# Refined Oils

## British expat Julyan Davis makes his home — and his art — in Asheville, North Carolina

*By* RANDALL CURB
*Photographs by*
PETER FRANK EDWARDS

Julyan Davis painting in Asheville's river district: a landscape of faded industry undergoing swift change.

# In

HIS 1934 BOOK *STARS FELL ON ALABAMA*, CARL CARMER wrote that that state was as different from the rest of America as was "the Congo." Carmer, a New York State native, lived only six years in Alabama before returning North to write about that "strange country" and his experiences there. More than fifty years later, an aspiring young British artist named Julyan Davis, brought up in and around London, stumbled upon Carmer's book, read it, and was intrigued by — to use some of Carmer's subject headings — "Tuscaloosa Nights," "The Red Hills," and "Conjure Country." Julyan had completed his degree in painting and printmaking at London's Byam Shaw School of Art in 1988, and not long thereafter flew to the States to travel by Greyhound bus through the Deep South.

This fleeting trip whetted his appetite, as did further reading in Southern history and literature. He was particularly fascinated by the peculiar story of a doomed colony of Bonapartist refugees who settled in Demopolis, Alabama, in the first decade of the 1800s, intending, with little understanding of the unforgiving local climate, to raise grapes and olives. It's the kind of romantic, ill-fated story that I would learn is always sympathetic to Julyan's imagination.

By the spring of 1990, Julyan was back in Alabama and staying with a friend he'd made on the spot in Tuscaloosa. There he met the striking Madeleine Bains, an Alabama girl studying acting at the university. I was living, as I still do, in Greensboro, a quiet, once cotton-rich antebellum town thirty-five miles south of Tuscaloosa. That March, a friend who was directing Madeleine in a play brought her and Julyan to spend a Sunday with me — and to see the real wisteria-draped, Greek Revival-porticoed, small-town South. Julyan spent much of the afternoon sneezing — azalea pollen was thick as fur — but he loved the place, and now I have lost track of all his many stays with me. He often brings English friends and relatives to experience what he sees as one of the South's "genuine articles." His mother, Suzy, who lives in Bristol, England, and also paints, is a particular Greensboro aficionado.

I felt immediate affection for both Julyan and Madeleine, and we began to visit often. Indeed, I spent the summer of 1991 in England so I'd be around for Julyan's wedding to Madeleine there that August. By then, Julyan had begun painting Southern subjects, and he and Madeleine settled in the South — first Atlanta, then Birmingham, and now Highlands and Asheville, North Carolina — where they have lived ever since.

Julyan quickly established his central artistic vision of the South — and hoopskirts and honeysuckle play no part in it. An abandoned foundry in a seedy suburb of Tuscaloosa was one of the first Alabama sights he wanted to paint. Faulknerian decadence and the marginalized world of such stories as Carson McCullers' rawboned "Ballad of the Sad Café" are dear to his temperament. When he first came to Greensboro, he didn't know the iconic Walker Evans photographs from *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, almost all of which were taken in the immediate area, or the work of Evans's protégé William Christenberry, many of whose best-known photographs are of Greensboro's Hale County. But he soon absorbed them, and he cites a photo by Doris Ulmann that illustrates what draws him to the "seamier side" of the South. It's of, in his words, "a girl of singular beauty, sitting among a crowd of Appalachian children," very much the odd one out.

"I've always had empathy," he says, "with the constrained characters of old ballads, and in a way my empty landscapes are haunted by such ghosts… So for me the seamier side is about capturing the day-to-day backdrop for, well, any of our lives. It's about that pull created between the beauty I see in the color, light, and pattern of something and the objective fact that it would be considered by many to be negligible or even ugly." His depictions of my home county — old barns, abandoned mansions, a disused bank interior, the outside of a homely washeteria — bear out this empathy, which, through the sensitivity and craft no photograph can realize, often translates into an unsentimental grace.

