

# Song of the South

by Norm Powers . photos by Brent Fleury



British-born painter Julian Davis was drawn to explore the American South by the works of Harper Lee, Carson McCullers and William Faulkner. Behind him are two works-in-progress inspired by Southern ballads: (l-r) *Banks of the Ohio* and *Barbara Allen*.

WHEN THE BRITISH-BORN PAINTER Julian Davis was growing up in London, two creative streams—one visual, one literary—began carrying him toward a transatlantic crossing and the American South.





**TOP:** *Mailbox, Delta*, 36x48 inches, oil on canvas  
**BOTTOM:** *House, Canton*, 48x60 inches, oil on canvas.

moss along a lonely dirt road or the heavy air of a southern summer settled on fields of cotton or tobacco.

In a way, Julyan was depicting unexplored territory, as the South has few widely known, native-born landscape artists—a fact that



‘Americanophile’ for sure, although more drawn to the Southwest.”

Not long after graduating from London’s Byam Shaw School of Art in 1988, Julyan made the leap to these shores and found himself on a Greyhound bus heading for Dixieland, ending up

demanding a certain respect in Julyan’s mind. “Because the South has so little cataloging of its appearance in paint, it still is best handled with some realism,” Julyan explains. “Much of southern visual culture was provided by northern visitors, from Winslow Homer to a lot of WPA work. The South often imported its artistic experience.”

But an independent eye can bring fresh perspectives to familiar objects, and Julyan’s depictions of aging storefronts, stucco walls faded to soft pastels, rutted dirt tracks interrupting expanses of open country, all take reverent note of the quiet dignity and the stubborn survival of a culture and a landscape that’s kept its character despite the upheavals of history. Particularly poignant is a series of interior studies of an abandoned mansion in Alabama, washed in a blue-tinged haze of memory and loss, the tattered and broken rooms awaiting their fate.

Further creative opportunities arrived when Julyan visited friends in Highlands, North Carolina, where the rugged terrain

The visual current arose from a family tradition of landscape painting inspired by the gentle contours of Somerset and Devon, a tradition that put pen and paper in Julyan’s hands in early childhood. The literary impulsion began flowing in school where *To Kill A Mockingbird* was required reading. “That turned me on to Faulkner, McCullers, Welty, O’Connor,” Julyan recalls. “And my father was an

in Birmingham, Alabama. His travels around the state inspired his first series of American landscapes, a departure from his earlier works in Britain, which had been heavily weighted toward portraiture. With his family’s attachment to landscape made stronger by his travels around the South, Julyan began producing a collection of evocative landscapes in oil that captured the textures of the South: feathery Spanish





**LEFT:** Julyan Davis in his element: plein air painting. “The scenery, and particularly the atmospheric variations that come with the mountains, keep landscape work constantly interesting,” he says. **RIGHT:** *Cascade*, 60x64 inches, oil on canvas

attracted his eye. “The scenery, and particularly the atmospheric variations that come with the mountains, keep landscape work constantly interesting,” Julyan says. “And there’s the creative environment provided by the strong crafts scene here, and the fact that the wilderness scenery is still relatively unexplored by artists and the urban scenery hardly at all.”

Julyan has since settled in Asheville, and the work that the area has inspired employs a brighter palette and compositional elements that acknowledge an historical debt. “I look to Velàsquez and Turner for painterly technique, to Van Gogh and the Expressionists for ‘gutsiness,’” Julyan says. Both streams seem most evident in *Billboard*, one of Julyan’s Appalachian scenes; the “gutsiness” evident in the bold composition, and the craftsmanship embodied in the delicately portrayed flowers and the diffuse brushwork of the background landscape.

Julyan frequently takes summer trips to Maine, where his artistic response to

the landscape moves further toward the American Impressionist school of Childe Hassam, John Twachtman or Frank Benson. Unlike the South, the Maine coast is well-trod territory, which lays fewer restrictions on contemporary artists.

“Maine has been painted to death,” Julyan says, “Up there, you can go as far as you wish. You can only abstract effectively from very familiar subject matter. You need a very explored, even worn-out world.” The work painted in and around Stonington, Maine, depicts both natural and man-made features of the landscape enveloped in an almost eerie light born of fog and sea or, in the case of Julyan’s view of Penobscot Bay, with a startling blue that implies both the sea’s bounty and its violence. Indeed, the range of style and technique displayed in works from Alabama, the Appalachians and Maine is unusual for landscape painting, one of the most rigidly defined of genres. “I approach quite a broad range of subject matter compared to most landscape artists,” Julyan admits. “That is also part of the challenge

of painting, I guess. I try to bring along all the lessons I have learned.”

In keeping with this exploratory orientation toward his work, Julyan has, at times, turned completely away from landscape to add to a series of character portraits drawn from Appalachian folklore and ballads, begun more than a decade ago and painted on oak and other nontraditional surfaces. “The Appalachians have been, since my childhood, a rich source of these narratives, songs of love and loss, murder and passion,” Julyan explains. “I’ve also painted completely abstract pieces for my own satisfaction. I need to explore more mediums. I tell my apprentice that...the sooner all the myriad techniques of painting become a blur—muscle memory, even—the sooner one can start to play, and from there stumble into your own voice.” □

*Julyan Davis is represented by Blue Spiral Gallery, at 38 Biltmore Avenue in Asheville, which is planning an exhibition of his work this summer. To view Julyan’s work online, visit [www.julyandavis.com](http://www.julyandavis.com).*