



BIOGRAPHY

After studying Fine Arts at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada, Jennifer Annesley (BFA, CSPWC) started showing her work in different galleries in Alberta and Vancouver. In 1994, she was given the opportunity to hold a personal show – the first of many successful exhibitions. The artist lives and works in Edmonton in a house built in 1912 that she renovated with her husband. Her paintings are shown exclusively at the Canada House Gallery in Banff.

jennifer@annesleystudio.com
www.annesleystudio.com

Jennifer Annesley

A Quest for Beauty

IN THE WATERCOLOURS OF THIS CANADIAN ARTIST, AN ABUNDANCE OF DETAIL IS NOT SYNONYMOUS WITH A LACK OF EMOTION. ON THE CONTRARY, HER ARCHITECTURAL VIEWS SHOW BOTH VIRTUOSITY AND EMOTION. IN THIS EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW, SHE EXPLAINS HOW SHE MANAGES TO REACH THIS DELICATE BALANCE.



Clerestory. 2003. 68.5 x 109 cm.

Jennifer Annesley, Your own taste for romanticism and no doubt history play a major part in the choice of your series of interiors and castles. We sense a strong sentimentality in your work. Where does this come from?

My work is founded on my passion for the art, architecture and aesthetic of the Old World, a love of the natural world, and a fascination with the power of contrast. These interests, which I have had since childhood, are now reflected through my love of travel, renovating old houses, outdoor adventure, fabric and clothing design, music, and most strongly in my painting career. My taste for ancient architecture was

sharpened by growing up in Western Canada where there are very few buildings over 100 years old. One exception is the chain of great railroad hotels built across Canada at the turn of the last century. They are built of stone to resemble European castles and have fascinated me ever since I first set eyes on them. Later, while studying fine art at the University of Alberta, I chose to focus my art history studies on the art and architecture of the Renaissance, Baroque and 19th century, further refining my interest and aesthetic. It is the seductive balance of elegance and power in architecture that most inspires me.

“I often think of an interior as a still life on a large scale – a box with objects arranged inside and purposefully lit to create dimension.”

In your opinion, what can only be found in architecture?

The incredible skill, time, creativity and ingenuity required to create great architecture are the same qualities that I also appreciate in great master paintings from around the world, and that I try to integrate into my own work. I believe architecture provides not only shelter for the body and mind, but also an arena where creativity and expression are physically manifested. Man-made spaces are an insight into the needs and culture of the people who built them, as well as the tastes of the period, building processes and available materials. Buildings that were built to last for centuries are of particular interest to me, especially in the present era of more temporary architecture. It is intriguing to imagine who occupied or passed through a place, what events unfolded there, whose hands skillfully carved each detail, and whose mind dreamed of such a space.

As an artist, what inspires you in such places?

The sheer skill and manpower required to create a complex vault of stone or a domed ceiling is awe-inspiring. I am most often drawn to interiors as they are where we live out our private lives – the mysterious inner space where life and intimacy unfold. Interiors are embellished with draperies, textiles, applied details and objects, which offer endless opportunities for a painter to explore colour, texture and form. Interiors are naturally dramatic spaces where light and shadow dominate. Dramatic light, which is central to my work, sweeps in from windows or doors, or emanates from candles and chandeliers. I often think of an interior as a still life on a large scale – a box with objects arranged inside and purposefully lit to create dimension.

Values play a major role in your interiors, where contre-jour creates intense lights and large areas of deep darks. What is your opinion on the role of values in a painting?

I believe that contrasts or opposites are the basis of perception. Put simply, without dark one cannot perceive light. Light is central to creating emotion and atmosphere in my paintings, and Carravaggio's 'Dark Manner' (Tenebrism) – the use of stark contrasts of light and dark to hide or reveal certain forms – is certainly an influence on my work. A shaft of light angling through a window creates dimension, atmosphere, texture and a sense of time, emphasizing reality with sharp relief. Value contrasts also create drama, pattern and rhythm.

What is the relationship between colour and value and how do you apply this to your work?

I tend to push the value differences of colour perhaps more strongly than hue, although I pay attention to temperature in order to create aerial perspective or depth. Colour can evoke emotion and drama - think of the emotional and visual impact

of a darkly cool stone room with a single note of rich crimson fabric or stained glass, and the glow of burnished gold in contrast to cool blue window light. John Singer Sargent's 'El Jaleo' and its deeply sensual palette of mostly black and skin colours, punctuated by a brilliant burst of red, is a painting I greatly admire.

