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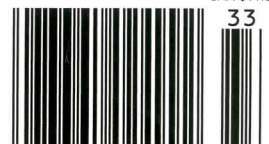
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Real Cuba

THE WATERCOLORS OF RANCE JONES OPEN A DAZZLING AND REVEALING WINDOW ON LIFE IN POST-CASTRO CUBA.

By John A. Parks

“Travel,” said Mark Twain, “is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness.” Texas artist Rance

Jones would certainly agree. He paints in a sumptuous, hyperrealist manner to bring back vivid and compelling images of communities around the globe where he has spent his time. His previous projects grew out of sojourns to Peru, Mexico and Ireland, while his current work has drawn from his repeated stays in Cuba. “Out of all the places I’ve traveled, Cuba has been the most enlightening in terms of observing humanity on a different level,” says Jones. “I’ve been to countries where there was a tourist infrastructure that created stereotypes. You’re presented with the people and scenes that you expect to see. They’ve attempted the same thing in Cuba, but if you get in a car, drive around the island and visit with people in their homes, you find that they defy any stereotypes.”

Wherever he is when he paints, Jones feels that his role is to be open to whatever confronts him—an artist who allows his imagery to arise from what he actually finds. “In Cuba, I can step back and be an observer and get rid of preconceptions,” he says. The results are extraordinary.

Perception vs. Reality

Contemporary Cuba presents a rich visual feast for any artist, in part because of its difficult history. After a succession of increasingly corrupt and despotic governments throughout the 20th century, a popular revolution, led by Fidel Castro, took hold in 1958. Most of the moneyed class fled, and a program of land reform and nationalization redistributed the country’s wealth.

The United States continues to maintain a trade embargo against Cuba to this day. Unable to import cars, appliances and many other items, Cuba became something of a museum—where American cars

from the 1950s are still on the roads and many of the once-grandiose facades of Havana suffer continued dilapidation and neglect. Add to this the lush vegetation and the naturally spirited and stylish Cubans themselves, and you have a world that feels strangely exotic to a foreign eye.

“Americans think it’s difficult to visit Cuba,” says Jones, “but, in fact, it’s quite easy. You just have to tick the right boxes when you apply for a visa.” The artist is also fortunate enough to have a friend, Gio Guerra, who knows the country well and serves as a guide. “He takes me off the tourist trail to more remote areas,” says Jones. “In some of the smaller towns we visited, he told me I was the first foreigner the local people had seen.”

On one occasion, Jones and Guerra were detained briefly by the local political police. “They were very polite and professional,” says Jones. “I guess I was just in an unusual place with a camera, and they wanted to know

OPPOSITE
Yellow (watercolor on paper, 32x25)

BELOW
Positive Space (watercolor on paper, 32x25)



Artist's Toolkit

WATERCOLORS:

- Winsor & Newton Professional
- Daniel Smith

BRUSHES:

- No. 10 Escoda Perla
- Nos. 3–10 Rhapsody, Raphael, Princeton and Kolinsky sable rounds
- Silver Brush Black Velvet 1- and 2-inch squirrel-hair flats

PAPER:

- 154-lb. Arches hot-pressed, purchased in a large roll

who I was and what I was doing. Once I explained, they told me to proceed with my art." Many of the artist's experiences in Cuba have involved meeting people who surprised him with their warmth, openness and zest for life. "They'll express frustration with the government," he says, "but then they get on with their lives."

While the Cuban government does keep a tight grip on political expression, Jones maintains that life on the island isn't without optimism. "Kids there have a pretty wholesome childhood—playing outside, riding bikes, walking to school. It's a very safe place to grow up. So it's hard for me to reconcile some of the condemnation of Cuba with my actual experience of the place."

An Intuitive Approach

Jones collects reference for his paintings with his camera, a Canon Mark V with a zoom lens. "I don't think I'm a good photographer," he says, "but I take a lot of photographs so that I have enough information when I get back to the studio. I also make visual notes, quick sketches and color notes. I carry a small watercolor set with me so I can set down exactly what color a wall was."

