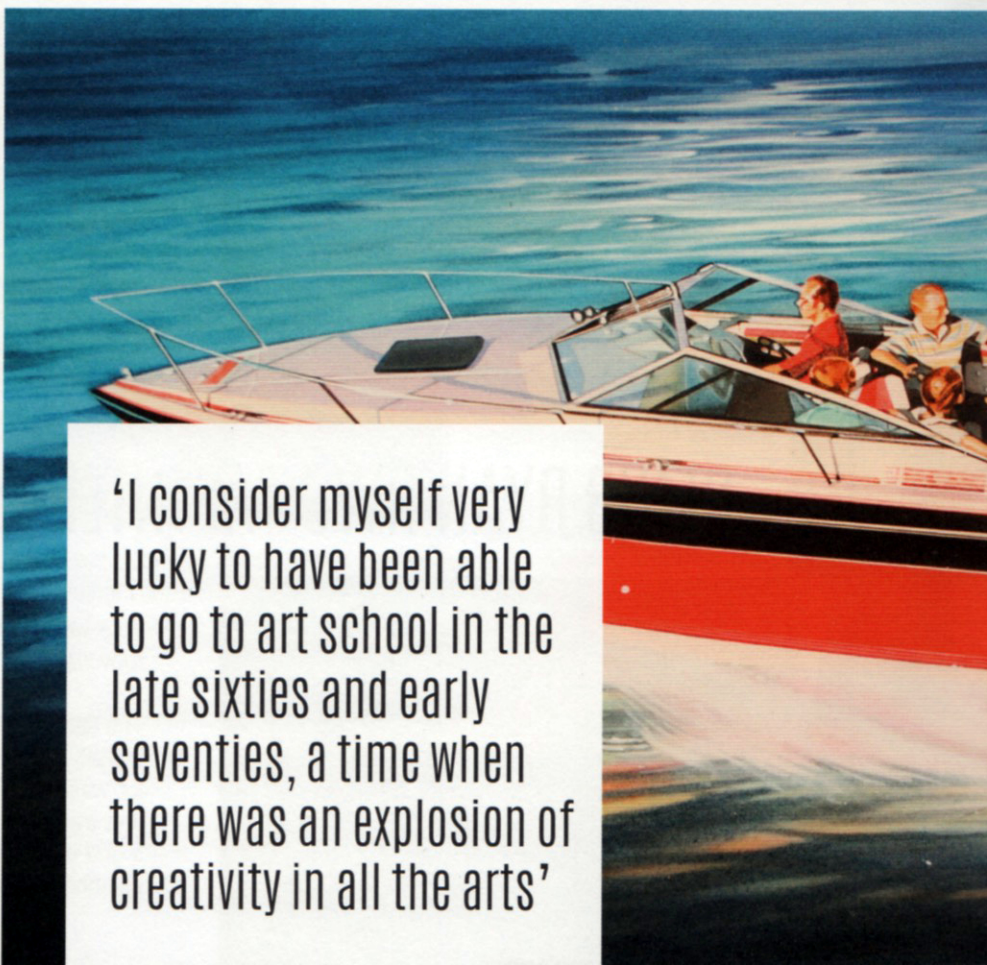
In fact anyone using recognisable imagery at this time, pop or not, was considered New Realists simply because it was the post-abstract period.

When I first saw a show of photorealist work, 1974, I couldn't believe my eyes - it was like a light had been switched on. It was a Ben Schonzeit show in the Fulham Road. Schonzeit was one of the originals of the American movement, producing paintings from his own photographs. His imagery was not a million miles away from the kind of photographs I liked to take. I carried my camera everywhere, I just loved taking photographs and still do. I now saw an opportunity to use my own photographs to create my own paintings but obviously stamp my own personality on them.