Many of your paintings are very detailed. Do you try to create a faithful likeness in your paintings or do you inject other elements?

Creating a faithful likeness in my paintings is not paramount to me, but creating a heightened kind of reality is, in order to convey an ambience that inspires a feeling of being present in and a desire to move through a space. I continually add or subtract elements in order to build a satisfying composition, to create a focal point or tension, or add a narrative or subtext.

Please discuss your approach to so much detail and why and how they do not dominate the overall scene.

Detail works best when it is balanced by strong formal qualities, ie. simple or plain passages of colour, so that it doesn't overwhelm the scene. Again it is the power of contrast. Detail would be almost meaningless and certainly monotonous if there wasn't a calm place to rest the eye. I liken it to moving through a well-designed garden – one doesn't want to see all of the elements at once – there should be hidden places to discover and perhaps rest in, creating a sense of mystery and depth. The image should not fall apart under close inspection. I try to draw the viewer in with an immediate powerful emotional impact, and sustain and intrigue them with the use of rich detail. I am thrilled when viewers comment that they discover something new in one of my paintings each time they look. The emotion and control of my paintings is a direct reflection of my personality, my aesthetic and the deep passion I have for my subject matter. Emotion happens when the painting is an honest expression of an authentic experience and solid technique and control are the tools I need to convey this emotion, drama and romanticism in my work. It is when emotion and technique strike a certain balance or note, that I feel art is at its most profound.

Can you explain us how you reach this balance?

In any other art discipline such as dance or music, a lack of technical skill is obvious and results not only in a failure of expression, but in a very unsatisfying and possibly annoying performance. Conversely, technically perfect music is hard to listen to when it lacks emotion and similarly, a technically perfect painting may lack emotional impact. The paradox of emotion and control also relates to my theory that contrast is the basis of perception and can be a powerfully expressive tool. Exploring the power of thematic counterpoint in a painting



Gasparini
Room. 2001.
53.5 x 35.5 cm.



Spanish Staircase 2. 2003.
73.5 x 26.5 cm.

“Part of the joy of my work is to deconstruct a complicated composition or set of details.”

subject (such as strength and fragility, permanence and transience, feminine and masculine, order and chaos) and how those elements can be balanced and described through formal opposites (such as light and shadow, warm and cool colours) is central to my work. Elegant detail is a counterpoint to strong structural elements; intricate glass and light are offset by stone and deep shadows striking a compelling balance. I am very much a Romantic constantly pursuing beauty and at the same time understanding that it is control and attention to detail that allows me to enjoy and express that beauty.

You obviously concentrate on technique, be it in drawing complicated perspective or painting complex and intricate scenes. What is the reason behind this: a choice of subjects that appeal to you or a personal challenge?

Part of my joy and satisfaction in my work is to deconstruct or unravel a complicated composition or set of details. As I work on a painting, I feel as if I am gaining a greater understanding of the structure, intent and nature of my subject. Although this level of complexity is challenging, it is also meditative and it is where I am most comfortable as an artist. The physical painting of detail is very satisfying and mesmerizing to me. Complex historic architecture of the ‘old world’ offers the intricacy and detail that I am drawn to. I wish to create an illusion of perspective, strength and solidity with the delicate medium of watercolour on paper and without strong technique, especially draughtsmanship, I would be unable to achieve this illusion.

As a young painter, do you feel you need to prove your technical prowess? Is it important to you? Many artists throughout history such as Rembrandt were tempted to illustrate what they could do in order to gain credit in an otherwise white-haired community of peers. Your thoughts?

I think I will always feel the need to refine my technical skills in order to keep improving and growing as an artist, however, I don’t feel that proving technical capacity to one’s peers is important in this day and age. Technical skill doesn’t command the respect and importance it did in say Rembrandt’s time. In my opinion, technical skills have become less important in the past century as technology has minimized the need for painters to record history and facts, freeing artists to explore pure expression and abstraction. That said, I believe that as technology continues to infuse every aspect of our modern lives (including the creation of art), the work of artists who practice solid technique will become a poignant reminder of human capability and an important connection to art history.



