



Signs OF THE Times

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

By Ken Gofton

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.

B the Hero The flat orange background in *Berlin Neon* (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.

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 (below) 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."

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

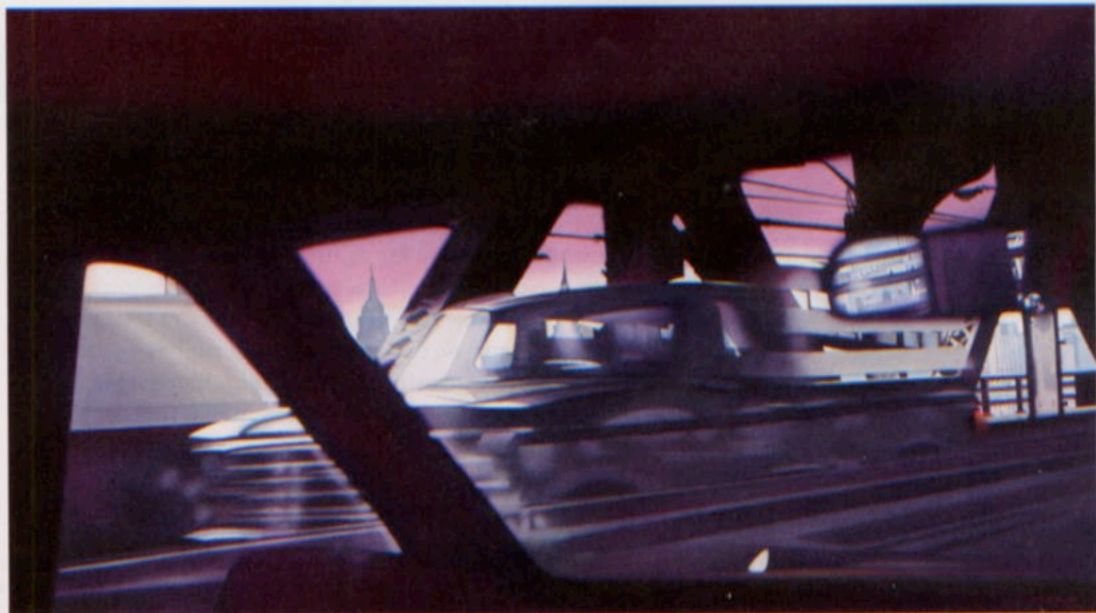
After earning his M.F.A., Ryan spent his early professional life in animation and illustration. He worked on a number of major films, including *Watership Down* (1978), *The Wall* (1982) and videos for Paul McCartney and Elton John. Eventually, however, the industry's move toward computerized animation 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

Starting Point

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

Captured Motion

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





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 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 references, which include sketches with

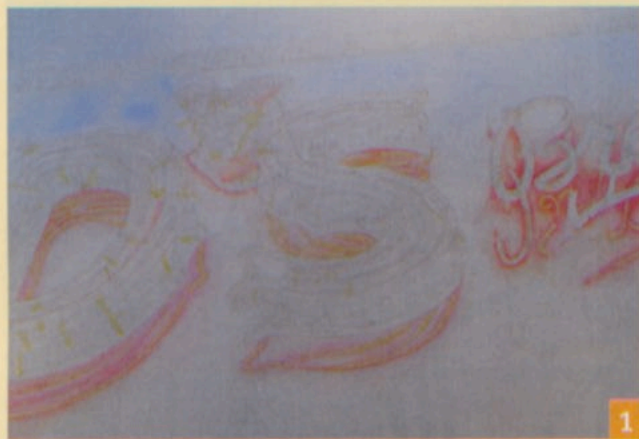


notes and photographs exploring the lighting conditions at different times of day. Some photographs will have been deliberately underexposed to reveal deep shadow details, giving him the choice of whether or not to include them.

"I'm a realist painter but not a pure photo-realist," 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."

Tapestry of Textures Within *Clear Neon, Lisbon* (top; 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 at the end of each day while painting, to remind himself what he'd like to change or add.

step by step: painting neon



Once I drew my image as accurately as possible, I put down liquid rubber masking fluid and tape and began to drop in washes.



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



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



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



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.



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.'



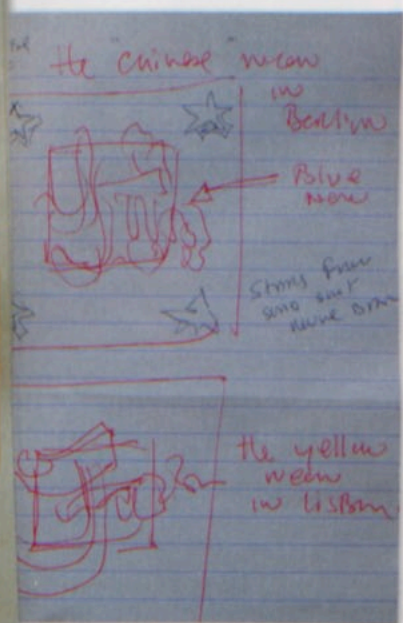
I airbrushed parts of the letter 'S' to create definition and added washes of color to the letter 'D.' I then laid down washes in the top 'Philadelphia' part of the sign and in the letters 'CH.'



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.



City Lights Multiple layers were required to achieve the depth of color in *Philadelphia Neon, New York* (acrylic and watercolor on board, 13x22).





Delight in Curves

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

Clear Blue Yonder

'ett' *Cabaret, Berlin* (opposite; watercolor and acrylic on board, 19x19) provides an intriguing look at negative shapes. The early watercolor sketch (opposite, bottom) 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.

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 50). He may need up to 10 washes for the darkest shadows, including hints of unexpected reds and blues, which pick up reflected light.

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 the last two artists that has set Ryan off in a slightly new direction. His latest paintings, such as *Berlin Neon* and 'ett' *Cabaret Berlin* (on page 44 and opposite), 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." ▮

KEN GOFTON is a freelance arts writer based in Kent, England.



View more of Denis Ryan's sketchbook images at www.artistsnetwork.com/medium/watercolor/ryan-watercolor-sketches.