



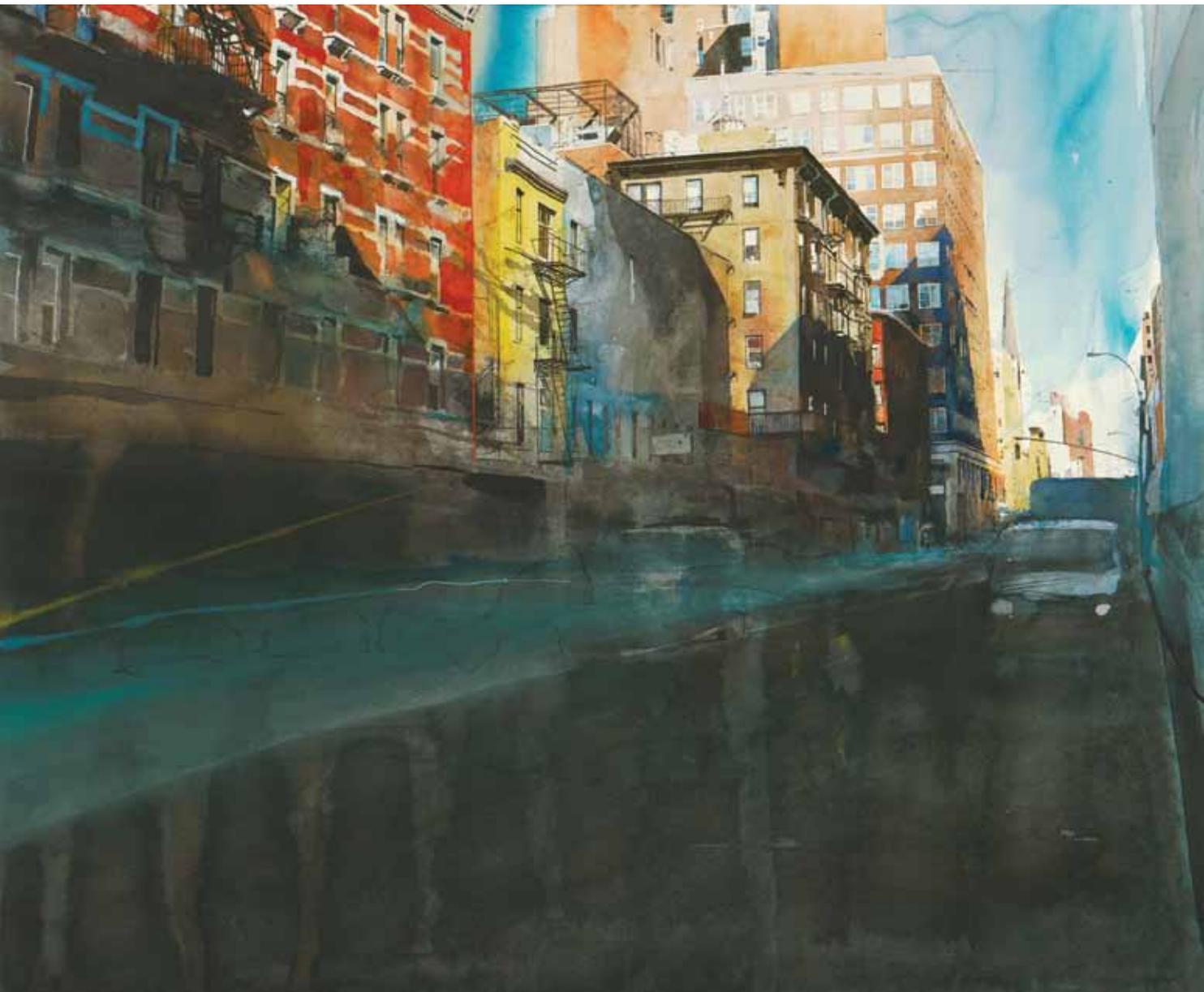


Urban Spectacle

Christopher St. Leger combines acrylic ink with watercolor to create blazing color and rich glazes.

BY JOHN A. PARKS

Zippo (watercolor and acrylic ink on paper, 33x38) captures the urban landscape with a cool palette.