A Passion for travelling across Europe

CHANCE IS A SIGNIFICANT PART OF MY TRAVELS AND PROCESS, WHETHER IT BE STUMBLING UPON A SPECTACULAR FAÇADE THAT THE LIGHT HITS JUST PERFECTLY FOR SECONDS, OR A SHADOW THAT SWEEPS ACROSS A CATHEDRAL FLOOR CREATING AN AMAZING COMPOSITION.

DISCOVERING THE PANTHEON

On a recent trip to Italy, we spent our first few hours in Rome on an evening stroll, delirious with jet lag and with the overwhelming grandeur of the city. Wandering aimlessly through the narrow streets, I was stopped in my tracks at the sight of an enormous ancient round building. It was somewhat familiar... I didn’t realize we had approached the Pantheon from behind. I knew its famous façade from art history books and had even written a paper about it in university, but had planned on seeing it for the first time from its proper vantage point in the Piazza della Rotonda. My impression of it was so different to what I had imagined and I noticed details and structure that I might not have noticed otherwise, hopefully leading to a richer and more interesting painting.

AN EPIC JOURNEY BRINGS INSPIRATION

Another serendipitous moment happened after what was supposed to be a two hour journey by hydrofoil from Istria to Venice,

spiraled into a complicated, epic fourteen hour journey by car, on foot and by bus and train – because we were unaware that most modes of transport in Croatia shut down on Sunday (Spontaneity and lack of planning sometimes has its drawbacks!) We were exhausted and grouchy, but when I stepped out into the warm Venetian afternoon and looked back at the train station, I was rewarded by the sight of the powerful and expressive sculptures adorning the façade bathed in warm afternoon light. The whole trying day ended up with a vision I will never forget. I dropped my bags and took dozens of photographs which later became the basis for my painting ‘Broken Angel.’

VISUAL ENCOUNTERS

These moments for the most part cannot be planned. The important thing, if you want to increase the chances of spontaneous visual encounters, is to be out there experiencing and exploring. Unplanned experiences are part of the joy of travel and the creative process, and can bring freshness and emotion to one’s work.



Above:
Broken Angel.
2006. 51 x 76 cm.

Venezia. 2006.
107 x 56 cm.



Blackrock House. 2009. 53.3 x 35.5 cm.

On another note you are a young female painter. As you know, many professional artists throughout history and even today are men. Do you think there is a difference between women and men's artistic careers?

Historically there has been a vast difference between the artistic careers of men and women, but that is diminishing as women's position in society improves. I think men and women are equally creative as artists and I see this reflected in the fairly equal number of women and men exhibiting in the galleries in Canada. Where the major difference lies is between the number of women who have a full-time art career compared to men and the price their work commands. As in any profession there is still a glass ceiling for women. In my own career I have experienced some sexism and ageism (as a relatively young artist) but it is just as likely that I experience more prejudice from the art establishment for other reasons. Firstly, I paint realism which in some circles is considered academic or passé. Secondly, watercolour, which as many watercolour artists have experienced, is sometimes perceived as a less serious or valuable medium than oil or acrylic (and yet is generally accepted as the most difficult medium to work with.)

How do you sell your paintings? Do you work with commercial galleries?

I market my work in an unconventional and independent manner. In 1994, I created an annual one-night private solo

My Creative Process in 6 steps

THE WAY I WORK IS BASED ON MY PERSONAL EXPLORATION OF HISTORIC ARCHITECTURE AND LANDSCAPE, AND CREATING A VISUAL EXPERIENCE THAT REFLECTS MY EMOTIONS IN RELATION TO THAT EXPERIENCE. I HOPE TO INVITE THE VIEWER INTO ANOTHER PLACE AND TIME, WHERE THEY CAN APPRECIATE AND CONTEMPLATE THESE FINITE RESOURCES AND THEIR INTRINSIC BEAUTY.