The artist is interested in photographing people as well as locations. "I want to be respectful," he says, "so after I've taken a few photos, I always go over and talk to people and tell them what I'm doing. Then I'll take a few more pictures."



ABOVE
la Administradora
(watercolor on paper, 21x18)

OPPOSITE
Lift (watercolor on paper, 27x36)

Back in the studio, Jones usually assembles a composition from several photographs. "It's rare that I come up with a single photo that works on its own as a painting reference," he says. "Typically I find interesting people in one group of photos and a beautiful facade or space in another group. I also have to think about consistent direction of the light source."

The artist uses Photoshop to place figures in new settings and to adjust features throughout the composition. "I might enlarge a window or move a figure," he says. "I subjugate

everything to the principles of design. When I take a photo, I just think about getting the raw information. In the studio, I think about the composition of the painting."

When he's satisfied with an image, Jones projects it onto a sheet of watercolor paper and traces the outlines of the major elements. "Once I have the image on paper, I can start to push and pull things," he says. "I let go of the photo and think about design, composition and texture so that the painting becomes more than a photograph."

As he works, the artist uses both color and black-and-white prints for reference. "I work the painting section by section," he says. "In each section, I first lightly lay in the shadows and negative spaces using sepia or cobalt blue, or a mixture of the two. This allows me to work out shape and form and to build dimension. I then lay transparent washes

“ONCE I HAVE THE IMAGE ON PAPER, I CAN START TO PUSH AND PULL THINGS ... I THINK ABOUT DESIGN, COMPOSITION AND TEXTURE SO THAT THE PAINTING BECOMES MORE THAN A PHOTOGRAPH.”

—RANCE JONES

over this stage and model the paint by either adding or lifting out pigment.”

Jones paints with sable rounds but uses several sizes of less expensive, flat, stiff synthetic brushes to scrub or lift paint. By proceeding carefully through each section and making many small adjustments, additions and corrections, he builds an extremely rich and luminous image. The variety of color in his work is aided by his deployment of a large range of pigments. “My palette has gotten bigger and bigger over the years,” he says. “I started off with a limited palette, but now my colors have taken over every chamber. I have at least 24 colors.”

The artist says that his approach to color involves no particular system. “For me color is intuitive,” he says, adding that his interest in technique

as such is limited. “I have little formal training in watercolor, apart from a course I took as a teenager. When I went through art school, everything was conceptual, and there were very few formal classes in painting available. I see watercolor as a means to an end, a way of talking about the people and places I’m interested in.”

With such complex paintings, the artist acknowledges that knowing when to stop can be a challenge. “I usually know when a painting is complete by the overall balance and impact of finish and refinement along with accuracy of values, form and color,” he says. “I try not to go too far with refinement. It’s nice when a viewer can see the brushwork and paint edges.” Jones has an additional method he employs to encourage himself to finish work on a picture. “I usually have the next painting or two worked out and ready to start before I finish the one I’m working on,” he says.

People and Places

The strength of Jones’ approach is on view in *Guajira* (opposite), a scene in which a young woman is walking in front of a house that’s undergoing roof repairs. A group of workmen are passing materials onto the roof, a washing line of sheets is blowing in the wind and everywhere there’s a wealth of color and texture. We have the impression that we’re witnessing a candid moment on the street—a true slice of life. In fact, the painting is highly composed. “I took the figure of the girl from another setting,” says Jones, “and I also invented the line of guys on the roof. I wanted this clearly spiraling composition. I even added



LEFT
La Enfermera
(watercolor on paper, 21x18)

OPPOSITE
Guajira (watercolor on paper, 36x27)





TOP TO BOTTOM
Iglesia del Castro
 (watercolor on
 paper, 38x30)

Anejo (watercolor
 on paper, 21x18)

the billowing sheets in the wind to create movement and chaos in the middle of the painting.”

