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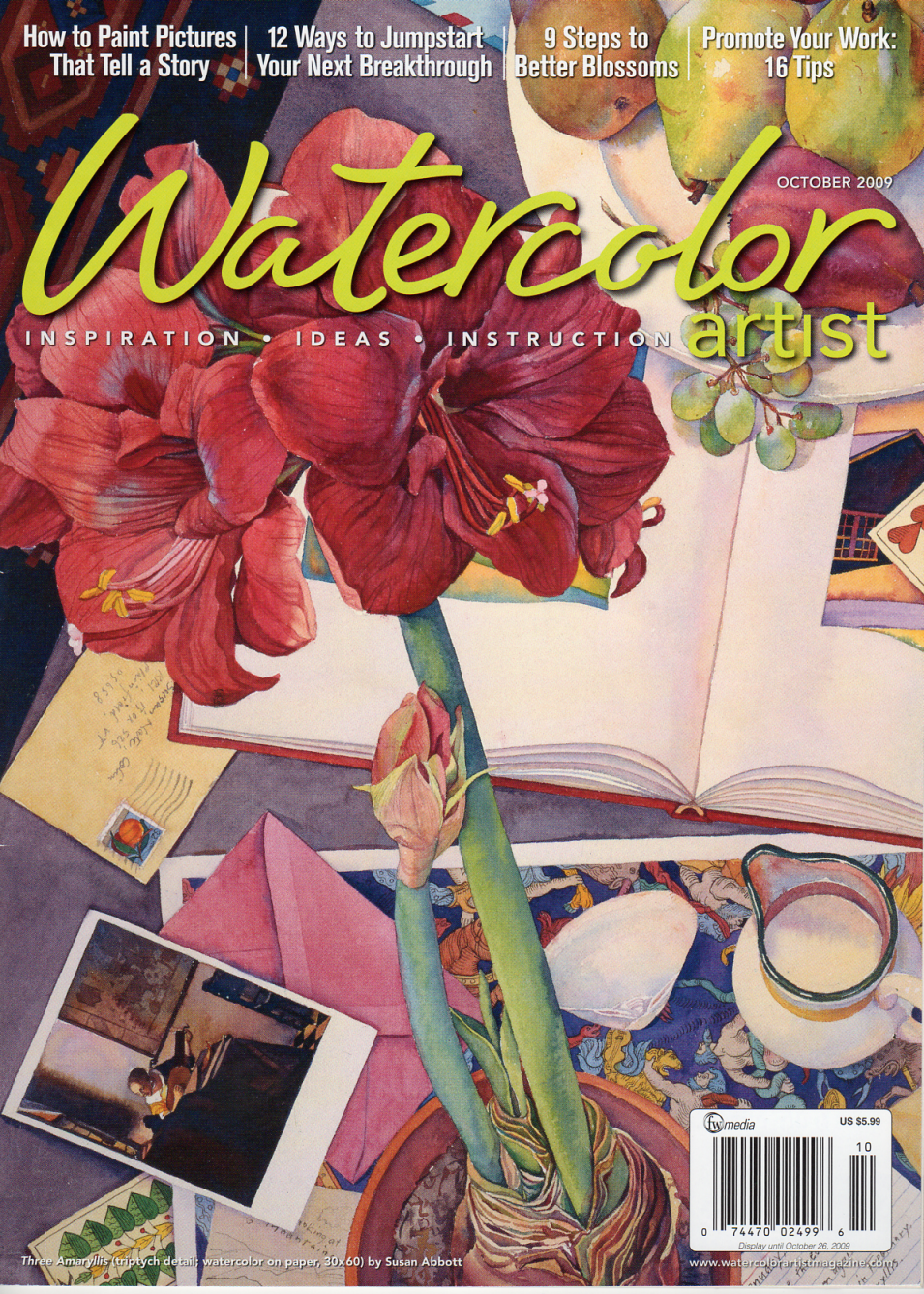
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Three Amaryllis (trptych detail; watercolor on paper, 30x60) by Susan Abbott

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Inspired by Cuba's time-worn streets, **Tony Armendariz** tells the country's stories in his paintings by balancing suggestion and description.

By **Michelle Taute**

Tony Armendariz took his first trip to Cuba nearly a decade ago, but he can still recount the details of his first morning in the country. He opened the window of his hotel room, eight stories above Havana, and stood in awe of the city below. "You're in an area where you're not supposed to be," he says. "You're hearing the sounds of the city, looking at the old cars and seeing people going about their day-to-day routines. I knew then and there this was going to be a special place, and that I would visit again."

