

Interview with an Artist

Nicholas Simmons

Nicholas Simmons paintings are fresh, high-energy, unorthodox, and oh so beautiful. His diverse subjects are wonderfully matched with his approach to the media: poured watercolor, fluid acrylic used as transparent watercolor, unusual textures such as his “batik” technique, large scale painting, and creative photography for unconventional reference shots.

The subject matter is a dazzling mix of figures juxtaposed with printed lettering, graffiti, Japanese block prints, neon lights, reflections, and nature. The paint itself floods, drips, spatters, and gives his work a sense that it was done in a matter of minutes. These watercolor paintings are exciting and mysterious.

I am thrilled to bring this interview to the readers of *Hot Press*. I hope you find it as inspiring as I do.

Charlene Collins Freeman

To introduce you to our readers, please tell me a little bit about your background and how you got started.

I’m originally from Cedar Rapids, Iowa, where I started art classes when I was four. Art was always my best subject in school. I started painting watercolor years later in Sarasota, Florida.

I didn’t go to art school, and have no formal training apart from workshops with lots of watercolorists.

I don’t know how to talk about “accomplishments” ...maybe it’s a good sign I can’t remember a lot of what is going on at any given time, or what is to be published, exhibited, etc. Seems I’m always behind with commitments, and it’s a blur. Among other things, I am excited about being a judge for the exhibition in France that is sponsored by Art of Watercolour (L’Art de l’Aquarelle), with the biggest cash prize in watercolor.



Summer Wind
71 x 86 cm

Why did you start painting?

There was no conscious decision. A roommate of mine started messing around with a beginner watercolor set, and I got into it, too. Then I saw a demonstration by the great watercolorist Valfred Thëlin and realized there was much more to watercolor than I ever imagined. I got hooked.

I was also playing guitar seriously, and the two disciplines have coexisted peacefully ever since. I’m constantly struck by their similarities more than their differences.

I’m in love with your artwork, it’s so spontaneous and surprising. Tell me about your process. How much time do you spend sketching? Do you work from photographs? How is it that you beautifully mix realism with abstraction? Is it as spontaneous as it looks on paper?

It’s easy to be spontaneous in watercolor on a small scale, much more difficult on a large scale.

If people think my work has a sudden and surprising look, that’s a compliment to me. Achieving that can sometimes require a degree of planning that might seem contrary to the concept of spontaneity.

Transparent watercolor in particular presents certain problems that can be a real challenge to deal with, but at the same time, watercolor does so much work for you.

I think drawing is an important background, and its principles and skills enter into every painting, but the paintings don’t evolve from sketching. Life drawing is pretty much irrelevant to my work. I don’t do value sketches. Some artists take offense at this attitude, and I have to remind them I’m only referring to me and my work. What works for others is fine. It’s possible the way I work only looks good for the subjects I’m doing, or the way I’m doing them.

Imagination and the camera are my primary sources of inspiration.

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Tsarina
97 x 97 cm

Reference photography and tools such as Photoshop are often criticized for not being true, but I find this is what attracts me. Many are compelled to paint from a beautiful, perfect photo. I don't like to do this, and actually consider it a form of desecration. I see a big difference between photographs as an art form, and those that offer a bit of information that sparks the imagination. A perfect photo doesn't leave you anywhere to go, nothing to improve upon, nowhere to go but down. I'm inspired by the imperfect shots, the weird ones, the mistakes the camera makes, the images I think I can do something interesting with, take to another level. I like blurred motion, something the human eye doesn't see.

Most of all, I like to see something dangerous, daring, accidental, raw, abstract and maybe real, too. Not too careful.

Tell us a little bit about your works in progress, your working style, subject-matter preferences, and how these link up or are developed from what you have done in the past.

Sometimes I get incredibly inspired and crank something out spur of the moment. More often I go through a process of painting various ideas in my head, discarding the ones I lose interest in. That actually saves a lot of work!

There is a down side to this process; thinking too long about any particular idea can cement a vision of it in the brain that is difficult to break away from, if needed.