One of the things the painting reveals is the range of ethnic backgrounds found in Cuba. “The Cuban people range from blond with light skin to Afro-Caribbean complexions,” says the artist, “just as if you were in Florida or Texas. I took the title, *Guajira*, from the old song ‘Quantanamera,’ which means ‘girl from the country.’” The painting demonstrates how dilapidation—cracked and stained concrete, peeling stucco and cracked roof tiles—can become strangely picturesque.

Jones’ ability to orchestrate his compositions in order to tell a wider story is particularly effective in *Iglesia del Castro* (top left). The location is a crumbling building in Havana that’s swathed in scaffolding. The fact that the title can also be seen as a reference to the Castro regime adds further dimension to the narrative. In the painting, things have fallen apart somewhat, but some kind of restoration seems to be underway. A young man walks toward us cradling a basket of eggs in his hands. He’s approaching a step, and we hope he’ll negotiate it without losing any of his precious cargo.

Throughout the painting, the rendering of the rich textures and subtle color is impeccable. “There’s a lot of tension in the picture,” says the artist. “I shaped some of the scaffolding to give a sense of the man walking out of a temple or cathedral with this fragile thing in his hands. I’ve been trying to understand the impact of the revolution on these people, and this painting really symbolizes that it’s not a lingering revolution. It’s not in the people’s hearts anymore, especially the young. They want a better life.”

Some of Jones’ most powerful pieces take the form of portraiture. In *Anejo* (left), for instance, an older man enjoys a glass of rum and a cigar at a bar. His face is lean and worn, but he looks at the world with clear eyes while his slender frame is not without strength and poise. His clothes, hat and boots are worn but clean. “He’s a day laborer who came in for a drink,” says Jones. The surroundings are bare, makeshift even, with the bar stool cushions long gone and the bar itself made from rough concrete. Yet somehow the place is attractive, and the sense of life and warmth are palpable.



Angel (watercolor on paper, 21x18)

One of Jones’ most recent paintings, *Yellow* (page 22), exemplifies the sense of the fullness of life being played out against a backdrop of neglect and economic hardship. A young woman stands in front of a kiosk that appears to be selling more or less everything—pineapples, melons, garlic and other items—including bottles of cooking oil. The surrounding sidewalk and walls are dilapidated, but the general color is stunningly vibrant. Deep in the shadowy interior of the stand we can just see a religious calendar on the wall. “The girl was “pasted” into the image,” says the artist. “I changed the color of her hair to red because I wanted to make clear the diversity of the people in Cuba. They care about how they look and what they wear. The painting may not show this fully, but that’s my motivation.”

Outside Looking In

Jones’ body of work displays a lively curiosity about the broad world that we live in and the condition of the people who inhabit it. He says he has sometimes faced questions about whether his forays into distant communities amount to appropriation of other peoples’ cultures, a suggestion he dismisses. “What could be more valuable than an outsider’s impression?” he asks. “How are we going to connect if we don’t allow someone else to offer commentary? Through these adventures I’m trying to be more open, more accepting and more in tune.” The father of two daughters, Jones feels it’s important for everyone to experience the diversity of human life. “We raised our daughters in a very safe, sheltered, wholesome, affluent community,” he says, “but we have to show them there’s so much more to learn.” **WA**

John A. Parks is a painter, a writer and a member of the faculty at School of Visual Arts, in New York City.



Meet the Artist

Rance Jones (rancejonesart.com) earned an MFA in illustration from School of Visual Arts, in New York City. His exposure to the variety of cultures there, along with the great disparity of wealth, has greatly influenced the direction of his work. His paintings are widely exhibited and have received many awards—including Best in Show at the 2018 Richeson 75 Figure and Portrait Exhibition and the President’s Award at the 2018 Southwestern Watercolor Society Exhibition. Jones is represented by Forum Gallery, in New York City. The artist makes his home in Richardson, Texas.