



Infusing Drama & Structure

Nicholas Simmons uses acrylic paint and watercolors on a large scale to create paintings that are both powerful representations and strong abstractions.

by **John A. Parks**

Nicholas Simmons paints in watermedia on a scale that rivals oil painting. The subject matter is a dazzling mix of figures juxtaposed with printed lettering, graffiti, Japanese block prints, neon lights, reflections, and lavish corners of nature. The effect can be disorienting, as though a camera has taken a picture by accident, revealing an image that is both exciting and mysterious. The paint itself swirls, floods, drips, and spatters, driven on by the general excitement of the imagery and giving the work a sense that it was done in a rush in a matter of minutes. "I'm very flattered when people tell me that my work looks as though it is done quickly," says the artist. "Actually it is all very carefully planned out. I call my approach 'accidentally on purpose.'"

Fresh Sushi
2007, watercolor and acrylic, 41 x 41.
Collection National Watercolor Society.

NICHOLAS



LEFT
La Vida Breve
 2006, watercolor and acrylic, 60 x 30. Private collection.

RIGHT
Tokyo Express
 2008, acrylic, 41 x 41. Collection the artist.

For Simmons a painting usually begins as an idea. “Much of what I do is generated from what’s floating around my head,” he says. “I’m often unable to distill that into a static composition so I look for subject matter that allows me to use some of the texture, color, and atmosphere that is driving me at the time. All of my work is an attempt to capture something in my head. Once in a while I succeed.”

This approach finds the artist working from multiple sources, including photography, other works of art, memory, and life. “Some of my paintings are 100 percent from the imagination,” he says, “but I have found that larger works usually require more planning. Photography often plays a part but not perhaps in the way that most people use it. Like Alex Kanevsky, I’m interested in unusual effects gained from careless and casual use of the camera—photographic ‘mistakes.’”

Once he has settled on an idea, Simmons will often use the computer to manipulate the various elements, shifting placement and color to optimize the picture. Having finalized the composition, he transfers the image to watercolor paper using a digital projector. He now faces the task of planning his strategy for painting the piece. “I try to incorporate what I call ‘safety mechanisms’ in each painting,” he says, “which are elements that can be left white or open and then adjusted late in the painting.” Often this means using masking fluid to keep chosen areas unpainted. In *Tokyo Express*, for instance, the artist originally intended the white lettering to be black. However, he masked it out at the start of the work to leave this option open. When he removed the masking toward the end of the painting, he realized that black lettering probably wouldn’t work. To





LEFT
Nassau No. 4: Bay St. Girl
 2008, watercolor,
 38 x 38. Collection
 the artist.

ABOVE RIGHT
Summer Sonata
 2007, watercolor,
 41 x 41. Private
 collection.



check this he took a digital photograph of the piece, put it in Photoshop, and tried out the letters in black on his screen. After some thought he decided to leave the lettering open and white, allowing the crisp drama of the white paper to operate against the luscious layering of the paint around it.

Another strategy that Simmons adopts prior to applying paint is to consider which areas might be somewhat uninteresting or overly quiet. He sometimes enlivens these by spattering some masking fluid on the area first. Later, when the painting is complete and the masking fluid removed, they act as white dots that create a sense of excitement and movement adding to the general sparkle of the painting.

While Simmons works on traditional watercolor paper—usually unstretched 140-lb hot- or cold-pressed by Arches or Fabriano—his paints are not exactly traditional. “I use fluid acrylic paint made by Da Vinci in combination with watercolor paint,” says the artist, adding that Da Vinci sponsors his work. “I use the acrylic like a traditional watercolor,” he explains, “but I find that there are aspects of it that facilitate certain techniques that are not possible with traditional watercolor paint.” The principal difference between the two mediums is that acrylic is unmovable once it has dried. This allows the artist to secure a great variety of edges and particularly to hold on to hard edges while using flooding or washes on top of them. This is visible in *Tokyo Express*, where the artist began with a hard dark line to mimic the Japanese woodblock print that he was using as subject matter and then washed and dripped paint across it. However, as long as the acrylic is wet, it can be used in a manner identical with traditional watercolor, allowing for a full range of blending, flooding, and diffuse edges. “In fact,” says the artist, “nobody, even the experts, can tell the difference.” Even so, Simmons often finds that he is criticized by watercolor purists who feel that his technique deviates from what they understand as “true watercolor.” “Obviously that doesn’t make much sense,” says the artist.



“What distinguishes watercolor is not the binding, be it gum arabic or acrylic, but the vehicle, which is water.”

Simmons applies his paint with a variety of synthetic brushes. “I have never used expensive brushes,” he says. “Synthetic is fine by me and some of my favorites are cheap house-painting brushes from hardware stores.”