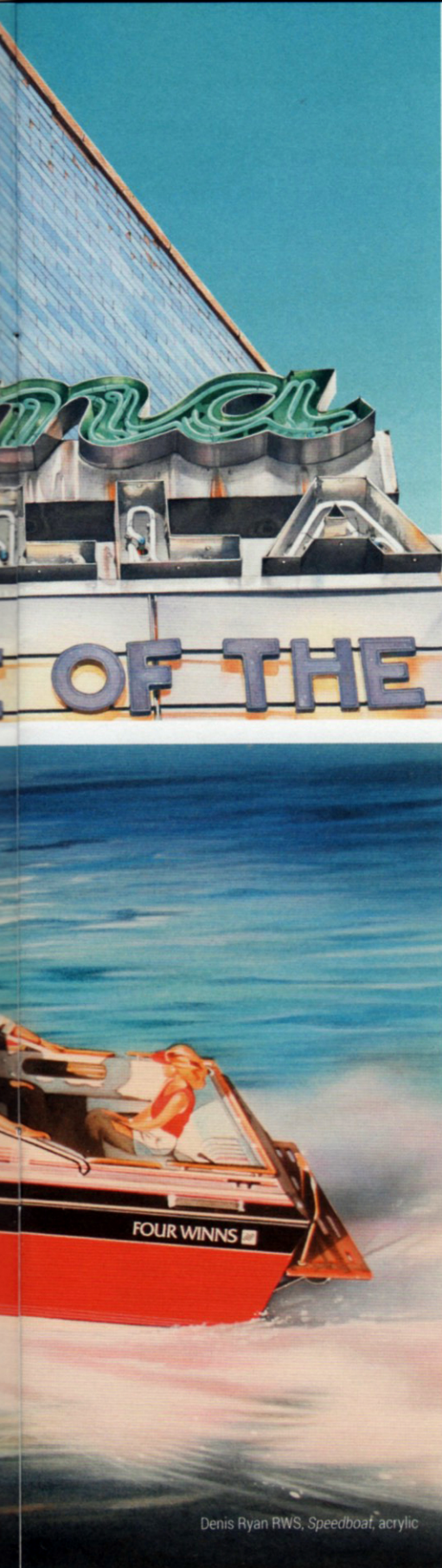
I now work in a very similar way to the original photorealists. I will take several source shots of the subject I want to paint, the camera providing me with all the accurate information I require - only a photograph can do that. I then collage the photos together and decide what to take out or add, stretch or squeeze, in order to get the composition exactly as I want it. I think of the camera as an extension of my eyes, as a tool it enables me to paint things I couldn't paint otherwise. I couldn't really set my easel up and paint under a sign in the city for two months, it's not practical. I will trace my final collage of photographs using a lightbox for accuracy, then trace it down on to paper mounted on board. Then I draw the whole image again and make any last minute adjustments. I'll shade some areas if they are very complicated (it helps me when I paint). I guess it's a long, painstaking process but it gives me a chance to know where every nut and bolt is. When I've finished tracing and drawing, which I find very therapeutic, I'm satisfied that I'm familiar with every inch of the painting.

Cities, cosmopolitan life and themes of commercialism often feature in your work. Why have you been so drawn to these themes?

Denis Ryan RWS, Greenwich Village Cinema, NY, acrylic



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Denis Ryan RWS, *Speedboat*, acrylic

I was born in London and lived most of my adult life in it. I have a strong emotional attachment to the city and all it entails. As I mentioned, I love taking photographs and love walking around the city, any city, looking for a good picture or reference shot. When I started painting for myself I referred back to all my old photographs and decided to work on a series of urban landscapes. As the series developed, I was painting a picture called '2 Rs Neon, Lisbon', an old neon sign and I realised how much I was enjoying the experience, as it provided me with all the surfaces I love to paint - steel, metal and glass with all its reflections, all of which suited my style of painting. So I then started to look for and focus in on old signs, which I find more interesting as they have more attention to details and the use of materials is more exciting. In fact I realised what works of art they were in their own right. Unfortunately, since I've begun the current series of neon signs, I've seen how quickly they are disappearing which I think is criminal. New York for example is losing three a day!

Wandering around all cities photographing buildings and shop fronts isn't as easy as it was. You do encounter problems; I've had angry New Yorkers asking for my camera or the film if they think they're in the shot, security guards rush out of shops and demand ID, shop assistants tell you that you can't photograph their windows etc. It's getting worse. I now take some examples of my work with me to show suspicious people what I do and why I need to take a photograph.

Has your background in film animation and illustration impacted your painting today?

Yes, definitely. All those years working in that field have given me the skills and techniques I now require for my paintings. For example the colours required for working in animation must have really influenced me. I got so used to using it that it has become second nature to me now, I love working with colour. I was painting almost every day in those years.

You had to be a quick learner, work fast and produce excellent work. The standard of work here in the UK was phenomenal. These years were a massive learning curve and the help and advice I got from experienced artists was invaluable. The way I was working, particularly in illustration, using the camera for reference shots, using models and locations, turned out to be an excellent grounding for the way I'm working now, it's very similar.

What is it about water-based media that suits your practice?

At college we used mainly household paints - emulsion and gloss (they were big paintings!). Watercolour was a scary medium that we thought was difficult to use so we didn't! So it was a bit of a shock to discover when I started work in animation that all the paints were water-based. Inks, gouache, watercolour and acrylic. It was back to school for me, I had to get my head down and practice. I gradually got the hang of it even though we had to change mediums with each film or commercial depending on the director's choice. Over the years I developed the skills required but my preferred medium was acrylic. I had started doing some paintings in acrylic at home in the evening and was now beginning to use an airbrush that I had taught myself to use working on some films. This also meant that I could pick up extra work retouching. I still use an airbrush today as an extra tool.

In illustration all my work was in acrylic on paper mounted on board exactly as my paintings are now. I use the acrylic watered down a lot, it's very liquid, building up the paintings with dozens of washes. As the painting develops I switch to smaller brushes and begin to work on the details, the paint still very thin. This is my way of painting, it's developed organically over the years and is second nature to me now. I can't imagine painting in any other way.

Interview by Hatty Davidson