Few artists have brought as much drama to urban night scenes as Christopher St. Leger. In his large, bold paintings, he combines acrylic ink with traditional watercolor to create spectacular dramatic effects. Car headlights and streetlights, surrounded by vivid halos of saturated oranges and yellows, glare through the night. Meanwhile, areas of shadow reveal unexpected, sometimes mysterious depths in veils of rich violet, gray and blue. The drawing is elegant and precise in areas only to dissolve altogether elsewhere as floods of watercolor subsume it into a suggestive haze.

In his daylight paintings, St. Leger presents a cooler palette by conjuring the subtleties of stone and concrete, following the intricacies of rain-soaked surfaces, and making thoughtful and telling observations of the city's inhabitants.

Brilliance in Ink

One of the keys to the brilliance of St. Leger's work is his use of acrylic ink. "Inks make sense for large works because the color is so saturated, and I can work with it as a liquid," he says. "I sometimes dilute the inks, but I also work with them at full strength right out of the bottle." Besides their vibrancy and even consistency, acrylic inks offer a unique characteristic: Unlike traditional watercolors, they can't be rewetted once they've dried. This forces a decisive, active work process in which floods and pools of color must be worked while they're still wet.

Once dry, the inked surface provides a permanent film that can be painted over without being disturbed. "You get a different look from traditional watercolor—a glazed look," says St.



Clockwise, from opposite: Highly focused imagery at the top of **Midlothian** (watercolor and acrylic ink on paper, 33x38) is played against obscured detail in the lower half.

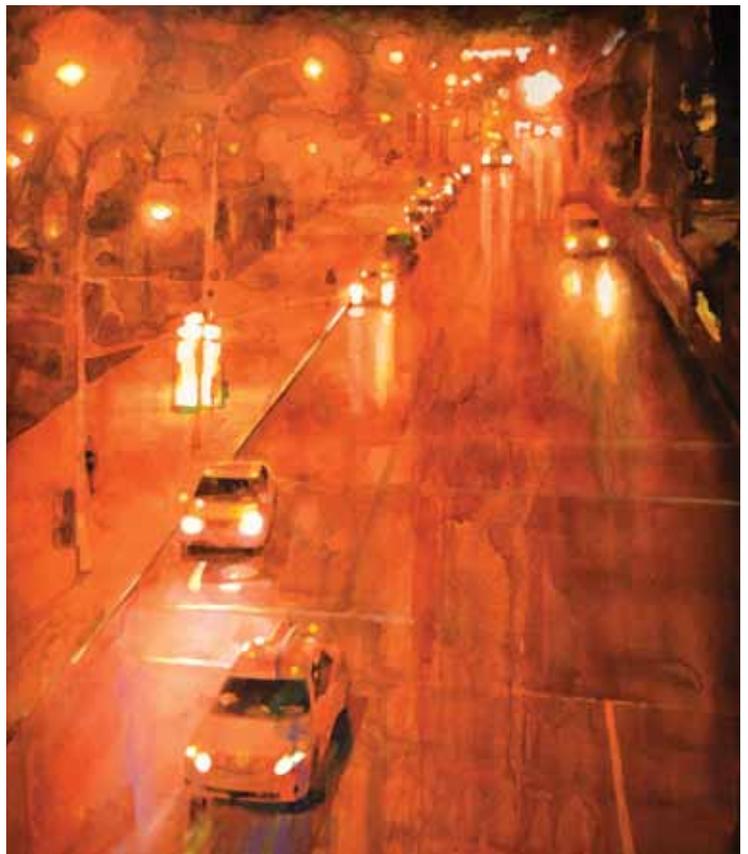
The lively handling in the shadow areas helps to create a sense of atmosphere and depth in **Papa John** (watercolor and acrylic ink on paper, 33x38).