INSPIRATION

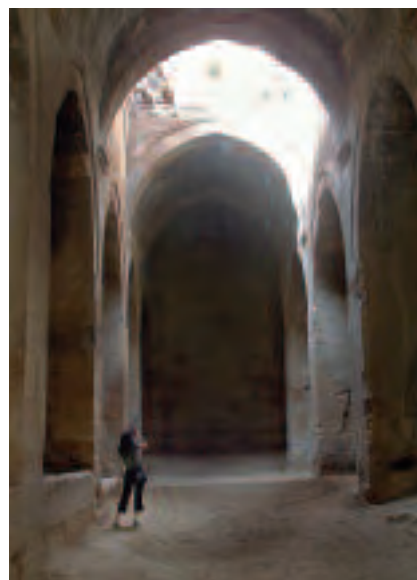
I begin by choosing a theme for a series of paintings based on a city or country, travelling to that location, then exploring and observing. I spend a lot of time wandering around old places, soaking up the atmosphere and usually waiting for transient moments of light to create the contrasts and patterns that I seek. Sometimes, the best images come from a scene or detail that comes as a surprise when exploring.

I believe that being able to recognize the beauty and value in spontaneity is something we all need to practice as artists. The moment something catches my eye, I usually know if I will eventually work with that image, so I try to gather as much information as possible with a camera and notebook.



ON THE GOOD USE OF PHOTOGRAPHY

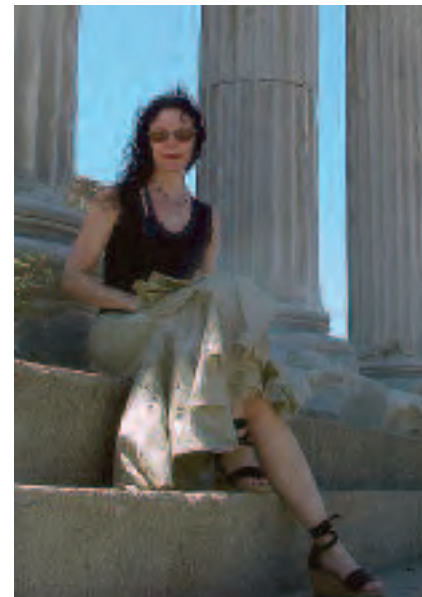
It is important not to let photography control the painting. One's experience of a place is much broader than a photograph and often the reality represented in a photograph is skewed due to lens distortion and the limitations of technology. Being able to recognize and override the limited reality presented by reference photographs is essential to creating an expressive painting. I only use my own photographic reference material and do not use projections, scans, or computer imaging. My reference photos are the results of my own experience and personal aesthetic and are the seed of an original image. I feel that the drawing process should come from the eye through the hand to the paper, to ensure that the artist's vision is directly translated.



Hagia Sophia. 2007. 106.5 x 56 cm.

ARTISTIC VISION

Back at my studio, I focus on exactly what intrigued me about a place and how to express that, which elements are critical or extraneous and how to recreate the emotion I felt there. At this stage my detailed notes are helpful. My technique is planned and disciplined, with the design and drawing stages forming the foundation.