Julyan works almost exclusively in oils. The first painting he gave me — a casual seated portrait of Madeleine in their Birmingham apartment, with a sketched-

PAINTINGS COURTESY OF BLUE SPIRAL 1, ASHEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA

*LEFT:* Davis puts the finishing touches on a painting of Asheville's Riverside Cemetery, home to the graves of Thomas Wolfe and O. Henry, among others. *ABOVE:* *Riverside Cemetery*, oil on canvas


*LEFT:* *Southern*, oil on canvas, private collection

*ABOVE:* The folklore and past glories of the American railroad remain an inspiration for Davis' work.

*LEFT:* Items in the artist's studio *BELOW: Montford Avenue*, oil on canvas, private collection. "My paintings are foremost about mood – a wet Sunday afternoon, a view glanced through a window on the way to work," Davis says. *OPPOSITE: Bank Interior, Newbern, Alabama*, oil on canvas

in painting on the wall behind her that is also a Julyan Davis — was an oil. So was the second — a deserted Birmingham alleyway as lonely as an Edward Hopper nightscape and as shadowfully eerie as a de Chirico. From the beginning, I was astonished by the range of styles in which he was proficient.

Always in love with art, Julyan started painting in watercolor at about age twelve, but at school he concentrated on printmaking. Though work in other media informed his devotion to oils of the past twenty years, he says his oil painting was largely self-taught. A born autodidact, he quickly mastered the technique of classic landscape as exemplified by John Constable and the Barbizon school, and selling those traditional pastorals — some English, some Southern — helped pay the bills in his first decade in America. But all the while he was exploring other approaches and subjects that, while not then very marketable, helped satisfy his ambitions for a more idiosyncratic style. Influences in those years included post-impressionists such as Bonnard and Vuillard, Chaim Soutine, Marsden Hartley, and the expressionists.

In the mid-1990s, Julyan began to participate in group shows around the South, as well as in Maine, Washington, and New York. I was once again in London in the summer of 1994, when he was showing work in a gallery in Mayfair. As he couldn't attend the opening, Suzy, some other friends, and I gave him a running commentary via mobile phone from the pavement in Dover Street.

Then, in 1996, the Davises moved to Highlands, and Julyan embarked on an extensive and commercially successful series of North Carolina scenes: mountainscapes at all times and seasons, rivers and waterfalls, and some forest compositions defined by dozens of strong perpendiculars. They are trees, of course, but from a distance you might mistake those canvases for abstracts. Asked about what role abstraction plays in his frankly representational painting, Julyan says, "I have often lazily referred to myself as a frustrated abstract painter, but that is not entirely true. I would enjoy the occasional abstract painting, but I would dread the strict harness of doing nothing but that." I can hear his keen resistance in the very word *harness*.

Moving inexorably but never reflexively from classical realism in landscapes, still lifes, and the occasional portrait, to a freer, more personally gratifying technique has been Julyan's real education as an artist. Doing this by stages, he says, "taught me to bide my time, learn more, and find a way to keep the best of both worlds.

"[Today] I have a technique that daily

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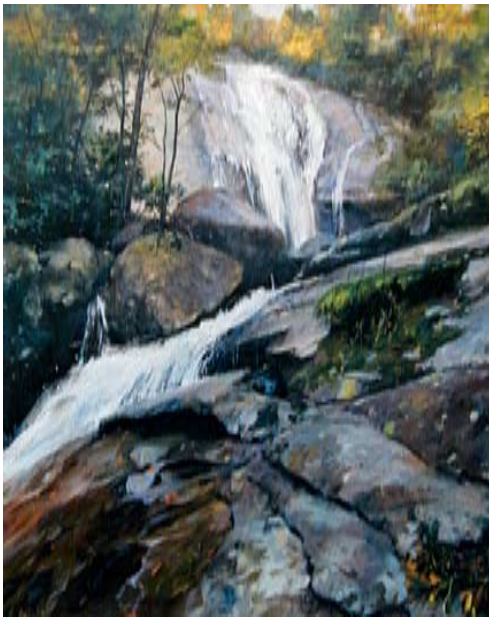
*BANK INTERIOR, NEWBERN, ALABAMA*, COURTESY OF MASON MURER FINE ART, ATLANTA, GEORGIA



*LEFT:* *Washeteria*, oil on canvas
*BELOW:* *Green House*, oil on canvas, private collection
*RIGHT:* *Middlecreek Falls*, oil on canvas. "I began as a realist. My new, more painterly work incorporates much of modernism," says Davis.

surprises me — which is essential to continuing as an artist — and that has room to move forward and maintain a broad range of description. My issue with modernism has always been the easy sacrifice of communication for the shock of the new. [J.M.W.] Turner could paint hoarfrost in November mists; post-impressionism could not. To lose any subject only because it is just too delicate or detailed for one's technique is, to me, questionable."

