

Watercolor and the World: The Art of Alexander Creswell

BY PETER TRIPPI



The British watercolorist Alexander Creswell (b. 1957) does not permit grass to grow beneath his feet, so this month finds him opening his latest exhibition at New York City's Forbes Galleries.

A defining feature of Creswell's art is his lifelong desire to explore the world, which surely began the day he was born in the British embassy at Helsinki, where his father served as ambassador. He grew up shuttling between various capitals and his boarding school in England, Winchester College, where he discovered his passion for art. That led Creswell to complete a foundation course at West Surrey College of Art & Design, yet he survived only a term and a half at London's prestigious Byam Shaw School of Art. The reason? He had fallen for watercolor, but his modernist instructors neither possessed nor valued the skills he craved. So he proceeded to teach himself by studying the watercolors of J.M.W. Turner, John Ruskin, John Singer Sargent, and the globe-trotting Scot David Roberts (1796-1864).

Two irresistible challenges drew Creswell to watercolor, one technical and one societal. First, like his historical idols, he relishes the medium's spontaneity, yet because mistakes are difficult to correct, one must plan the composition well ahead. "Drawing is the backbone," Creswell says. "It is no good having a lovely sense of light and color if there isn't the firm foundation underneath. The happy accident happens about once a year. The rest are unhappy accidents." Second, Creswell bridled — in the fading years of heroic modernism — at the idea that real men do not use watercolors: "Having been completely out of fashion in the 20th century, watercolor was dismissed as a medium only suitable for Victorian ladies, not a medium for the consideration of great art." Fortunately, that view is unsupportable now, thanks in part to Creswell's efforts.

The artist is particularly eloquent about watercolor's unique capacity for analyzing and portraying light. "Light cannot be clumsily smeared on with a palette knife, or spread like butter on a sandwich," he says. "Light is built up of layer upon layer of atmosphere, dust in the ether, filling the space between objects, describing form and volume, filling our world with spirit. Light is tangible like water in a pool, breathable like smoke in a room, radiant like fire in a grate. Watercolor is a medium wholly sympathetic to that sequence of thought, that method of observation and analysis."

OLD BUILDINGS SEEN ANEW

Today Creswell, his wife, Mary, and their three children travel widely, always armed with sketchbooks. This wanderlust makes perfect sense in view of the artist's gift for capturing what D.H. Lawrence



WINDSOR CASTLE, ST GEORGE'S
HALL AFTER THE FIRE

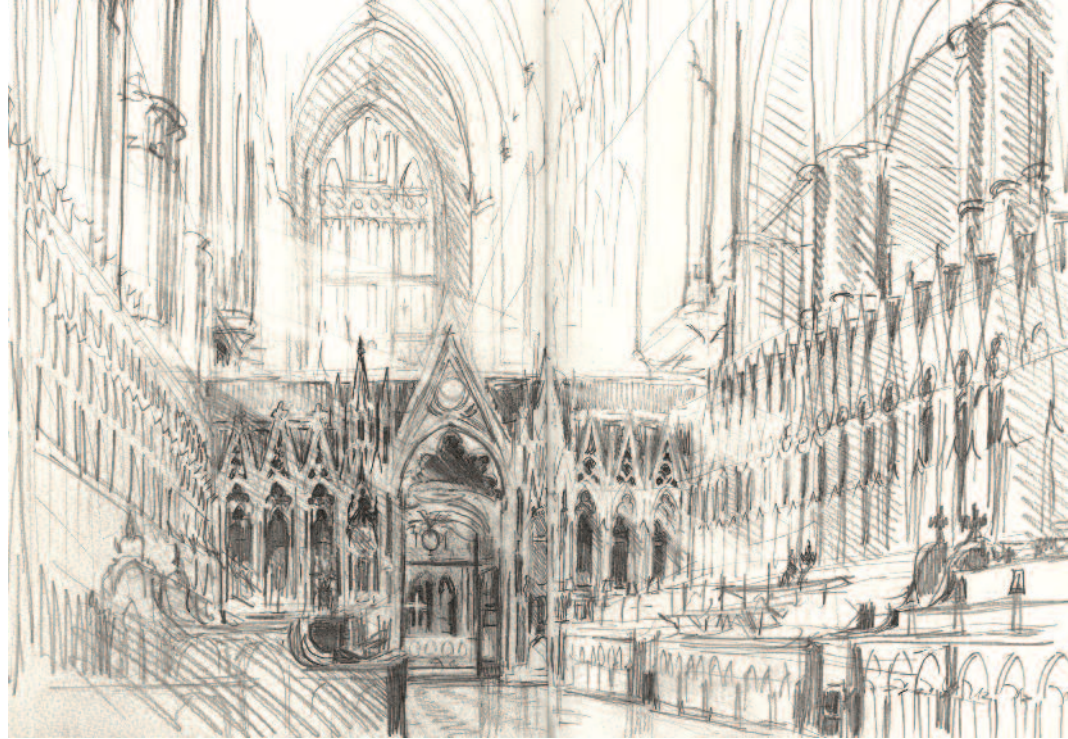
1993, WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 22 x 30 IN.
© ROYAL COLLECTION HM QUEEN ELIZABETH II