THE DRAWING

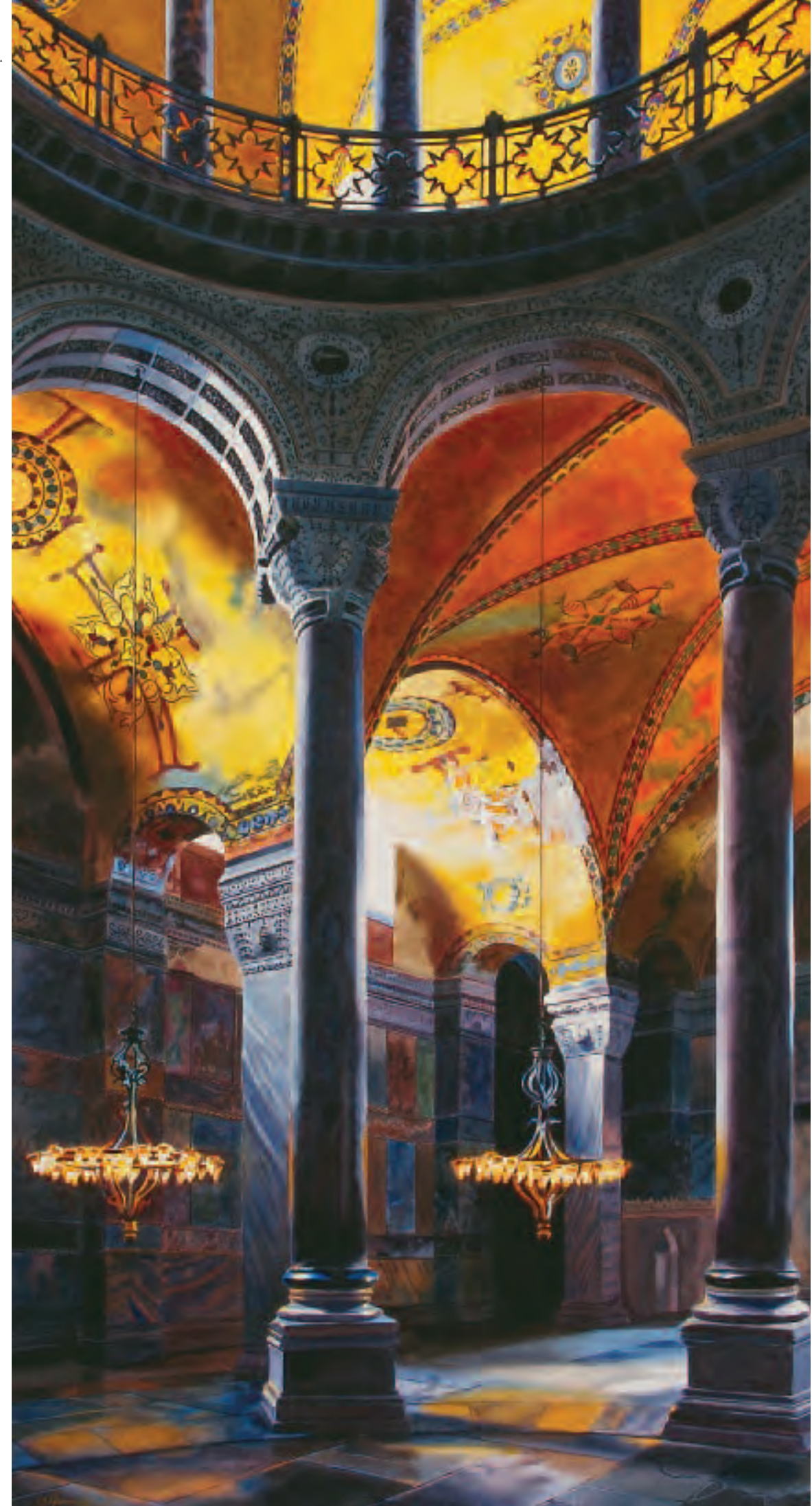
Once the key elements are distilled in my mind, I make a preliminary sketch and a detailed underdrawing. This is a distillation of the main elements in my reference photographs which emphasize the simplest forms and design of the painting. Essential compositional decisions are made at this point; movement, major forms and line. Details and perspective are developed as the drawing is refined. To create interest, I often use elements from other photographs that I've taken, or objects in my studio.

PREPARING THE PAPER

As I often use odd dimensions of paper, I soak the paper and tape it to a support board, or I use 300 lb paper which doesn't require stretching. I start with a preliminary sketch drawn directly onto the paper, using my compositional sketch and main working photograph as reference.

THE PAINTING PHASE

When the drawing is finished, I start applying the lightest colours while working around the highlights, which are the clean white of the paper. I employ a combination of repeated washes to achieve luminosity and depth of colour, alla prima application to create saturation and an illusion of strength and solidity, and single wet in wet washes. I finish with the darkest colours, being sure to work detail into the shadows. As the painting evolves it often goes in a different direction to what I originally intended, taking on a life of its own. A large painting can take me up to 300 hours to complete.





Ballad of Éire. 2009. 104 x 51 cm.

exhibition in Edmonton to showcase the majority of my year's work. It has become a much anticipated annual event, and continues to grow and receive local, national and international attention. It is this exhibition, in combination with being represented by two major galleries in Alberta, that allows me to make my living solely through painting.

As an artist do you find that you are able to successfully translate your ideas into a visual language that gets through to people?

I do hope my work speaks to people, as expressing and communicating ideas is the very essence of art. My patrons often tell me that my paintings move them deeply, and I have had the privilege of observing people crying while standing in front of my work. A more concrete measure is that I have been able to make a living solely by selling my paintings for the past twenty-two years. The response to and understanding of my work is very affirming and one of the many joys of my art career.