But what the artist didn't know was that this unfamiliar landscape would help draw him back to painting and eventually inspire a series on Cuba that is now the centerpiece of his work in watercolor. Armendariz describes this country as a living museum, and he captures its aging buildings and the life among them with a kind of soft, mysterious realism. These pieces sometimes fade gradually at the edges and what Armendariz chooses to leave out, perhaps a person or what lies beyond a doorway, is just as important as what he leaves in.

Another Story Armendariz was drawn to the scene in *Shapes of Color* (watercolor on paper, 22x30) by the colorful tile work and the open doorway, which suggests another story just beyond view.



Detail: Cuba



Location: Caribbean, island between the Caribbean Sea and the North Atlantic Ocean, 150 km south of Key West, Florida

Area: 110,860 sq km (slightly smaller than Pennsylvania)

Capital: Havana

Climate: Tropical; moderated by trade winds; dry season (November to April); rainy season (May to October)

Terrain: Mostly flat to rolling plains, with rugged hills and mountains in the southeast

Geography: Largest country in Caribbean and westernmost island of the Greater Antilles

Population: 11,451,652 (July 2009 est.)

Ethnic groups: 65.05% European (Spanish, French, other), 23.84% Mulatto and Mestizo 10.08%, African (Yoruba, Igbo, other) (2002 census)

Language: Spanish

Government: Communist state



Subtle Drama In *Havana Laundromat* (watercolor on paper, 23x17), the 10-year-old girl standing on the rickety balcony adds subtle drama. “Anywhere else, this building would have been condemned,” Armendariz says. “To the Cubans, it’s commonplace.”

It’s as if he’s found the perfect way to transfer his deep curiosity about Cuba to viewers. His pictures make you wonder: What’s it like inside that apartment? Is the woman looking at something just outside the painting? And what’s it really like to live in Cuba? “I’m not out to paint one picture and tell you everything,” he says. “There’s got to be something happening that tells more than one story. It’s not really important that I tell what that story is—that’s for the viewer to decide—but that’s what makes it interesting.”

Inside the Border

Armendariz took his first trip to Cuba in 2000, almost on a whim. He was playing ball with some friends and discussing possible vacation spots. People threw out New York and Las Vegas as ideas, and then someone said: “Hey, what about Cuba?” Another friend had talked the country

up, so the group made the trip down and fell in love almost instantly. While Armendariz didn't have any personal ties to Cuba, he found himself amazed by buildings that were half in ruins and half occupied, and by the people who seemed happy despite their modest resources.

He snapped countless pictures of the urban landscape and now believes this rich subject matter lit a spark that ultimately rekindled his interest in painting. At the time, Armendariz was focused on a career in web design and hadn't given watercolor much effort since art school years before. But, in 2003, he started painting subjects in and around Chicago and after a second trip to Cuba in 2006, he turned to his reference photos and began re-creating Cuba's

street scenes, and something quite interesting developed in these new landscape pieces. "I only include people in my paintings of Cuba," he says. "They're really a part of the story. The people almost feel like part of the architecture."

While his Cuba paintings might include a figure sitting on a balcony or standing in a doorway, it's often the building that draws Armendariz to a scene. He made his third and fourth trips to Cuba in 2008 and 2009 and now actively seeks out scenes to paint. "What grabs me is when I'm looking at a building and I see empty spaces, be it a window, a door or an area that leads to another area," he says. "I look at that and go, 'Wow, there's something back there. There's a lot going on that you don't see.'" He believes these hidden



Color Guard The Cuban flag in *Flying Their Red, White & Blue* (watercolor on paper, 17x23) caught Armendariz's eye, but just after he shot a few quick reference photos, the boy pulled the flag back inside. "I couldn't figure that out," he says. "It was just unusual."

areas—along with the desire to know what’s going on inside them—bring out a building’s life as much as its colors and textures.

Cultural Exchange

All the pieces in Armendariz’s Cuba series seem effortlessly authentic, but he achieves this elusive quality through hours of firsthand research. For *Sky in the Window* (see the demo starting below), the artist sketched the building straight on and thought that viewpoint would make a perfect painting. But on the last day of his trip he returned to the same structure to shoot photos, capturing close-ups and unusual angles. Then, back at his home studio outside Chicago, he spread out all these reference materials and saw things in a different light. He switched the

piece’s perspective from a straight-on view to a straight-up one to make the composition more interesting.