WESTMINSTER ABBEY CHOIR
2010, GRAPHITE ON PAPER, 11 x 16 IN.
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

called “the spirit of place.” Somehow Creswell always conveys that spirit, be it London, Paris, Venice, Rome, St. Petersburg, Prague, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Beijing, Cairo, Petra, Baalbek, Capetown, New York, or Newport.

As suggested by this partial list of destinations, Creswell is especially fascinated by the changeability of historic buildings, both indoors and out. His first architectural series (1990-91) examined deteriorated British country houses, a project that attracted the attention of HRH Prince Charles, who said that Creswell effectively captures “both the appearance and the atmosphere of a building.” This admiration led to Creswell’s serving as a tutor at the Prince of Wales’s Institute of Architecture and the Prince’s Foundation, and also as an official artist on the Prince’s tour of central Europe. In 1993 HM Queen Elizabeth II commissioned Creswell to depict the rooms destroyed by the recent fire at Windsor Castle, and again four years later to show them magnificently restored. In 2002 he was enlisted again, to record the Lying in State of the Queen Mother at Westminster Hall, and he is now making a series of interior scenes at Westminster Abbey.

In the U.S., Creswell is represented by Hirschl & Adler Modern (New York City), where director Gregory S. Hedberg praises the British artist for “defying the traditional frontal format for architectural views that captures the entire façade — the old-fashioned ‘postcard view.’



Instead, he gives us unexpected angles and up-close views. These iconic structures are treated as amazingly complex surfaces, articulated with light and shadow.” Sargent did this in watercolor, too, yet there is something somehow contemporary about Creswell’s efforts in this area, perhaps a trace of modernism too subtle to point out. Indeed, the artist’s relationship with modernity is not antagonistic: though Creswell is more likely to portray a Beaux-Arts monument such as Atlanta’s Millennium Arch than a modernist one like the Empire State Building, he certainly enjoyed sketching Manhattan’s steel-beamed Queensboro Bridge while riding back and forth in the public cable car alongside it.

Why devote so much energy to pictures of old buildings? On September 11, 2001, Creswell was scheduled to work in the U.S. Capitol, but ended up sketching in the Library of Congress, which was inspired by the Baths of Caracalla. “In contemplation of ruins,” Creswell muses, “one contemplates one’s future, the fragility of the present, and the futility of the past.” The issue of ruination remains complex in the U.S., of course, as anyone can see in media coverage of the World Trade Center site and Detroit, to name just two examples.

AT SEA, AND IN THE STUDIO

To reach his far-flung destinations, Creswell has traveled by almost any mode available, including the many vintage cars he has restored. Just as useful are his boats: he is an avid sailor, having learned to sail in Finland as a boy. Now Creswell co-owns a 23-foot fishing boat that serves as his studio in Venice. “Sailing her is beautiful,” he



WINDSOR CASTLE, ST GEORGE’S HALL RESTORED
1997, WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 22 x 30 IN.
© ROYAL COLLECTION HM QUEEN ELIZABETH II



VENICE, CA' DARIO FAÇADE
2008, WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 15 x 20 IN.
HIRSCHL & ADLER MODERN, NEW YORK CITY

to hang wherever the client needs them; for example, to camouflage the façade of a building under renovation, or to create an imaginary backdrop in a party tent. These creations also appear every summer at a performance venue near Creswell's home, Grange Park Opera, where palatial interiors are printed on huge scrims to hang behind the performers and diners in the café.