TEXT: LAURENT BENOIST. PHOTOS: © JENNIFER ANNESLEY

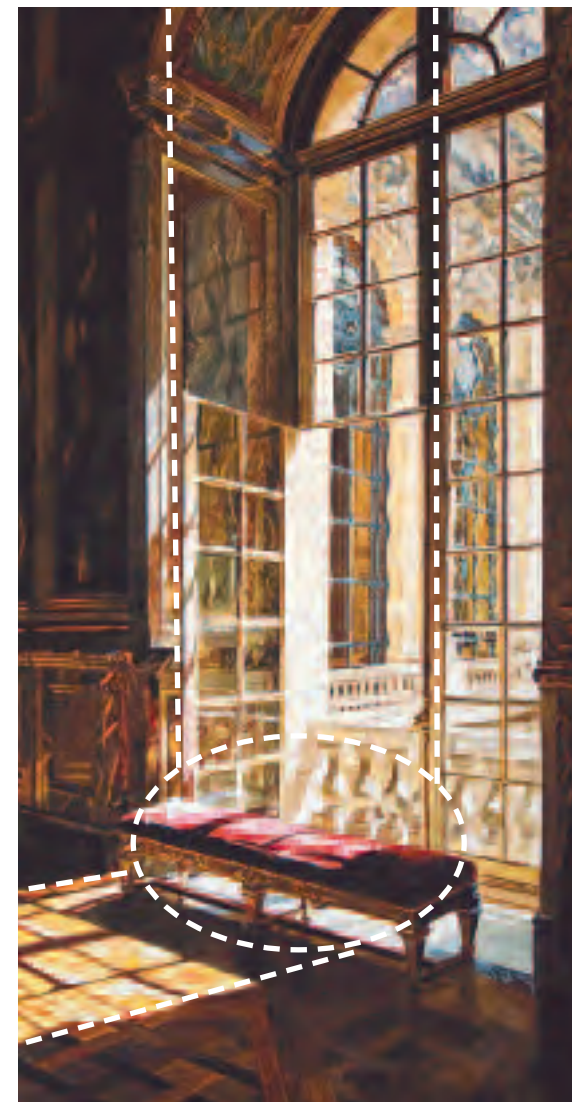
Analysis

'A GLASS WORLD: VERSAILLES'

2010. 73.5 x 43 cm.

