

Ancient & MODERN

ROME-BASED ARTIST **WENDY ARTIN** RELIES ON HER EXPERT EYE, FEATHERWEIGHT TOUCH AND A TRUST IN WATERCOLOR TO INFUSE HER SUBJECT MATTER WITH LIFE AND LUMINOSITY.

By John A. Parks



ABOVE
Via dei Fori Imperiali
(watercolor on jute paper, 11x20)

OPPOSITE
Muhammad Ali, John and Yoko
(watercolor on paper, 41x26)



Wendy Artin paints with a miraculous balance of lucid observation, sensitive touch and energetic handling of watercolor. Working primarily in Rome, she manages to convey all the splendors of sun on ancient stone; the delicate detail of tiled roofs, weathered columns and domes; and the majesty of parasol pines. She accomplishes this by using watercolor in its most glorious form: fresh brushstrokes, blooms, floods, puddles and blends that somehow combine to re-create a compelling light-filled world.

INTELLIGENT EYE & FLUID HANDLING

Beyond her cityscapes, Artin brings a combination of intelligent eye and fluid handling to a variety of subject matter—figures, statues, walls, cars, columns and more. Often working in long series, she finds that each subject elicits a somewhat different response. She paints figures minimally, with deftly chosen tones and dissolving edges that allow the image to emerge from the white of the paper.



Her cityscapes fall into two main categories: topographical studies in monochrome that can include intense observation of architecture, and full-color closeup paintings of walls festooned with graffiti and posters. Unlike the figure studies, these paintings often delight in a wealth of information and a rich serving of detail.

Meanwhile, the artist's paintings of sculpture fall somewhere in between. More completely described than her figural work, they retain a similar clarity of form and a sense of purity.

All of Artin's works project a comprehensive and present sense of light, and a pervasive luminosity that derives from a deep understanding of how light falls on form and plays in the air and among the dust to create an enveloping atmosphere and mood.

WHEN IN ROME

After 25 years in Rome, Artin paints the city with all the advantages of intimacy and familiarity. She's deeply cognizant of the history of art and names a slew of masters as influences, ranging from Phidias to Sargent, Michelangelo to Emil Nolde. But her response to the city is fresh, direct and undeniably lyrical. "My paintings of Rome are about light and form and watercolor," she says. "They're about the way the Mediterranean fills the air so much with light that the shadows become transparent and crisp, like a watercolor puddle. They're about the sun sliding across the façade of a ruin, squeezing the shadows till they suddenly switch to the other side. They're

CLOCKWISE
FROM LEFT
Putto (watercolor
on paper, 11½x9½)

**Small Arches Villa
Adriana** (watercolor
on paper, 5x7)

Ganges (charcoal
on paper, 43x43)



about the beautiful rows of columns in a rounded arc, each with its own shadow; about the domes with their delicate details; about the parasol pines, so dark and velvety; about how the paint, if you put it onto the puddle at the right time, will go just where it's meant to go before the Roman sun evaporates its movement midstream."

This unabashedly poetic engagement with the city can be seen in *Via dei Fori Imperiali* (on page 46). Here a trio of Rome's famous parasol pines stands in the foreground, offsetting a view of a church in front of a group of ancient columns. The acuity of the artist's vision is at work in her rendering of the details of roof tiles and the delicate ribs of the dome of the church. These are set against much looser painting in the foreground trees and broad shadows of the buildings. The rich forms of the tree foliage are conjured from blooms and puddles of paint; much of the foreground simply dissolves into an expanse of white



paper. It's a perfect balance between the power of suggestion and the delight of precision.

"What I really most want with a cityscape is for it to capture the essence of the place—the light and the form—in a way that's precise enough for it to look exactly right, but also loose enough to please me tactilely," says the artist.

"I LOVE THE WEIRD, RANDOM COMBINATIONS OF IMAGES AND WORDS THAT CAN FLOW TOGETHER LIKE AN ABSTRACT SYMBOLIST POEM."