I feel lost as I begin almost every painting. By this time I should probably have a solid grip on my own methods, but it hasn't happened.

I believe painting is 99% mental, and watercolor is 99.5% mental. Past successes don't help me out much because I keep thinking there is a new, smarter, better way.

The basis of my working style might be to listen to the painting, and let it tell me what to do.

I don't have any special subject matter preferences. I really value diversity, so I do all kinds of paintings, but I'm often told there is something about them that look like mine. Can't escape that. Style is what happens while you're trying to paint something else!

Which artists or art movements inspire/influence you?

Several of my favorites continue to inspire me. I went up to New York last weekend to see the Sargent show of watercolors, and practically everything he did appeals to me. Same with Whistler, Sorolla, Klimt, and many others throughout the 20th century. These days I'm amazed by the work of Alex Kanevsky, Lita Cabellut, and Jose Parla, to name a few.

Of course I admire many watercolorists - too many to name, and I'd leave someone out. My colleagues are the among the very best, and they constantly inspire and challenge me.

How has your music coexisted so easily with your watercolors? Do you find yourself torn over which passion to pursue?

I was undecided for a while, but music seemed to be the more exciting avenue. I didn't paint for a long time, except occasionally, and then finally burned out on the music business.

I also had a hand injury that stopped me from playing for a few years. I went back to watercolors in about 2004 not knowing what to expect, and it quickly became full-time. I'm playing guitar again, and anxious to do more with it.

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There are lots of similarities between the two, and I find that a free approach to watercolor is very much like jazz, very improvisational. I suppose I believe music is the more profound medium, and I wish it were possible to get the emotional impact of great music into a painting. Maybe it's not possible, but then visual art has its own magic. The confrontational immediacy of it is unmatched. You can be hit with it in a fraction of a second, where as music or literature take a longer time to experience.

What is your day to day approach to art and music? How do you structure your time?

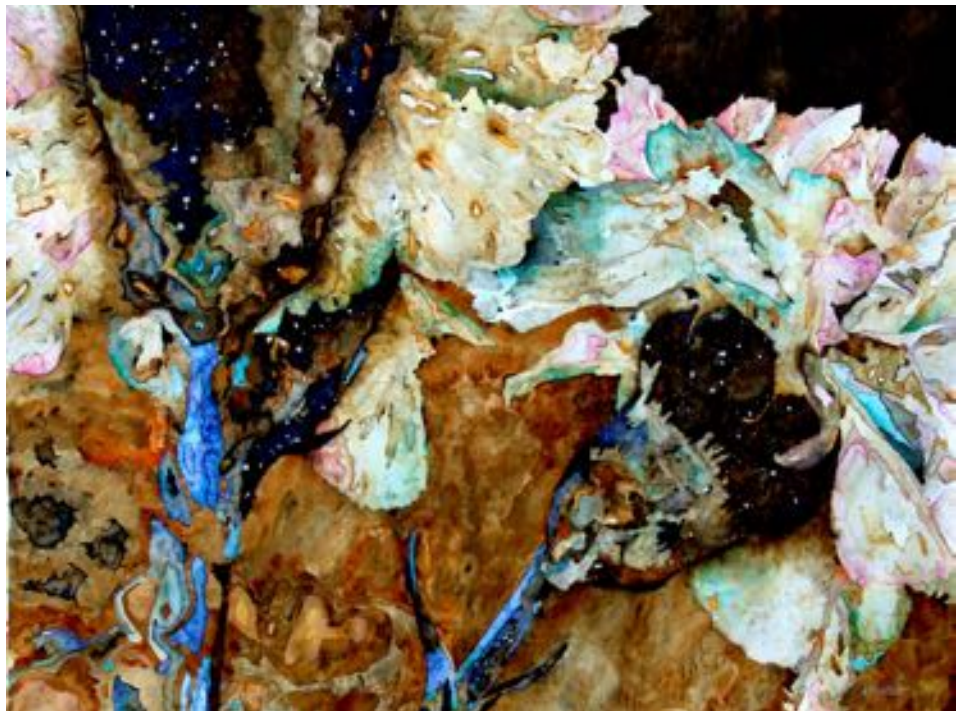
This has been a problem for a while, and the demands of time away from the studio have increased. I'm starting a new venture with an agent who is helping me to refocus my priorities; fewer workshops, events, and traveling, and more painting for a different audience.