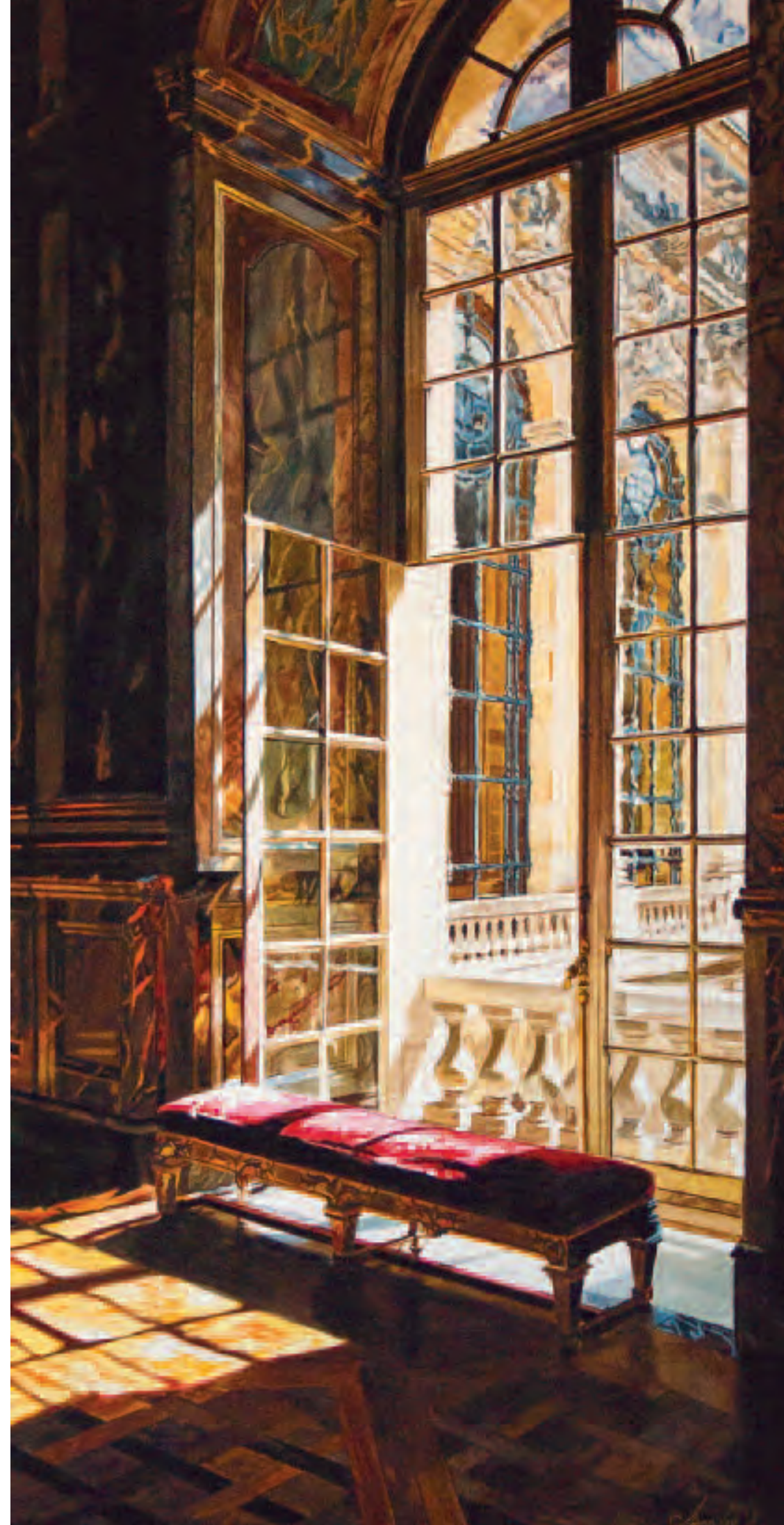
COMPOSITION

This composition is very much based on strong geometric lines tempered by curves and texture. The curved windows and balusters provide relief to the strong linear elements of the structure. The mullioned windows cast angled shadows across the floor, intersecting with the lattice design of the wood floor and leading the eye to the focal point of the red velvet bench.



SUBJECT AND SYMBOLISM

The very idea of Versailles seems to stir controversy as it is both a virtuosic feat of architecture, decoration and design and the ultimate symbol of decadence and greed. I wished to reflect some of the complexity and paradoxes of Versailles and achieve an almost dizzying effect of intersecting line, pattern, textures and perspective. The palace is undeniably beautiful and is awe-inspiring, but what it symbolizes - power, an imbalance of wealth, stunning opulence and decadence in the face of an under-privileged population was unsustainable and in the end, this power fell to revolution. When looking through the ancient distorted glass, it seems to dissolve the architecture beyond it and reflects this sense of fragility and decay of a glass world.



CONTRASTS AND VALUES

This is a painting of contrasts: the thematic counterpoint between permanence and fragility, strength and elegance is achieved by visual contrasts between surface textures (soft sensual velvet, worn polished wood, hard stone, glass and iron), interior and exterior space and light and dark. The use of a wide range of values in this painting is typical of my work. In trying to achieve a sense of being in a dark space looking out the window into sunlight, I used as much contrast as my materials would allow. These values also create the sense of rhythm and pattern that my eye is drawn to. The warm colours of the interior, seen in the floor, the marble and the velvet bench seem even richer because of the direct contrast to the cooler complementary colours of the exterior and the reflection of the sky in the glass.

POINTS OF FOCUS

The focal point of the composition is the red bench, a place for the eye to rest. It is created by the perspective of the floor and the many vertical lines which intersect at the bench. The sunlight illuminating its sensual red also draws the viewer in. The secondary focal point is the pair of slightly abstracted arched glass windows seen through antique glass. The spatial and colour relationships between these two focal points causes the eye to move from the middle ground to background, from interior and exterior and in a cycle from top to bottom.

MATERIAL

My paper: 140 or 300 lb Arches paper.

My colours: Burnt Sienna, Scarlet Red, Cadmium Yellow Medium, Ultramarine Blue and Ivory. Black Gouache for its depth and matt quality. I use Schminke Horadam watercolours for their intensity and permanence, and limit my colour palette to 6 or 7 maximum. I never use white.

My tools: I mainly use 3 different-sized brushes, a spray bottle with clean water for wet in wet washes and some clean paper towels to dab the brushes.