Although Simmons’ paintings are mostly representational, they contain a strongly abstract sensibility. In *Fresh Sushi*, for instance, we are clearly looking at a neon sign with a Japanese motif on a wall behind it and one or two plates in the foreground. The indeterminate quality of the space, however, results in a flattened image in which we are left to consider the purely visual dynamics of the painting. The blue neon bar slices across the center of the composition, separating the pyrotechnics of the saturated color above from the quieter imagery of the traditional Japanese figure and old-fashioned plates below. The idea of two worlds, modern and ancient, is reinforced by this simple and powerful visual idea. “I most closely identify with abstract painting,” says Simmons, “but I also like to see a touch of realism. Combining the two and striking the right balance for the piece is a challenge. I also try to be consistent with handling, and that can be difficult when I try to combine abstraction and representation.”

Occasionally the artist will produce a wholly abstract work, as in *Bustin’ Out for Rosey*. Here the single dramatic brush mark was executed in masking fluid with a big brush. The paint layers were then built onto the paper so that the brush-stroke would be silhouetted against the heavy, dark oblong. An orange-and-yellow border was then placed around this shape. “I wanted to create a kind of electric border around the black,” says the artist, “like some kind of low-voltage field.” The combined force of the violent brush mark and the quietly shimmering oblong behind it is electric indeed. “Purely abstract work is a joy to produce, and maybe my favorite thing of all in art,” says the artist. “In some ways, it’s the ultimate test of an artist’s compositional, color, and textural abilities.”

More often the artist will combine representational elements with abstraction, often using lettering as a bridge. In *Night Light No. 1: Lord & Taylor*, for instance, he painted an illuminated sign on the side of the famous store. It is only after a moment that we realize that we are looking at a picture of a building and that the silhouetted trees and lamps inhabit a fully three-dimensional space. At the same time they also work as a dramatic two-dimensional composition of muted color and stark contrast. Here again the lamps in the foreground were masked out at the beginning of the work. Masking fluid was also used to create the spatters on the dark stripe toward the bottom of the painting.

In *Nassau No. 1: Discount Warehouse*, Simmons again uses lettering to form a bridge between realism and abstraction. Here the white lettering meshes with the white shirt of the boy in the foreground, flattening the image so that we consider the whole image as a flat design as well as a realist rendering. Sometimes this approach yields images that have an overwhelming graphic feel as in *Podnyataya Yubka* (“Raised Skirt” in Russian) where the Cyrillic lettering and stark imagery convey a feeling of a poster for some Eastern European night club.



Simmons’ Materials

PALETTE

- Da Vinci fluid acrylics and watercolors

BRUSHES

- Princeton Artist Brushes in a variety of sizes
- house-painting brushes

SURFACE

- 140-lb cold-pressed or hot-pressed Arches or Fabriano paper

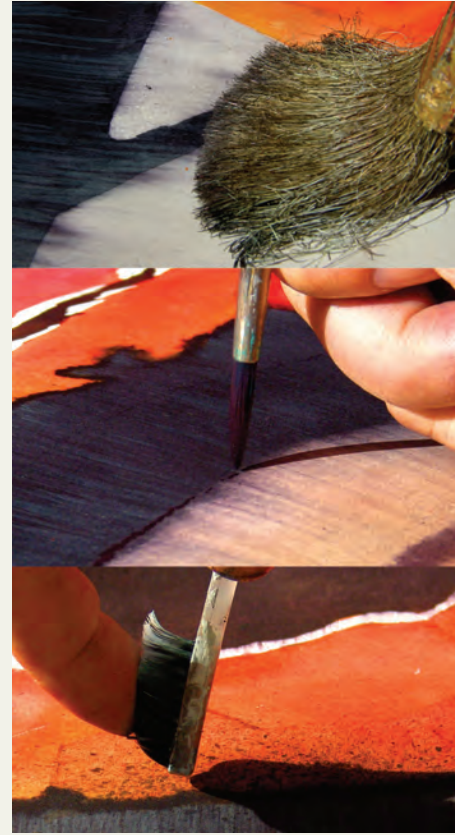
ABOVE
**Night Light No. 1:
Lord & Taylor**
2006, watercolor and acrylic, 29 x 37. Private collection.

LEFT
**Nassau No. 1:
Discount Warehouse**
2008, watercolor, 41 x 41. Collection the artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP
Podnyataya Yubka
2007, watercolor, 20 x 20. Private collection.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM
Bustin’ Out for Rosey
2007, watercolor and acrylic, 50 x 25. Collection the artist.

