



- Full Interview with Art of Watercolour writer Laurent Benoist & editor Janine Gallizia for the March 2013 Issue no.16

LB: Your painting Symphony of the Phoenix was awarded the Best in Show Award at the Biennial Shanghai. What prompted you to submit that particular painting? What reasons according to you made your painting stand out?

AK: The reason I submitted “Symphony of the Phoenix” was because it was the most powerful painting I had made, up until that point, and it dealt with current events. The painting is an excellent representation of my technical ability with watercolor and an intrepid concept rolled into one. Because it was current and it embodied the evolution of my previous works, I felt it gave me the best chance of being chosen for the exhibit. Being chosen for the exhibit was a tremendous honour and the fact that the painting won an award, was literally icing on the cake.

When it comes to shows, I try to show my most recent paintings. I feel they are the best representation of my art form, because they are so progressive and ever changing. This also speaks to my concepts. They are my commentary on our times. When you look around the landscape of society and politics, you have a backlash of the people vs. their ruling bodies. What I am presenting in that painting is my commentary on the state of affairs in the streets. Living in America, there is a responsibility and obligation to uphold the rights of our people, even if that means to protest and oppose the political current. Along with that, it is our job to raise our voices against corruptions and immorality. The unfortunate sign of our times is that there is a lack of communication. The collective voice of the people is silenced or not given the appropriate forum to be heard. In the case of protests and speaking out, it is supposed to allow for individuals to voice their opinions and speak to their feelings and needs. It should also create a healthy drive and push for change, because change is growth, and growth although painful, is necessary. “Libertatem Constituentes: Symphony of the Phoenix” is a realization of me digesting the world around me. I don’t think about an audience when making my paintings. I focus instead on making something that’s important to me first. It is from that truth that the painting becomes a powerful message. The majority of my work is rooted in empathy and personal introspection. Each painting parallels my life and society as it becomes a symbolic self portrait. When someone sees my work, my hope is that it creates a dialogue between their ideas and their beliefs, as well as giving them a very provocative and striking image to look at. My goal is to make something profound.

As for what makes my work different... I don’t pin my work against anyone else. I make what drives me, and I think that everyone’s work is valid and stands out to different viewers. My hope is to make paintings that first and foremost make people think, and if I have accomplished that, I can call that a successful piece. My responsibility as an artist is to challenge myself to grow while becoming a better communicator. I focus on making work that is passionate, honest, and forthright. I also believe in

being true to my personal voice regardless of trends. In time, I feel this will cause it to eventually stand out.

LB: You have mentioned that your paintings exist as part of a larger story arc (“the viewer creates the past and subsequent future, I give them the now”). How do you choose this particular moment? And how does it translate in terms of composition? For instance *The Redemption of St-Michael* and *Symphony of the Phoenix* are extremely powerful paintings, notably because of the compositional choices (ie, only parts of the model are shown): what was the process that allowed you to reach this final composition? (Long question(s), I know! Feel free to answer at length, your answer will probably be divided into several paragraphs).

AK: My process is both complicated and simple, as impossible as it sounds. My ideas are formed not through only the single moment that the concept is born out of, but in all of the moments that I spend editing the final outcome. Whether it is through sketching, writing, or just driven but themes I am reading about, the image presents itself in my mind’s eye first. I then elaborate on that idea in my sketchbook by firming up the composition and the aesthetic choices. I add symbols and subtleties that will connect the subject to my personal life and give clues to its conceptual beginnings. I do a lot of drawing in my sketchbook, that is where the ideas start to blossom into paintings. If I am reading a lot, I find that I am often inspired by a title or a phrase that grows into a visual translation that eventually comes out in the final piece. Very rarely are paintings solid ideas at their conception...they usually go through a detailed process of editing, mentally and physically. What I mean is, I will draw out various options of the same concept to work out kinks and even surprise myself. This can even happen during the reference phase while I’m composing the photographs I will use for the painting process. This helps me to rethink and strengthen the idea. I have to be open and spontaneous. Being in the moment is so important to fresh ideas. The eyes won’t lie, they will confirm or dismiss a composition instantly. Ultimately, the concept is paramount, but the visual translation of that idea is the vehicle for delivering it.