Though he is sometimes annoyed by an art aesthetic that over-celebrates the value of brilliance of color, Julyan is an astute and imaginative colorist. He may start a landscape or still life by aiming his palette at verisimilitude, then find that his eye skews things a bit, adding qualities in harmony with, but distinctive from, the nakedly perceived subject. "I want a painting to look like a painting," he says.

"I definitely don't want to start a picture knowing absolutely what the final result will be." He might choose a subject because of its chromatic appeal, but he finds that "one color will often adjust another, completely unrelated to the actual color in the subject before me. This is visible in my work in a certain 'halo' effect, where past color choices can be seen at the edge of a plane of color, in a sort of tide-line effect."

Such discovery goes on constantly and intuitively, of course, and I have often sat talking non-stop with him while he paints, listening as he keeps up a steady stream of detailed narrative, opinion, and occasional invective, not realizing that all the while he is working through intricate nuances of color and light.

I love it when I can pick out little signatures in a Julyan Davis, just as I love his very English sense of humor and his continued amusement at things American. His wit often emerges in an incongruous still life, such as his series of phases of the moon identified by ever larger bites taken out of MoonPies, or his luminous *Okra and Coke* — a bottle of Coca-Cola one-third full with three pods of ripe okra resting against it. A serious devotee of blues, bluegrass, and Appalachian ballads, he always has music playing in his studio, and on a recent Sunday afternoon in Alabama we rode around scouting subjects with growly Delta blues blaring from the CD deck.

Painting *en plein air* calls for a different sound track. "The best part of it," Julyan confesses, "is the wildlife. Outdoors I notice all the activity, and because it is a quiet pursuit, the critters get used to me and just go about their business. There is a story of how a field mouse crawled into Constable's pocket as he sat, so still, drawing a scene." Julyan's own easy presence in the outdoors could lead to just such an incident.

I haven't yet been to the 1920s house in Asheville that Julyan and Madeleine recently bought, but I'm delighted by how congenial that town is to them. This summer Julyan had a major exhibit at Asheville's Blue Spiral 1 gallery, where he has frequently introduced new work, and since acquiring a studio in town, he has begun doing more portraits. Characteristically, he chooses the non-*soignée* as models.

"They're a feisty group of women," he observes. "I paint them in their own clothes — dance clothes, theatre costumes, whatever they prefer. These girls, with their tattoos and piercings, are direct relatives of the Barbara Allens I painted twenty years ago." My favorite of these is a willowy belly dancer whom he has rendered with the sultriness and expressive modeling of an exotic by Julyan's hero Velázquez.

Asheville seems a perfect fit for Julyan. It's surrounded by deep Southernness, with inherent old traditions and values. "But it's also," he says, "an oasis from some of those past values. There are many 'refugees' from the rest of the South here — people who didn't fit in back in Georgia, or Tennessee, who bring much energy to a less judgmental future and yet have an attractive affection for the homes and life they left behind."

The ironies in this remark are telling, since both Julyan's personality and his artistry thrive on dichotomies, tensions, paradoxes. Painting for him — and he paints nine hours a day, six days a week — means confronting such paradoxes and tensions and resolving them the only way he knows how, with the tools of his trade. He chooses his subject, his viewpoint, his scale, and his focus. Then the challenge really begins — that of, in his words, "finding a new way to capture a familiar effect, a new kind of mark, say, one that is both ugly and beautiful, or that conveys only paint at one moment and the world observed at the next. This is what keeps me going."

And, I hope, will keep him in the Congo that's the South for years to come.

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