Demonstration: Teriyaki Bo



Step 1 (above left)

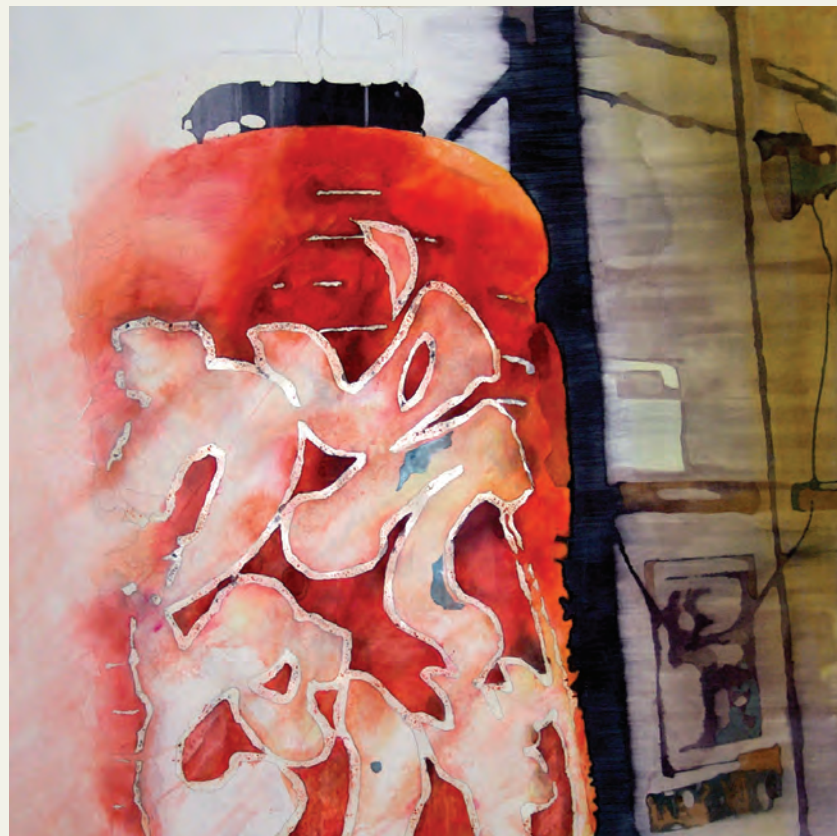
A lantern in New York City's Chinatown caught Simmons' eye with its exotic symbols and electric color. The artist chose the square format so that he would have precise control over the picture's axis. Cropping the reference photo to emphasize the strong vertical, he created a horizontal feeling by dragging a large brush across the paint as it dried.

Step 2 (left)

Next, Simmons painted the blurred background on the right, masked the characters and a few highlights, and then added the bright color wet-in-wet. Because he liked how it faded off on the left side, he also lifted color from the left side of the dark shape on top. A dark wash unified the negative shapes and subdued some areas.

Step 3 (above right)

To modify the edges, the artist smeared wet paint with an inexpensive bristle brush; used the "sewing-machine stroke," which is like stippling; and spattered paint with a toothbrush. All these techniques can soften edges, model form, or add texture.



Step 4

A mixture of alizarin crimson and phthalo green makes an effective dark for the characters, and the bristle brush was again used to smear edges. A background of cerulean blue complements the hot spot of orange and lets the composition breathe. The fragmented and unfinished left side encourages the eye to move right, settling on the harder edges and value contrasts. Black and white spattering contributes to the raw and urban look the artist was striving for.

Step 5

If possible, Simmons likes to frame the painting and live with it for a while—or put it away out of sight. Invariably he discovers changes that need to be made, and a "curing" period allows him time to analyze things more objectively.

THE COMPLETED PAINTING:

Teriyaki Bo

2008, watercolor and acrylic, 38 x 38.
Collection the artist.