Other adventures have led to unexpected encounters with Cuba’s residents. On his third trip, Armendariz was taking pictures of an older woman from across the street when she asked his friend, “Why is he taking my picture? Why doesn’t he ask my permission?” Armendariz apologized and asked for her consent to take more photos. She said “Yes,” and proceeded to tell them how she used to work as a secretary for the Castro brothers. The resulting painting is called *Con tu Permiso* (on page 00) or *With Your Permission*, and it’s definitely informed by the artist’s sense of his subject’s personality and pride.

Realizing the Details

Tony Armendariz’s striking painting of a scene he witnessed in Cuba, *Sky in the Window*, began with several trips to the location, which he photographed from a variety of unique angles and perspectives, sensing immediately that there was a painting there. But it wasn’t until he was back in his Chicago studio that he realized (after experimenting with perspective) the right approach.



The artist selected the areas he wanted to bring to the fore, projected his reference photo onto a sheet of watercolor paper and sketched the image.



Next, he moved into his three-part painting process. A large, first wash blocked in color and defined light and dark areas, adding reference points for his eye.

Then there's the kind of exploration that might not lead to a painting right away but instead deepen Arnedariz's understanding of the real Cuba. This year he made a point to seek out a *paladar*, which is a private restaurant that seats maybe a dozen people and is usually run out of someone's home. After finding a recommendation for one online, he took a cab ride and found himself at a small house in a rural neighborhood. He took in the tiki-themed yard, with its palm trees, sculptures and bamboo, along with a good meal.

Lasting Impressions

Back in the States, Arnedariz begins the hard work of capturing such an amazing and rich culture with only paint on paper. He starts by picking out a reference photo to work from then

works out his composition with a rough sketch on a 8x10-inch piece of paper. This also helps him figure out which areas he wants to highlight with the most detail. From there, he'll project the photo image onto his full-sized paper to help get a light pencil sketch in place, altering details to match his compositional sketch.

Next, he turns off the projector and moves into a three-part painting process. Working primarily with Winsor & Newton watercolors, he blocks on color with a first wash all over the paper and begins to define light and dark areas. He might indicate strong shadows with ultramarine or cobalt blue and go over sunlit areas with cadmium yellow or yellow ochre. These contrasts provide reference points for his eye as he continues to work on the entire piece.



A second wash filled in actual colors and forms and blocked in the entire painting.



In the latter stage, he layed in the fine details and dark shadows in *Sky in the Window* (watercolor on paper, ***x**).



Proof of Life Courtyard (watercolor on paper, 32x23) originally included a person sitting in one of the windows, but Armendariz decided he didn't need this detail to tell the story. All the windows, along with the laundry and antenna, do enough to suggest life.



Turn Around To add a sense of mystery to *Vieja* (watercolor on paper, 15x11), Armendariz took out the friend this woman was chatting with. “This was a rare instance where I made a major correction, and it worked,” he says. “It completely changed the whole nature of the painting.”



Composed Armendariz sketched the figure in a couple of different positions before settling on a side view for *Comfortable in Her Own Skin* (watercolor on paper, xxxxx).



Treasures In *Con tu Permiso* (watercolor on paper, 16x13), Armendariz thought the combination of the woman’s nightgown with her beautiful necklace and earrings added a sense of comedy and sweetness to the piece.

For his second wash, Armendariz begins to fill in actual colors and forms and block in the entire painting. He works quite dry and tends to use round brushes in Nos 5, 6 and 7 for both his second and third washes. The latter stage is when he lays in the fine details and dark shadows. “It’s a lot of what makes certain areas of the painting pop,” he says. Throughout the process, he only keeps about a dozen colors on his palette, relying on about six earth colors for most of his painting. He’s partial to raw umber, olive green, cadmium red and cadmium orange along with the blues and yellows mentioned previously.

One painting might take a week or two to complete, but he’s working on it a bit at a time—if he devoted himself full time, he says he could probably finish a full-sized watercolor in two to three days. Of course, the truth is that each of these paintings has actually been in progress for a long time, as they all got their start almost a decade ago, when Armendariz took that first fateful trip to Cuba. ▣



Posture Armendariz normally takes candid reference photos, but the woman in *Reina del Malecón* (watercolor on paper, 12x12) invited him up. Her bright clothes and regal nature make the posed scene work.

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