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Out of the Ordinary

Making unusual choices leads to excellence



MIKE BUCHER

WELCOME TO this special issue in which we celebrate the winners and finalists of our 10th annual Artistic Excellence competition. The process of selecting these winners seems to get more grueling every year, as the quality of the entries continues to impress us. Comparing artworks against one another is a profoundly difficult task,

but it's a joy to have so many beautiful and striking pieces to choose from.

Once we settled on this year's winners and I had a chance to reflect upon them as a group (see page 56), what stood out most was how many of them surprised me in one way or another. They are often unconventional, reflecting creative decisions made by the artists that are outside the norm and perhaps a little more risky than average.

A terrific example of this is *GECKO* by Rance Jones, our first-place winner. When I saw this watercolor for the first time, I was immediately struck by its vivid color palette. The intense green of the doorway, paired with the pinkish cast of the sky and the building's façade—this is not a combination one often sees, and it made a strong impression. As far as I'm concerned, it vies for prominence with the figure in the lower right, who has a commanding presence all his own and adds an additional layer of meaning and intrigue to the artwork.

Two other pieces surprised me with their unusual perspective and composition. *QUEEN IN TRAINING I*, a charcoal drawing by Tanja Gant that won third place, packs a punch in part because this fierce female face is positioned above the viewer, putting her in a position of strength and authority that's reinforced by her unwavering gaze. On the other hand, *THEY MADE MAPS OF THE SKY* by Kim VanDerHoek places the viewer above the landscape, putting us in the unique position of seeing clouds from their tops—and what beautiful clouds they are.

Perhaps the most unusual piece in the group is *KRILLING ME SOFTLY*, a masterful watercolor by Luis F. Pérez. This gorgeous painting of fresh shrimp in a silver colander stopped me in my tracks. The translucency,



Gecko (detail) by Rance Jones.

textures, and colors are all beautifully captured; this may be one of the strongest examples I've seen of truly appreciating the overlooked beauty that surrounds us in our daily lives. I hope you'll join me in applauding this piece and all the winners, who have found meaningful new ways to capture our world on canvas and paper.

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ARTISTIC EXCELLENCE

Each year we invite artists from around the world to submit their best original artwork to our Artistic Excellence competition, with no restrictions on medium, style, or subject matter. In response, we receive almost 1,500 entries from a diverse and gifted group of artists, including both emerging and established talents. Needless to say, the task of selecting our award winners is never easy. In the following pages, we present the 13 artworks that most captured our attention in this year's 10th annual competition.

BY KIM AGRICOLA

RANCE JONES

FIRST PLACE



GLOBETROTTER Rance Jones has documented and portrayed numerous indigenous cultures over the years, from Ireland to Mexico to Peru. **GECKO**—a painting from his latest series of watercolors, which focuses on Cuba—takes the top Artistic Excellence prize. While Jones describes the work as quiet and reflective in mood, he points out a host of visually dynamic details that caught his eye when he photographed the scene: the building's weathered architecture, the fluorescent lighting in the entryway, and the contemplative man sitting off to the side. "I think he's in the moment, watching the world go by, and we are watching him in that moment," observes the artist.

Jones studied graphic design at the University of North Texas before entering an illustration program at the School of Visual Arts in New York. After graduation, he embarked on a 20-year career in storyboarding that involved "drawing thousands of figures," he says. "It was really my internship in drawing every single day, especially the human form."

Today, the figure plays a leading role in



Gecko, watercolor, 38 x 30.

Jones' watercolor art. "I try to let the people in my paintings—through their expressions and body language—tell their own stories," he explains. "And it's essential that I always include the environment around the figure."

The artist gravitates toward realism, in part, because the style allows viewers to consider

an artwork without feeling confused or unqualified to understand it, he says. "I look at art to relate to it, to connect with it, even if it's a negative reaction," notes Jones. "So, realism affects me in the same way it affects others." Find Jones' work at Forum Gallery, New York, NY, and www.rancejonesart.com.