What materials do you use?

For a long time I've been using Da Vinci artist watercolors and fluid acrylics. I switched to them after paying ridiculous prices for paint that wasn't as good. DV is fantastic, and run by the coolest guy in US manufacturing. He and I really hit it off, and he has even made colors to my specs. I've been using Escoda brushes since trying them a couple years ago while in Europe. I was very impressed and they also offered me sponsorship and a signature line of synthetic brushes. Handmade brushes of that quality really make a difference, and I'm very proud to be associated with the company. For paper I like Fabriano Artistico 140 lb hot press in the roll. All framing is done to museum standards.

How long does it take to complete a work of art? Do you sometimes struggle to know when a painting is finished?

That's always a tough question.



Darker Than Amber
86 x 112 cm

As we all know, it's not so much the amount of time with the brush, but figuring out what to do. I think I have a good sense of when a painting is finished, but I could almost always be satisfied with erring on the side of less-finished. I like things that have an unfinished quality. While I love *Madame X* (seen again a few days ago at the Metropolitan), the copy that Sargent never finished intrigues me even more.

When I'm at a loss in a painting, I put it away and don't look at it for a while. The longer, the better. It amazes me how coming back to problems with fresh eyes often makes the solutions obvious. Or stranger still, sometimes I can't see or remember any problems. **A detached, more objective perspective is useful.**

What makes a painting successful?

There would be many of the classic principles of drawing, composition, value, color, etc., not to mention subject matter, style, handling, originality, and intent to consider.



Self portrait: Breathe
107 x 157 cm



Summer Symphony
123 x 126 cm

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¡Barcelona!
114 x 114 cm



After All The Violence And Double-Talk
127 x 127 cm

However, I've seen paintings that fail on multiple levels and nonetheless blow me away. Then, what the artist and viewer consider successful may be very different, indeed.

How do you define success in a painting, or as an artist, or as human being?

That's one I'll have to get back to you on! Seriously, I think for most of us that definition changes with age, experience, disappointment, and *success* itself.

Other than other artists or art movements, where do you draw your inspiration/creativity from?

Music, film, photography, literature, science, anything really. My wife, Olga, has been a wonderful muse and model.

Are you involved with any art societies? Why or why not?

I've never been on a board or anything, but of course I've been a member of many. And of course I've been hired by many for workshops, judging, lectures, demos, etc. The watercolor societies have given artists an important venue for showing their work, and valuable recognition. I know from personal experience how helpful that can be in establishing a reputation. If there is an aspect that concerns me, it might be the tendency of a lot of artists to paint because of the shows and for the shows. This creates trends and a certain mentality, a certain aesthetic, that don't always serve the advancement of the medium. To guard against repetition and stagnation, new and younger people need to get involved in watercolor. As it is, the future of the medium

is in Asia, where huge numbers of young people are painting enthusiastically in watercolor.

Do you offer workshops?

Yes, I recently did my fiftieth workshop. I'm cutting back on them, but am still interested in doing some in places I like.

Is your work viewable in any current or upcoming shows?

My NAWA (North American Watercolor Artists) colleagues and I have paintings in the biennial in Mexico right now. I think I have a couple in traveling shows, and I'll have a couple paintings in the France event.

I'll be judging another European biennial later in the year that hasn't been announced yet, so paintings there. I'm also part of a new group of incredible international painters that will be exhibiting pretty soon, in addition to the work I'm sending out to a new agent in California.

*Interview with Nicholas Simmons
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To read more thoughts and news from Nicholas and see his 2014 workshops schedule, check out his blog at:

<http://www.nicholassimmons.blogspot.com>.