In the case of “*Libertatem Constituentes: Symphony of the Phoenix*”, I wanted to use shallow space to make it more intimate for the viewer. I cropped the figure because in my prelim drawings, that had a 3/4 figure, and the work seemed more about the actual person than the idea of protest. I wanted this piece to be about anyone, and by focusing on the potential energy stored in the figures hands and posture, I was able to capture a very specific moment. The moment before action is taken. The bandages, symbolic of a wounded society, were added to the figure to enhance the desperate nature of the scene. I chose to crop the sign because it didn’t seem to help the final composition. In many cases you have to be critical not only of what is in the work, but what is left out as well. Words are so overpowering if they are not used properly. This was not a painting to incorporate heavy text. I feel it would have overshadowed the humanism represented in the work. It was more important to be ambiguous, than to zero in on the message on the sign. The sign reads “ Stop HR 347” with a red empty set painted over the text. Ironically HR 347, which Obama signed, has clauses that tread on our First Amendment rights to assemble and protest. This made it a fitting message to the painting even though it is cropped out. I love to include messages just out of reach for the viewer. They serve as a mystery to be solved or a cipher to be decoded.

“*Redemption of St. Michael*” was a totally different situation... I had done a bunch of prelims about this concept but was running into issues on how I was going to portray the idea. The back-story of this painting is very different than how I come up with many of my other paintings. The Idea was born from a reoccurring dream I was having. The dream was vivid and epic with some rather intense moments. My challenge was to render down a massive amount of information and emotions into one

simple image. I sketched out many compositions but none seemed to encapsulate the feeling of the dream, so I shelved the idea. About a month or so later, I had the dream again. This time though, I had isolated the intensity of this vision, and the imagery was born. I worked out a couple of formats to present the figure and finally settled on the long vertical composition. My next challenge was to get the images out of my head and into a reference that I could paint from. While photographing, I remember having a tough time getting the head of the model out of the shot enough to have a decent image to start with. Well, that didn't happen, and I was pretty disappointed with the references I had captured. It wasn't until I loaded the photos on my computer and photoshopped out a few things, that it came together. It was one of those moments. Like being hit with lightning...the dream sequence came storming back. I knew I had something good.

JG: Your choice of subject is very specific, very political. Most people are aware of the current state of the hypocrisy in US politics, as it is the same everywhere, so speak as freely as you like. Please speak on why you choose the subjects you do and in an ideal world what you would like to achieve by doing so.

AK: Art is communication. The goal of my work is to communicate who I am, what I believe, and my values. I hope to start a conversation among others about the concepts I put forth. I use politics and society as a vehicle, because it is a major part of my world. It is a major part of all of our worlds! As a citizen, and even more, as a free thinker I have a responsibility to my fellow Americans. I'm not part of politics in the traditional sense, but I deal with policies like everyone else. I have very strong empathy for humanity and I feel equally as strong about human rights, and our freedoms, because it is so important to our future. My ideal hope would be to preserve and enhance our way of life... the aim of my work is not to change things, but to create a dialogue, to get people talking and thinking. Most people already know about these ideas, I'm not introducing anything new, but rather presenting it in my own voice. The fact that they see it in the art, I believe it creates awareness. The more that you see these issues presented in a personal way is important. It makes it more real. It breaks down the fear associated with it, and fear as we all know, is the greatest oppressor in our world. It causes people to turn away from injustice because they feel they may, in turn, become a target. So I take it upon myself to look at the hard questions and paint about them. My hope is that it makes it easier for others to face or talk about, even opening up an internal dialogue. People may look at my work and decide that they don't feel that way, and that's ok too. But what it does is create a spark, a thought. In many cases knowing what you *don't* want is more valuable than knowing what you *do* want. I'm not looking to take credit for change, or trying to influence peoples' beliefs or values. I'm just open to being part of the conversation. Art is a great catalyst for ideas, and can become a symbol that unites people.

LB: Your paintings have a strong political subtext, yet they are also beautiful works of art in themselves. Do you think painting aesthetically pleasing watercolours adds to the power of the message you are trying to put across?