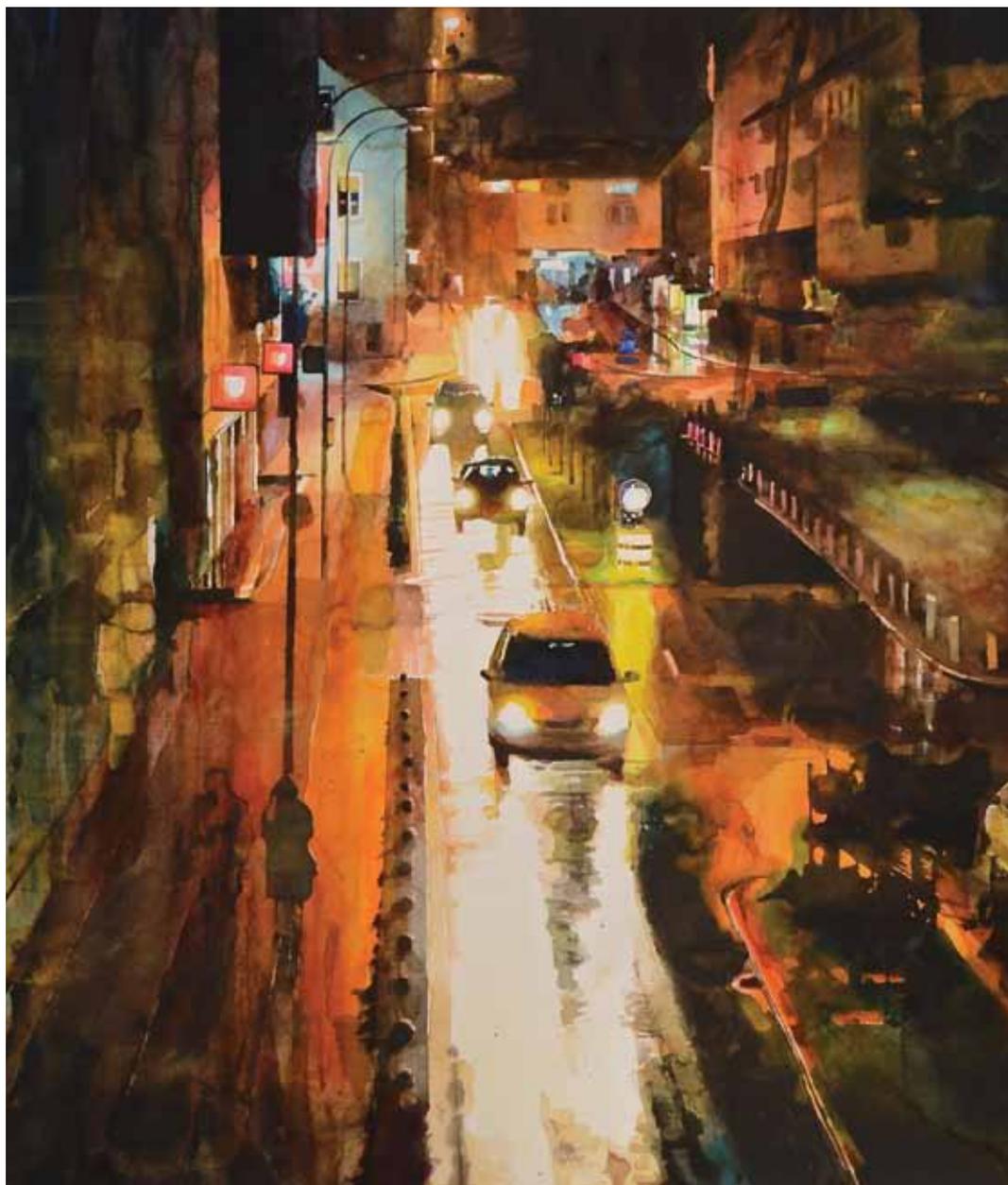
Heights (watercolor and acrylic ink on paper, 38x33) is unified by a single dominant color.

Leger. "I work in layers. I wait for things to dry and then add another layer." Since the dried layers don't interfere with each other, it's possible to obtain an enormous sense of depth by deploying successive veils of thin paint.