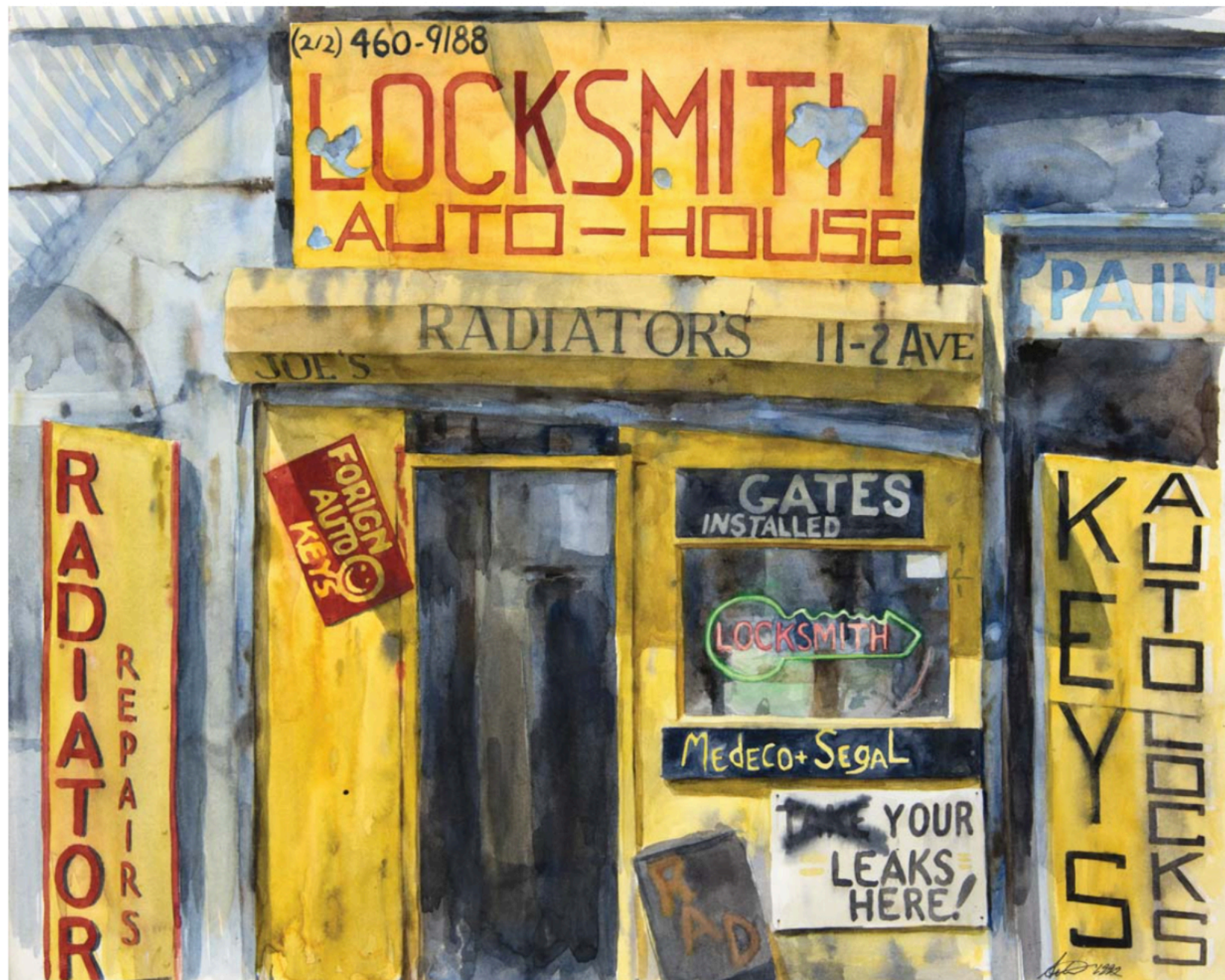
MARKS & ILLUSIONS

To achieve a balance between exactitude and the more suggestive qualities of watercolor, Artin usually makes a number of small preparatory sketches before launching into a painting. They help her establish the composition and basic proportions, giving her an early sense of how the image will read. But working small

and fast also provides an opportunity to make some special magic.

"I like for the marks on the paper almost to compete with the illusion that's created," Artin says, "so that you're always on the edge of that moment of recognition, which I find exciting. You go back and forth between 'now it's a shape of a watercolor puddle; now it's a dome; now it's just a wash of sepia watercolor; now it's a row of treetops.'"