AK: I think it does. I think it reaches an audience that is unsuspecting of that type of content, because the majority of political or social commentary in art is usually backed by a similar artistic aesthetic. Critical works often have an aggressive quality. The brushwork is very apparent or the mark making is very pronounced. My work is in direct contrast to that. It helps because it is not what we are used to seeing. There is a particular amount of time and energy that goes into making the type of art that I produce. It's a slower more deliberate process, especially when applied to watercolor. When looking at paintings like this, we tend to inspect and marvel at the details. So when the imagery is content rich, you have a two fold experience. It is both visually exciting, because the work has an achievement quality in the technique, and a thought provoking aspect that is like a treasure map

waiting to be deciphered. I feel there is a very strong seduction to look at my work because it appears like a scene out of a vivid dream sequence. It is pertaining to our reality but it has a very surreal quality to it. Part of my plan is to draw you into the painting and then make you question what is going on inside the work. It is a very subtle sensory attack that I am dedicated to perfecting. As an artist my job is to make provocative and entertaining work that is also arresting. Most importantly I enjoy planting a message into each piece. As a visual artist you want to stand out on the wall. I only have a small window of opportunity to capture someone's attention, so I take that opportunity very seriously. I take full advantage of all my skills in presenting myself to them. The best way I would compare my approach to painting is to think of a journalist presenting a piece on world affairs using poetry. What you get is a traditional idea that uses a medium to reach its audience on different levels.

LB: How are your paintings perceived? In other words, do you feel more flattered when viewers comment on the sheer beauty of your paintings or their social commentary?

AK: I am grateful regardless of what the viewer chooses to comment on. Anytime someone reacts to my work and enjoys my piece, for either reason, I feel excited about the opportunity to share my expression with them. Everyone wants something different from art. Some people respond to my technique and that is exciting. I can appreciate that response because it is one of the aspects I personally enjoy about my art. I spend time making highly rendered and studied pieces that offer an illusion of reality. It is the first thing you see when introduced to my work. Even if the viewer's inspection ends there, and they don't want to dig any further, I feel that the work is strong enough to stand on the visual aspect alone. In the same respect, if someone comments on the concept or the message of the painting, it is an equally satisfying feeling. There are numerous symbols for this person to discover and that drives me to work hard on including intelligent images to peak someone's curiosity. Just like the rendering of the image, I spend a lot of time designing and researching the aesthetic choices that go into my message. The most rewarding feedback I get is when someone appreciates my technique and it's counterpart, the thought provoking commentary. That is the ideal response.

LB: Do you think in today's world, and particularly in the States, artists are given enough latitude to express their opinions?

AK: That's a hard question to answer. At this point yes, we have a great stage for freedom of communication visually. But my fear, and part of what was driving my work on the political side, is the deterioration of human rights. When you start to see things like the Patriot Act, NDAA, SOPA/PIPA, or the Real ID Act, it causes real concerns over the direction of our government, and how much control we are relinquishing to these programs. As an artist there is a very real possibility that over time we will start to see a clamp down on freedom of speech, which includes painting and other forms of artistic expression. As you can see in my paintings "Libertatem Constituentes: Symphony of the Phoenix" and "Paradox: The Quest of Odin", I am speaking directly to the idea of suppression. We are slowly losing our ability to voice our concerns and our opinions in an open forum. It is not only our right, but our responsibility, as citizens in a democracy, to exercise our right to protest against the injustices and corruption that plagues our nation. This is something to be conscious of. It is a form of checks and balances. I think that a majority of the decisions coming out of Washington are not in line with the people's voice. That's why you have demonstrations and assemblies springing up. People are standing in opposition to what they feel is unacceptable. The biggest issue, in my opinion, is the outward physical persecution that many of these peaceful protests are faced with. Pepper spray, rubber bullets and numerous other weapons are used under the guise of public safety. Add to it the compromised media sources and the propaganda that has become our news cables, and you have an even worse situation. When government and media channels are dictating policy, and not

the people, you are treading on very thin ice, history reminds us of these exact issues. In Fine Art, artists are sheltered in a way, because of where our work is being shown. It is presented in galleries and museums and it rarely reaches the street. But people who are protesting and speaking out about their ideals are being persecuted. So as an artist, and someone with an audience and a forum, I use my skill set to try to communicate a message about what I see. I look out into the world I live in, I digest the information, and my creativity spits out the images and topics I want to talk about. Politics and society are a large component of our everyday life, however, what I find is that we generally distance ourselves from it because it is hard to deal with. I think a large majority of people have the opinion that it's someone else's problem and that "they need to fix it." This is the wrong mentality to have. We all need to help solve the issues by standing up and making our voices heard. I choose to incorporate my voice into my art. And at this point I still have the ability to do so.

LB: Do you think it's an artist role to make a statement through his paintings?