To handle the fluidity of inks, St. Leger dispenses with a traditional palette and the rigors of mixing multiple small amounts of color. Instead, he places his inks, sometimes diluted with water, in large jars. "I might have two greens, three reds, three yellows, four or five blues, a black, and white," he says. "I also have some traditional watercolors around that I'll sometimes mix with the inks." The artist says that he often uses traditional watercolor as a final glaze. "The neat thing about ink is that the pigment is even and flows well," he says. "But when it comes to the finish, it can be interesting to have a little more texture. In traditional watercolor, one of my favorite colors to use at the end of a painting is cobalt turquoise. It's really uneven, and using it in the final layer gives the painting a lot of atmosphere. I do something similar with Naples yellow."

To manage the scale of his painting and the liquid nature of acrylic ink, St. Leger opts to work at a large table where his paper can lie





Floods of watercolor create a suggestive haze in **Proz** (watercolor and acrylic ink on paper, 38x33).

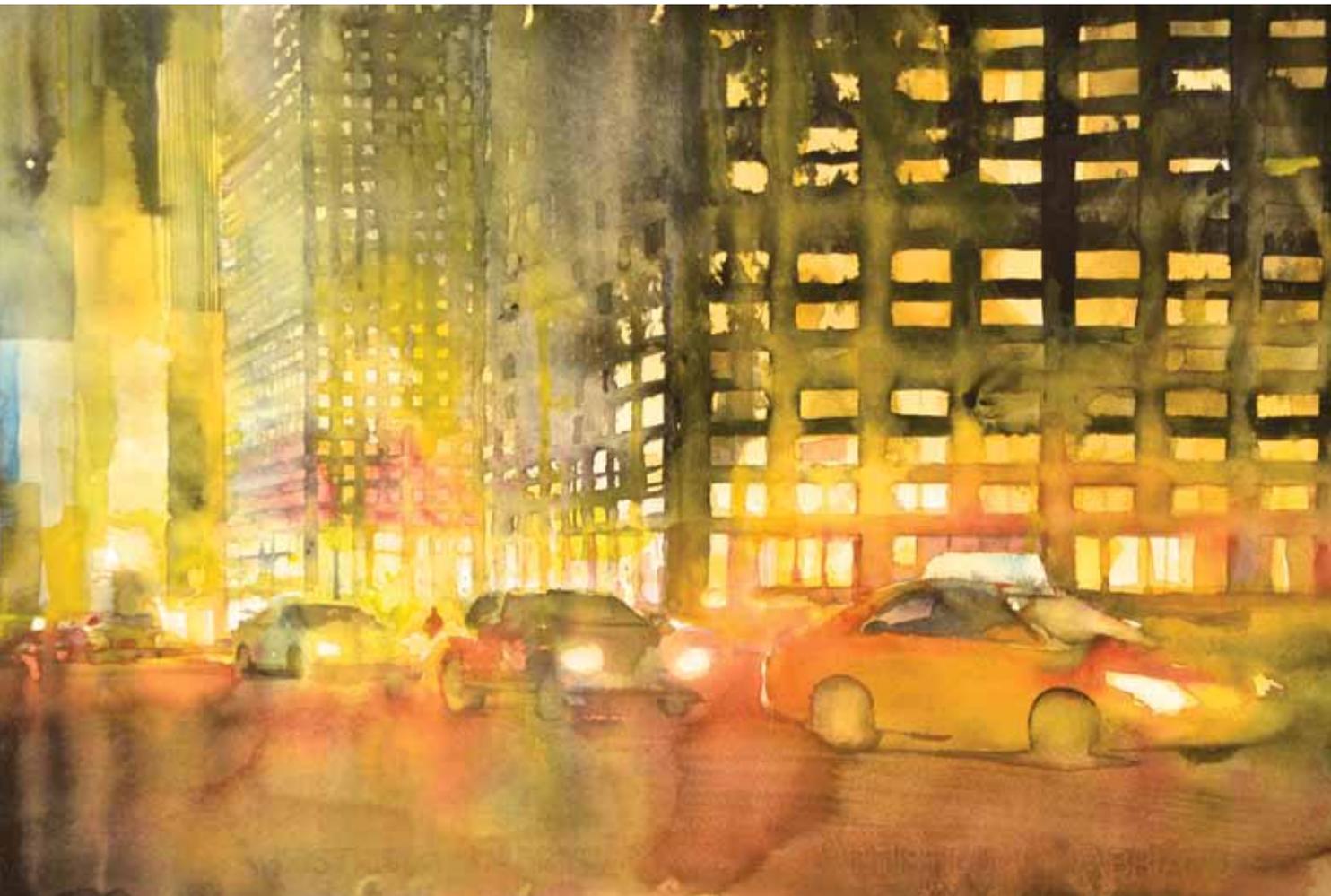
The brilliant whites in **No Pain** (opposite; watercolor on paper, 15x22) imitate the flare of overexposure when photographing direct light.