This condition of paint marks teetering on the brink of recognition as objects is apparent in *Putto* (on page 48),



RIGHT
If Even Matter
(watercolor on paper, 41x26)

OPPOSITE
Yellow Locksmith
(watercolor on paper, 14x17)

a sketch done in the Piazza Navona under a blazing sun. Energetic brushmarks are joined with blooms and spatters in a way that suggests the young body is just now materializing, a gloriously playful tension between chaos and order.

In *Small Arches Villa Adriana* (on page 49), a single area of loose brushwork represents the deep shadow and contained volume of the ruinous archway, while the exterior walls are achieved using just a few swaths of thin wash.

After completing her preparatory sketches, Artin selects a larger paper size and begins her work. "I usually do a few light guiding lines, or something like a gesture line of the shape, and then dive in," she says. This initial line is done using a soft brush line, not pencil. "If I started with a pencil line, then I'd get too involved with the drawing."

She establishes the major proportions, seeking out squares and rectangles, and comparing heights and column widths. "I'm not extremely precise," Artin says. "I improvise and have to admit that the final composition isn't often exactly what I thought it would be, but that's OK, since the marks are somewhat unpredictable, too, if they're loose enough to be interesting. I usually can work for two to three hours before the light changes so much that it's impossible to continue. If the weather holds, I return to the same spot the next day and beyond until I complete the painting."

STATUES AS FRIENDS

Artin's paintings and drawings of statues are natural extensions of her cityscapes. "Just as the cities are everyone's cities, statues are everyone's statues," she says. "They're like each person's friend in a city—friends who represent and express something for



each person. I love that cities belong to so many different people, and that so many different lives intertwine and intersect in so many different ways, and yet there are always the same references. The statues are so accessible—such large 'people' populating the piazzas, the façades, the bridges, totally absorbed in their role. Personally, I can't help but see them as alive, yet, at the same time, surprisingly and reliably immobile."

When drawing or painting statues, Artin takes on the challenges of rendering complex form in space. In *Ganges* (on page 49), she deploys a broad charcoal attack to create a variety of line and tonal qualities.

Toolkit

PAINTS

- primarily Winsor & Newton, but also Sennelier, Schmincke, Holbein, M. Graham and Daniel Smith

SURFACE

- Canson Mi-Teintes, Rives BFK, Arches watercolor, Khadi, Fabriano Roma "... and a few other terrific watercolor papers from Amalfi," Artin says.

BRUSHES

- Escoda. "I've never tried a brush by Escoda that wasn't marvelous."



ABOVE
Shield and Mane
(watercolor on paper, 41x49)

The drawing intensifies in the head and the hands while falling away in the drapery. The artist uses an eraser to pull out the lights in the forms, which increases their power and contributes to the general sense of strength and clarity that pervade the piece.

Artin's fascination with statues led her to paint a series of watercolors of the Parthenon frieze, depicting sections from both the British Museum collection and the Acropolis Museum, in Athens. In *Shield and Mane* (above), she captures the glories of the sculpture with its dynamic movement and fine detail still evident among the chipped and fractured stone.

There's always a risk in rendering another work of art, a chance that the new piece will be compared unfavorably

with its subject. But in this case, we sense the strength of Artin's engagement with the ancient work; the power of her observation spurs us to look more closely ourselves.

ON THE WALL

Artin's paintings of walls have a completely different feel. Entirely frontal and painted in color, they present the viewer with a closeup account of a surface. We're invited to contemplate the accumulation of popular posters, signage and graffiti in a variety of cities, including New York, Paris, London and Rome. "I love the way the walls describe daily life in a city: storefront grates, tattered signs, graffiti," says Artin. "They show what

some people thought was so important that it had to be made public. I love the weird, random combinations of images and words that can flow together like an abstract symbolist poem."

In these works, Artin captures the texture and substance of masonry, piping, grills, meshes and any other furnishings that appear on the wall. The subjects also present some technical challenges, including rendering the characteristics of other media, such as spray paint, stenciling and offset printing.



