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Inside Take: Designing Success



Scott Maier

A Conversation with Rance Jones, Watercolor Artist's Cover Artist

"Every painting is an opportunity to discover what works and what doesn't."

-Rance Jones

Rance Jones, the cover artist for the Summer 2023 issue of *Watercolor Artist*, is a big believer in travel as a way to widen perspectives. The artist has enjoyed sojourns to Peru, Mexico and Ireland, among other places, but his latest artwork draws its inspiration from a few repeated stays in Cuba. You can read the full story by contributing writer John A. Parks by purchasing a copy of the issue [here](#). And, if you happen to be in New York City in the coming weeks, you can check out his show, "Rance Jones: La Vida Brava—Cuba Today" at [Forum Gallery](#), in Midtown Manhattan, through June 9.

For this "Inside Take," exclusive to ArtistsNetwork members, *Watercolor Artist* Editor-in-Chief Anne Hevener asked Jones to walk us deeper into his creative process and the story behind his riveting cover painting, *Yellow*.



Yellow (2022, watercolor on paper, 31-1/2 x 25) by Rance Jones

Anne Hevener (AH): Tell me more about the circumstances behind the cover painting.

Rance Jones (RJ): The fruit stall is in an amazing city, Saqua la Grande, in the north-central part of Cuba. Once a prominent seaport, the architecture reflects the various social layers of the city. Some neighborhoods retain grand mansions and lavish homes that are falling into disrepair and divided into apartments. Other neighborhoods include block after block of rickety clapboard row houses, mostly occupied by families. When I saw the fruit stand, I fell in love with the bright yellow walls and the duo-chromatic coloration of the produce.

The young woman I incorporated into the painting was drawn from a reference taken in another town, in the south of Cuba. I wanted to keep her gaze directed away from the viewer and fixed on something within her own plane. For most of the paintings in this Cuba series, the people are looking away from or past the viewer. An important aspect of my current work is that connection between the subject and their surroundings. When the subject is gazing at us, the viewer, it minimizes or interrupts that connection.

AH: Were there particular challenges in the making of this piece?

RJ: The biggest challenge was designing a balanced composition. I approach my paintings from a semi-Cubist point of view. I'm trying to balance all the geometric shapes in the painting to create cohesive movement and flow. The sections of the wall, the open window space, the paper calendar, the door, the metal vent, the signboard, the fruit shapes, the bins. All of these shapes have to work in unison. It involves a lot of moving things around and adding things to get a decent composition. I'm also conscious of how the planes of perspective direct the viewer's eye toward the subject. In this piece, the perspective lines take our eye toward her upper body where the tying of the hair becomes the main action in the narrative.

AH: There's a lot of detail in the piece. Was every bit of that intentional—as part of the narrative?

RJ: On some level, every part of the composition is intentional. I'm not a "happy accident" sort of painter; I try to avoid surprises. I recently completed a painting that I had to restart 15 times! The biggest obstacle, in this case, was the simple color wash on a soft pink wall in the background. Because larger washes are so difficult to contain, I tend to start a painting with those, in case something goes awry. Conversely, the more complex details are easier for me simply because I have more control.

AH: How do you make those what-stays-in, what-comes-out editing decisions?

RJ: I'm not a very sophisticated photographer. I'm really just using photography to record information. It's in the studio that I select and combine that information into a composition and create a narrative. Anything that feels like a distraction from my main idea gets chucked. And, if I need to draw more attention to an area in the painting, I may introduce elements from other reference photos. I build up a rough composition in Photoshop and then do a range of printouts, from black and white to enhanced color to enlargements of specific details, like faces.

AH: Given your painting style, are people sometimes confused as to why you choose watercolor as your medium versus oil or acrylic?

RJ: I love watercolor for so many reasons. It's such a textural and honest medium. I like to say it's an act of nature, because you're applying natural pigments mixed in water onto plant fiber paper. The process feels very natural, therefore, and the textures feel very authentic.

AH: The color palette in this piece is especially lush and vibrant. Tell us more about the paints you're using.

RJ: I use high-quality watercolors—Winsor & Newton, Daniel Smith and Sennelier—to get good color depth. One stand-out pigment I used for this painting was Daniel Smith's Cadmium Yellow Light Hue as well as Winsor & Newton's Winsor Yellow. When I mix colors, I add water to the dried pigment in the wells on my palette and bring it to the mixing section in the middle. I've been keeping a full range of pigments on my palette lately, and I combine colors together intuitively rather than by predetermined formulas or theories. Every painting is an opportunity to discover what works and what doesn't.

AH: Travel is a big part of what inspires your art. Do you have upcoming travel plans?

RJ: Travel raises my senses to a peak. I go into hyper-observant mode. So, for me, that's a good thing. I've had to learn, however, that there's a difference between travel and vacation. Travel is work; vacation is relaxation. When I'm traveling to collect information and inspiration, I stay in someone's home whenever possible. I use public transportation and I walk for hours. I start the day before the sun comes up and keep going well into the night. I try to always work outside of the tourism infrastructure so that I get to observe and experience authenticity rather than what someone else thinks I should see. It's exhausting, dusty, muddy, wet, loud, smelly, hot, cold and occasionally treacherous—but I love it! My wife, Christina, and I will be traveling to Israel in May. She loves adventure and works as hard as I do, and is extremely supportive when we travel together. My goal is to observe how three very distinct and often opposing cultures manage to co-exist in a relatively small area.

AH: Any advice for others who may want to use travel as a muse?

RJ: My advice to someone who wants to be inspired by travel is to venture outside of your comfort zone and learn to rely on local people for assistance but be smart about it. Travelers can also occasionally be targets. I've been in a few scrapes, so I almost always hire a reliable guide and ask them to show me their neighborhood and introduce me to their family and friends. There's a wonderful Mark Twain quote that John Parks included in his beautifully written article about my work: "Travel," Twain says, "is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness." Those are things that arise out of fear. I would say also, don't let fear keep you from traveling and try not to carry it with you when you do.

Exclusive to members!

Enjoy this gallery of additional paintings by Rance Jones, which were not included in the magazine!