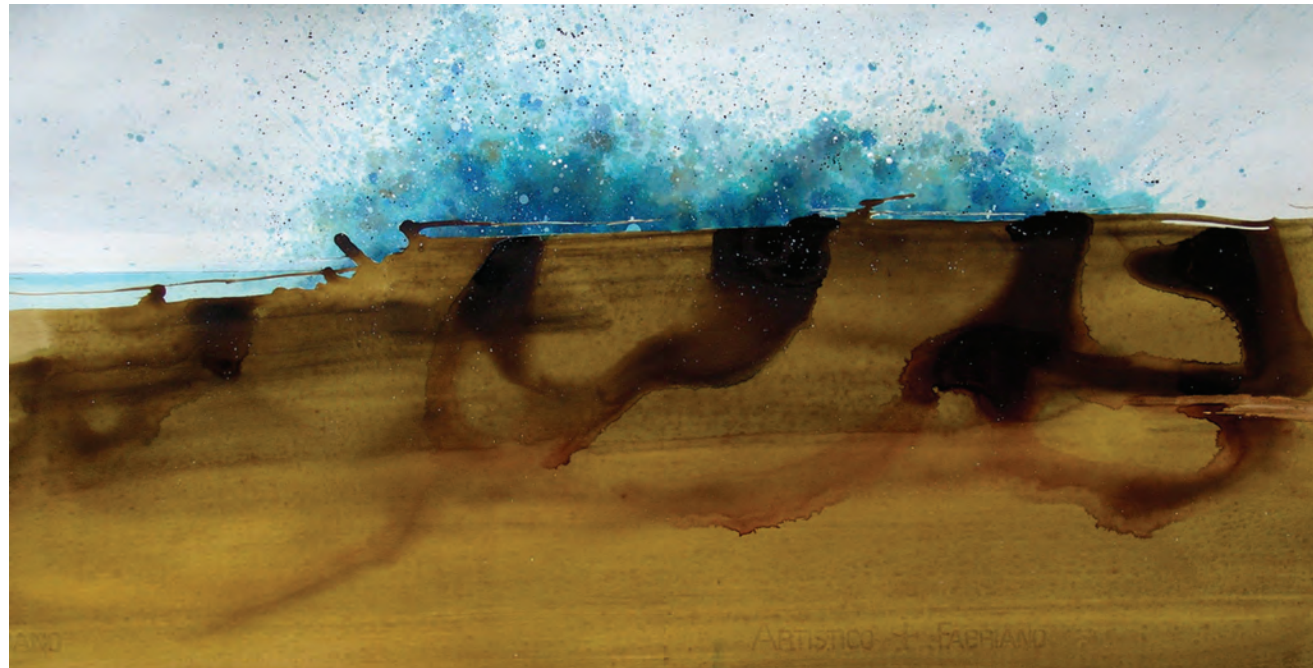
LEFT
Ma Belle Amie
2006, watercolor,
41 x 41. Collection
the artist.

RIGHT
Shanxi II
2006, acrylic, 50 x 25.
Collection the artist.



Simmons' delight in the exotic extends to Asian imagery, which crops up repeatedly in his work. "It started when my wife and I bought a spectacular Chinese wedding cabinet," recalls the artist. "It was decorated with traditional Chinese images, and I eventually decided to use some of them as a basis for paintings." In *Shanxi II* for instance, the artist succeeds in using watercolor to mimic the feel of a Chinese scroll and the delicate rhythmic line of Chinese painting. Later, this interest in Asian art would extend to Japanese prints and the inclusion of Asian and Chinese lettering in his work. "I practiced calligraphy for years," says the artist, "and always enjoy incorporating it in my work."

Occasionally Simmons will abandon his quest for original imagery to take on some of the more traditional subjects of watercolorists. In *Ma Belle Amie* he takes up the somewhat



ABOVE
Aegis II
 2006, acrylic, 15 x 30.
 Collection the artist.



LEFT
Sueño del Verde
 2008, watercolor, 27 x 52.
 Collection the artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE
September Song
 2006, watercolor and acrylic,
 30 x 30. Private collection.

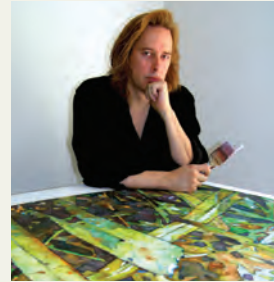
clichéd subject of a close-up of a bloom. Instead of a dazzlingly healthy flower, however, he presents an image of one well past its prime, with petals curling into brown at the edges and disfigured by decay. “Actually I’ve always been more interested in flowers that were in the process of wilting or dying,” says the artist. In this painting the very physical and direct handling of the paint is much in evidence. “I find that the paint itself is endlessly fascinating,” says the artist. “It does much more interesting things on its own than I could do with it. The more I can make the paint do, the better off I am, so I try and cede more and more control to it.”

The artist’s sensitivity to the rich effects of paint has allowed him to create a number of extremely rich and lavish nature pictures, such as *Sueño del Verde*, where a swath of rich green leaves spreads out in front of tree trunks and sky. “This

was a painting in which I simply decided to use every single green that Da Vinci makes,” says the artist. Certainly the range and variation that he achieves in the finished work says volumes for the sumptuous quality of his chosen medium.

Perhaps Simmons’ most mysterious and successful picture is *Aegis II*, where an image of sand dunes and a wave crashing over them is conjured almost purely from the action of the paint. It is a painting that succeeds in being both entirely abstract and highly evocative of a particular place and event.

Simmons’ plans for the future of his work suggest that there is more change and challenge to come. “The future is what it’s all about, because I’m not really satisfied with anything yet,” he says. “Which is not to say I’m disappointed—just eager to get on with the next picture in the hopes of getting it right this time.” ■



About the Artist

Nicholas Simmons, of Frederick, Maryland, was a professional guitarist before taking up art full time several years ago, studying with Valfred Thelin and Barbara Nechis. His many successes include the top prize in the annual National Watercolor Society exhibition in 2007. His work has been widely exhibited throughout the United States and abroad. An instructional DVD by the artist titled “Innovative Water Media” is available from Creative Catalyst Productions. Visit the artist’s website at www.nicholassimmons.com.