On Edge(s)

The airy quality of Artin's cityscapes and landscapes is a result, in part, of the variety of edges that she maintains in a single piece. "If you're working in monochromatic watercolor, there just aren't that many elements that you're controlling, but edges are one of them," she says. "I love edges—soft edges; edges with a bit of blossom; crisp, watery edges; and ragged edges. Different parts of the brush, and different brushes, make radically different edges."

The main challenge, of course, is determining which edges will be soft and which will be hard. "My basic rule of thumb is that you follow what you see in front of you," the artist says. "Where you see a crisp line, you want a crisp edge. Where you see a fuzzy line, you want to blend. If working wet-on-dry, the edge will be crisp. If working wet-into-wet, it will be soft. To get soft edges, I either wet the paper beforehand to work wet-into-wet, or I blend the wet-on-dry edge of the watercolor mark with a damp brush."

Pines (watercolor on paper, 17x15)



RIGHT
Watching Wall
(watercolor on paper, 11x15)

In *Muhammad Ali, John and Yoko* (on page 47), the artist depicts a doorway in New York City in which posters and graffiti cling to metal and wood panels. The “Active Doorway” sign provides an urgent reminder that the entry does actually function. The accretion of posters has left a partial view of John Lennon and Yoko Ono, as well as a peculiar three-legged soccer ball and a picture of Muhammad Ali.

Although Artin generally concentrates on conveying the world as she finds it, she occasionally makes adjustments for poetic or aesthetic reasons. In this painting, she removed a picture of a rapper, replacing it with that of the boxing legend. Throughout the painting, there’s an excitement in the tension between the care and sensitivity of the rendering and the rough crudity of the subject.

A similar set of forces is in play in *Watching Wall* (on page 53), a corner of New York City’s Soho district, where graffiti and torn posters appear on a roughly textured surface. The artist has taken on the further complication of a green hydrant, whose angled neck features a pair of plugs that form a sort of eerie robotic face. Other pairs of eyes seem to emerge from the posters and graffiti. The three-dimensional interpretation of

the hydrant is impeccable, and while the work is far from being a trompe l’oeil painting, it sets up a surprisingly taut sense of space.

While the New York City paintings have something of the hard energy of that locale, Artin’s paintings of Roman walls take on a warmer quality. *Pink Roman Wall* (at left) showcases a series of old grills, signs and fittings set in a strangely improbable arrangement on a roughly painted stucco wall. The tiny plaque above the house number is a relief of the famous wolf sculpture that’s the emblem of the city. A tenderness in the painting matches the richly attractive hodge-podge of the wall itself, as if Artin is conspiring with the city in its endless ability to serve up objects and places of beauty.

AN ODE TO VISUAL JOY

Throughout all of Artin’s work, we sense a strong desire to share moments of insight, the pleasure of simply being in certain places and the sheer joy of

CLOCKWISE
FROM LEFT
Pink Roman Wall
(watercolor on paper, 13x10)

Column Capital
(watercolor on paper, 30x22)

Column Capital No. 2
(watercolor on paper, 30x22)



looking at the world in all its variety. “I hope that people will respond to my work by loving it,” she says, “saying it’s exactly right. This is the essence of the thing I’m painting—that people love the marks, the way that watercolor seems to do it by itself—and that they want to look at the drawing or painting again and again. I hope that the pictures will make people return to moments of visual joy—to appreciate, for example, the dark, frothy parasol pines, and the gorgeous rust stain beneath a drain pipe.” **WA**

John A. Parks is a painter, a writer and a member of the faculty of the School of Visual Arts in New York.

Meet the Artist



Wendy Artin (wendyartin.com) was born in Boston, and was an avid artist as a child. “Drawing was a way to keep myself entertained in the museums where my parents brought me, a way to express myself as an awkward teenager,” she says. She attended a liberal arts college “for practical purposes,” majoring in French literature at the University of Pennsylvania while filling her free time with art classes. Afterward, she attended art school, first at the École des Beaux-Arts, in Paris, and then

for a master’s of fine art at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University, in Boston. She spent some time traveling and painting in Central America and Europe before settling in Rome. She has since exhibited her work widely both in the United States and Europe. Her watercolors of ancient sculptures were the subject of an exhibition at the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, at the University of Michigan, in 2015. Her work is represented by Gurari Collections, in Boston, and the Galerie du Passage, in Paris.