



Davis works on two portraits from his "Ballads" series based on Appalachian folk songs.

# Uncommon Ground

Asheville painter Julyan Davis lends a fresh eye to the landscapes of the South.

By Alli Marshall

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATT ROSE

**At first glance, Julyan Davis's work could be described as photorealism.** From across the room his Southern-themed canvases look more like sun-drenched photographs than paintings. But Davis believes his work defies that description.

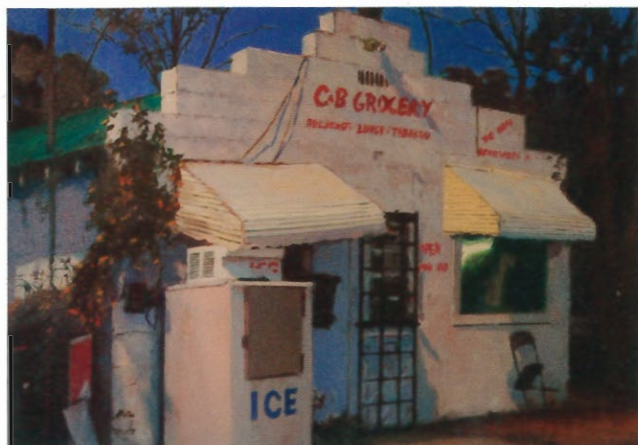
"Maybe from a distance it's very realistic, but as you get close up it falls into these blocks of color and very definite lines," he says. Look closely at "Washerteria," and the realistic effect gives way to a Cubist-inspired flattening of planes. The same is true for many of Davis's paintings: Saturated slices of Americana — a motel sign, a Laundromat, a motor court pool in winter — reveal an eerie beauty.

"It's not that I go around looking for Americana," he says. But in many ways, Americana found him.

## Southern inclination

Born in Chard, England, and raised in London, Davis came to the United States for the first time in 1988, just out of North London's Byam Shaw School of Art. He was drawn to the South after reading a history of Alabama, and he made the Library of Congress his first stop to continue research. He eventually made his way to western North Carolina — Highlands, particularly — and later moved to Asheville in pursuit of his wife's acting career.

“I try to find something that’s really close to boring, really close to completely nondescript, but something in the composition is endlessly fascinating.”



Almost photographic from far away, Davis's paintings give texture to scenes of the South.

Davis's connection to America, however, began early in his life. His first record album, acquired at age six, was a collection of American folk ballads.

In college, Davis began illustrating those ballads, mainly sea shanties to start. It grew into an obsession that stayed with him. A decade ago he embarked on the first of his painted "Ballads" series. Inspired by Southern folk art, these are framed in rough wood. One of these, "Shady Grove," depicts a girl in a gingham dress lounging on a green lawn in front of a single-wide trailer. The image flirts with a stereotype yet is at once so earnestly pretty and chillingly spooky — a coiled foreboding seems to lurk just beyond the darkened tree line — that it comes off as fresh.

And that is Davis's magic. "I try to find something that's really close to boring, really close to completely

nondescript, but something in the composition is endlessly fascinating," he says.

### Urban landscapes

Davis's landscapes are his most popular work, but he applies the same eye for composition toward his more urban scenes. "Montford Avenue," the rendering of a five-way intersection just around the corner from Davis's home (in one of Asheville's historic districts), puts a rain-slick stretch of tarmac front and center, while a warmly lit corner store recedes into the clutch of trees and sidewalks.

Another neighborhood scene, "Montford Study — Blue Car," humorously places manicured lawns and pastel flowers almost out of sight behind the behemoth back end of a '70s-era sedan. "My general leaning is



to find something beautiful in things that, in general, people overlook.”

### Preservation on canvas

“There’s very little that I’ve painted that’s the same,” Davis says, referring to the demise of the nostalgic landscape he’s drawn to. “Drive-in movie theaters in particular — I did a few of those.” Recently, the Rockola Motel in Asheville (a travel lodge dating back to the 1940s) was demolished. What remains is Davis’s interpretation in oil. A large, faded red sign reads “Motel,” while underneath an arrow instructs motorists to “Enter.” The two-story motel with its wrought iron porches and tatty furniture peeks out from one corner, annuals wither in concrete block planters, and the arched “Rockola” sign is just readable in the background. This is the blink-and-you’ll-miss-it snapshot from a speeding car, the time-bleached memory now only to be revisited on canvas. And somehow the odd angles, the washes of light, and saturated color from Davis’s palette, do the lost landmark justice.

Talking to the painter, it’s clear that he’s after more than saving time in a bottle. Davis likes a challenge.

His working style allows for just that, as he divides his time between his landscapes, his abstract paintings, and the “Ballads” series, which he has been revisiting in the past year.

Although Davis admits he has “no particular idea where the paintings will go,” he is visibly excited about the “Ballads” work. Two in-progress canvases in his studio reveal cinematic heroines, both caught in the rain, both smoking. One is “Barbara Allen” (a Hitchcock blond, alone on a dirt road); the other is “Banks of the Ohio” (a dark-haired beauty in soft-focus, pausing either helplessly or guiltily at river’s edge).

While Davis’s prowess with landscape painting is apparent in this new work, he also draws inspiration from old films. The aura of danger, the near tactile haze: Those effects are borrowed from photography, Davis explains. The intention of capturing a storyline, like a film still, in paint is his mission.

“It may be possible that a painting can’t do that, but that’s the challenge. While doing that, it lets me see what the limitations are and what the strengths are in painting,” Davis says.

And whatever the end result, the Ballads seem to draw on all aspects of this Englishman’s American education — the South both past and present, the lay of the land, the folk tales and, now, the films.

Reaching the junction where all of these forces intersect on Davis’s canvas might explain why, when asked if he feels at home in his adopted country, the painter answers, “I do now.”

*Alli Marshall lives in Asheville.*

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## if you're going

Julyan Davis’s landscapes, including his new work based on Appalachian ballads, will be on view this summer at Blue Spiral 1 Gallery, July 2nd through September 29th.

### Blue Spiral 1 Gallery

38 Biltmore Avenue  
Asheville, N.C. 28801  
(828) 251-0202

For a link to the artist’s website, go to [www.ourstate.com](http://www.ourstate.com), and click on “This Month’s Issue.”