LIVING LINKS WITH THE PAST

This season Creswell has finally found the perfect space to execute large works. His benefactor, oddly enough, is the once-renowned British academician G.F. Watts (1819-1904), who lived and worked in the village of Compton, Surrey, a 30-minute train

says, "skimming across the lagoon in barely a foot of water. Mary and I have yet to learn to row her in the elegant Venetian manner.... that's still to come!"

Marine scenes are a relatively recent, though deeply consuming, concentration for Creswell. In August 2010, for example, he was commissioned to chase a fleet of classic yachts racing off the Cornwall coast, and worked lashed to a deck, capturing their action at close quarters. The resulting sketches record mist, drizzle, and reluctant sun, what the artist calls "wet, splashy sketches in smudgy charcoal for sky, water, and sail, with white chalk applied in streaks for the cresting seas and foaming waves."

The magic of converting these sketches into large, finished works occurs back in the studio, where Creswell has broken new technological ground. While at sea, he carries a newly patented machine that contains a 33-foot-long roll of paper. When he cranks it, his just-finished drawing disappears inside to remain dry, replaced by a fresh stretch ready to adorn.

Then there is the matter of paper. Creswell once craved more space on which to capture the details of his complex scenes, yet sheets of thick watercolor paper larger than 22 x 30 inches were simply not available until 2004, when Saunders Waterford began offering rolls that measure 5 x 33 feet. The largest watercolor ever created on a single piece of paper is Creswell's *The Roman Forum and the Arch of Septimius Severus* (2006, 5 x 9 feet), now in a private New York collection. "A huge watercolor in a small room offers a theatrical experience," maintains Creswell, whose supersized works feel contemporary even as they remind us of the enormous panoramas our ancestors enjoyed before motion pictures arrived. These larger sheets are heavier, of course, so Creswell has created a hydraulically controlled worktable that allows him to paint flat and then bring the surface upright so he can assess it. And his mixing palette, adapted from an autopsy table, features a pressurized water supply and can be wheeled alongside him.

These days, a large watercolor consumes as many as four weeks of work, including preparatory and compositional studies, and maquettes. Once the image is painted, Creswell sets to work scratching out, using sandpaper and razor blades to get back to white paper, and using beeswax as a stop-out. He sometimes finishes off the image with touches of gold leaf or colored pencil.

Always thinking big, in 2005 Creswell founded the Big Picture Company, through which vast reproductions of his work are fabricated

NEW YORK, QUEENSBORO BRIDGE
2006, WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 83 x 45 IN.
PRIVATE COLLECTION





WASHINGTON, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS ROTUNDA
2001, WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 22 x 30 IN.
COLLECTION U.S. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

ride south of London. Following a sensitive renovation and expansion, the Watts Gallery is set to re-open to the public on June 18, filled with the master's paintings, drawings, and sculptures. Just across the street is his Great Studio, and this April Creswell became the first artist to use it since Watts's death in 1904. Director Perdita Hunt confirms that "the Trustees are delighted that the Great Studio will be occupied by an artist of international stature, who shares the empathy

ANTIGUA, RANGER & WINDROSE CHASING VELSHEA
2009, WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 30 x 40 IN.
HIRSCHL & ADLER MODERN, NEW YORK CITY



and ambitions of Watts. The resurgence of Compton as a center of innovation and creative energy is really taking place."

There is yet another aesthetic connection in play here. The Watts Gallery was designed by the architect Christopher Turnor. Located just 13 miles away is the villa-like house of Copse Hill, which Turnor designed the following year (1905). Alexander Creswell's children are the fourth generation of Creswells to grow up here, but this year they must drive 15 minutes northwest to watch their father work.

Fortunately, American admirers can see nine Creswell works from The Forbes Collection, plus a dozen others, at New York City's Forbes Galleries between May 6 and September 10. Details on visiting hours and events can be found at forbesgalleries.com. ■

Information: *Forbes Galleries, 62 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10011, 212.206.5548, forbesgalleries.com; Watts Gallery, Down Lane, Compton, Guildford, Surrey GU3 1DQ, 01483.810235, wattsgallery.org.uk.*

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