flat and undisturbed. Using mop-head brushes, the artist walks around the table to apply paint. “Mopping is a great word for the technique used with these brushes,” he says. “It’s like mopping the floor. I’ll sometimes hold the jar and mop-head brush together as I move around the painting. I often will have two or three brushes between my fingers so that I can switch quickly to a large brush from a small. Often I’m just shifting a puddle around. Once I’ve formed a puddle, I can shake the brush off, and it then becomes a mop and will absorb some of the paint, pulling it back onto the brush.”

Explore more Christopher St. Leger cityscapes at www.artistsnetwork.com/medium/watercolor/st-leger-cityscapes-gallery.

To create variety and nuance in the color, St. Leger sometimes dips his brush in multiple jars before applying it to the paper. He’ll also add colors to his pools and puddles. “If something goes on and it feels too hot, I might dip the brush in viridian and gray some of it back,” he says.

Clearly, this is a risky yet lively way to paint, and the artist says that he enjoys moving the painting along quickly. “I’m not looking to spend an infinite amount of time,” he says. “It’s as though I’m still working outdoors as I did earlier in my career. It’s not like oil painting where you can step back and think about things and then make endless adjustments or changes. Besides, I work on a table, so there’s not that much stepping back. I make decisions



quickly, and although I might dabble and adjust a little bit at the end, I like to hurry through it.”

Apart from his active flooding of paint, the other technique St. Leger uses is to tilt his paper to allow the color to run. This can make for dramatic moves and shifting veils of paint. It’s also very messy. “My work area is a disaster,” he says. “There’s color all over the floor. If I’m not making a mess, then I know something probably isn’t going right.”

Balancing Precision With the Obscure

The physicality and lively nature of St. Leger’s technique is combined with considerable control of luminosity and a sharp awareness of nuance in the more subtle passages of his paintings. In *Midlothian* (on page 00), for instance, the artist deploys brilliant color and acutely observed drawing in the upper part of the painting. He then renders the shadowy foreground in veils of subtle grays, retreating to a suggestive approach that adds considerably to the mood and mystery of the painting.

“I really like for there to be a balance between perspective and accuracy and then

tool kit

- **Surfaces:** Fabriano 300-lb. cold-pressed paper for large paintings; Fabriano 90-lb. cold-pressed paper for small paintings
- **Paints:** Liquitex acrylic inks; Winsor & Newton watercolors
- **Brushes:** Isabey mop-head brushes, No. 8 and smaller

something that’s obscure—that dissolves and is suggestive,” says St. Leger. “To have filled in and rendered every part of this image would have taken away something from the painting as a whole.”

Different levels of resolution are also apparent in night scenes such as *Apollo* (on page 00), where some details of the vehicles on the street are sharply focused while others dissolve into the drenched light and color of the scene. Here the light itself seems to be the principle subject of the painting as it envelops and overwhelms the physical objects it touches.

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In some of his recent work, St. Leger has adopted a somewhat smaller scale and a more subtle palette as he records daylight scenes with a more deadpan approach. In *Big Wall* (on page 00), for example, we see a workman cleaning graffiti from a wall with a powerwash spray. The image feels almost journalistic, and the color avoids the pyrotechnics of the night scenes.

A more abstract approach is on view in *Passadene* (on page 00), a scene of a group of buildings that the artist more or less invented. Here the painting feels carefully designed and edited while the surfaces have been built up with considerable energy. “With this one, I got more physical,” says the artist. “I really battled

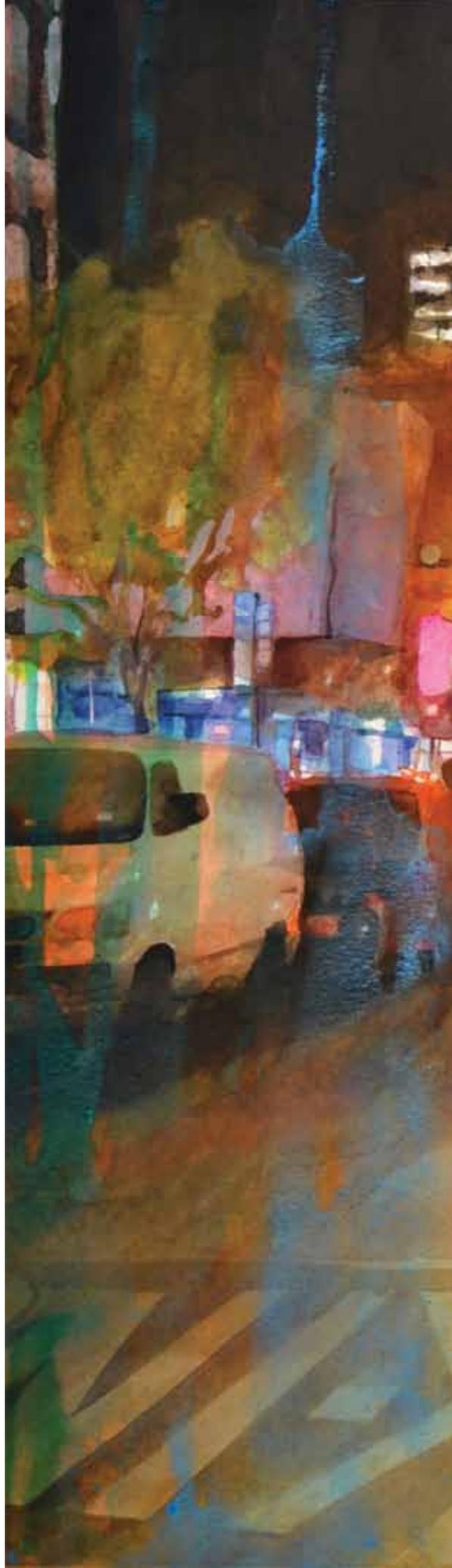
photo grids

St. Leger begins his painting process with a digital photo that reflects his current painting interest. “Recent adjustments to the way I construct my paintings have had an effect on my photography,” he says. “I’ve begun to look for more expression, more mood in my photos.”

The artist also has found confirmation for his adventurous approach to color in the magnified details of digital images, where surprisingly brilliant and unexpected colors can often be found.

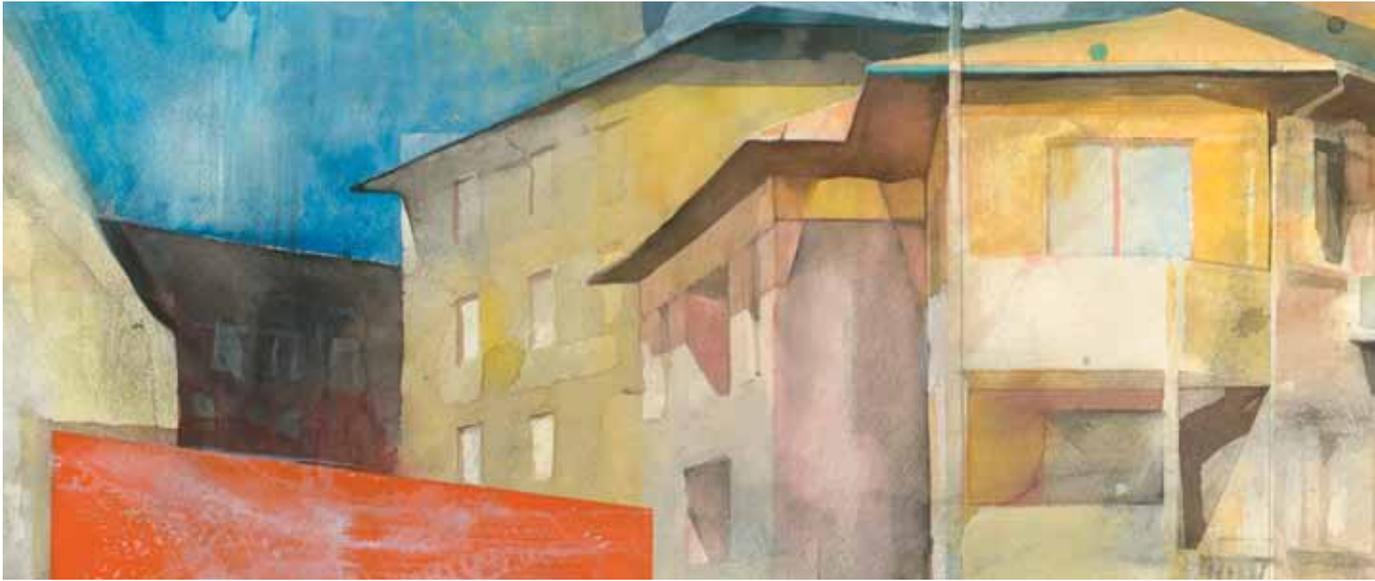
Once he has selected an image, St. Leger transfers its outlines to watercolor paper by squaring up a grid. “It’s freehand drawing,” says the artist. “I don’t use projection. I’m working on large pieces of paper, and I use a big grid with each section about 6 inches square. I then pencil in the image lightly.”

As the painting gets underway, he fine-tunes his reference by printing out sections of his photograph that are enlarged to the same scale as the corresponding surface sections. “I hold the printout right next to the area that I’m painting,” he says. “It almost feels like a kind of copying.”





The dramatic use of dripping and flooding in **Apollo** (watercolor and acrylic ink on paper, 38x33) provides a sense of blurred vision on a wet night.



Clockwise,
from above:

In more recent works such as **Passadene** (watercolor on paper, 15x22), the artist has been experimenting with abstracted and simplified form.

The flooding and splashing of watercolor in **Big Wall** (watercolor on paper, 15x22) seems to relate to the subject as a worker power washes a wall.

Instead of the pyrotechnics of his night scenes, St. Leger adopts a more gentle set of harmonies in **Prefabs** (watercolor on paper, 15x15), giving a quiet, reflective feel to the painting.





with it. I tore part of it off, and I sprayed some of it. I started getting rough with the paper. I think I was getting bored with the larger precise works, and I was figuring out how much the paper can handle. There's a focus on the texture and how the watercolor dries."

An Explosion of Inspiration

St. Leger's open, experimental attitude toward watercolor may stem from the way he first approached it. Originally a student of architecture, he taught himself how to paint. "I began painting with watercolors while on a biking adventure in Europe when I was 23," he recalls. "A friend had given me a beginner set of seven colors, and while stopping in Bath [England], I encountered the striking watercolors of contemporary British artist Ian Potts that were on exhibit at Six Chapel Row Contemporary Art. This was the closest I'd experienced to sudden, explosive inspiration."

St. Leger was also inspired on his trip by the work of Gottfried Salzmann (Austrian; 1943-) and Oskar Koller (German; 1925-2004) at Galerie Welz in Salzburg. "This was more or less my path to education in the medium," he says. "From Piet Mondrian's flowers and Paul

Klee's geometric abstractions, to Winslow Homer and Sam Francis, I find myself interested in practically anyone who paints in watercolor. It's so immediate and unique to each individual."

With his dazzling night visions and more serene daylight subjects, St. Leger seems intent on exploring multiple facets of urban life. But he's also interested in continuing to develop the way his paintings look and feel.

"I'd like to rely less and less on photography while retaining the sense of realism that I've built over the years," the artist says. "I'd like to flatten the picture, which I've already begun doing, with less complex one-point perspectives or axonometric compositions. I'd then like to build back up to the large scale. But the single most important aspect—the one that's also the most beguiling—is to remain loose and to be playful." 

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