AK: Regardless of intention, I believe every artist is making a statement. It doesn't matter if you're painting beautiful flowers, intense abstracts or in my case social/political commentary. Every piece of art is communicating a message. That's what art is. It's a visual communication. It is the oldest, most versatile form of language on the planet. It's a common denominator, a cultural equalizer. For example, my painting in China depicts a man holding a protest sign. This is contemporarily universal. I created it here in America but its message is cross cultural. It has the same message regardless of text or written language. We don't need a special education to understand with our eyes. Artists in some way are using visual concepts to help drive their work. It might be composition, colour, or design and in most cases it's a combination of all three. Some artists chose to harness the communicative power of art and make it part of the work. That's where conceptual artists fall. They build a piece around a central theme or message for the viewer to discover. In general, every piece of art has a concept. Some are simple while others are much more complex. But for me in particular, I believe I have an original statement to make that only I can deliver. I feel compelled to explore my thoughts and then share my findings with the world. In some ways I believe it is a public duty to package my thoughts into one place where others can explore and share my expression. If I am painting what I am passionate about in a truthful way, the message will resonate. Good, bad or indifferent, my work is about what I feel, how I think, and what my beliefs are. It's my job to make sure it's all rolled in there. So to answer the question, I would say, absolutely yes, because if you paint what's in your heart, it will carry a powerful message.

JG: How do you see the role of artists in the society? How do you see your role as an artist in today's world?

AK: I believe the artist's role is one of extreme importance. Artists are the dreamers and the creators. They are the music makers, and the philosophers of tomorrow. Artists are free to create without the boundaries of right and wrong, and paint what was, what is, and what could be. Now more than ever, an artist's role is so important to society. The corruption of social values and consumerism is destroying the magic at our fingertips... the ability to bring something profound and intangible into existence. This power is without measure, yet most artists are chastised and discouraged for expressing themselves in today's world. As a young artist, I deal with the trials of living a life

dedicated to art, and yet, amongst the challenging nature of this industry I find that the struggles give birth to the most profound ideas I have ever had. This is the natural consequence of creating. It unlocks the potential of humanity and the collective spirit. This is truly a magical experience. Artists are able to find the beauty in the mundane and transform it into something sublime. Artists can expose the true nature of our world by shedding a light on the neglected and darkest corners of the human experience. Artists and creatives are the spearhead. I believe that is why art is so important yet volatile to so many people. Artists are the voice, they are the visionaries. They have the ability to make something that unites people and in some cases even divide them. It can create action or suppression... art is neither right or wrong so as an artist we have a massive responsibility to culture. If you were to render down culture into a few examples, art would ultimately have to be present. Art that is truthful and sincere is, at its core, about people and our experiences. It is filtered through the artist and presented in their language. Regardless of how society views the artist, I feel the artist's job and role is a daunting one. Artists have the capability of carrying a heavy burden. They are able to be a beacon for change and a shining light of hope. Even in my small world, and my small following, I know people that believe in what I'm saying, they wait for my next idea to bring something out that they can then elaborate on. And that is such a small microcosm of what an artist is. If you think about art, broaden it past visual, include anything progressive and creative, and what it does to a society, you see how it has the power to shape our thinking. It creates awareness and opens our minds to the possibilities we possess. Every artist must keep that in mind whenever they sit down to create.

LB: You have also mentioned (in one of your facebook comments) that your paintings also have a strong personal meaning and that you enjoy art that doesn't have immediate answers. What are the clues or the bread crumbs that you may leave in a painting, as to its 'true' meaning?

AK: Every painting is in some way a reflection of its maker...of me. They are not self-portraits, but are instead a manifestation of my current state and identity. I think when you start to make work that is true to your ideas and beliefs; you have to accept that it's going to become personal. This is one of the more powerful ingredients that an artist can add to their artwork. For me, metaphor and symbolism is where I start to expose my truth. I'll add little components that speak directly about my world. These symbols usually have a dual meaning for the painting. They serve as "easter eggs" for those looking to find out clues to the true meaning. They also translate a little about my current situation. What I try to put into my work is a mythology of myself... of my world. I use reoccurring images and similar themes to connect works that don't really relate to one another. One image in particular is a symbol that I have come to associate with me as an artist. It is present in my painting "Origins" as well as my piece "Paradox: The Quest of Odin." I enjoy referencing earlier works or creating a treasure map for people to discover within my body of work. One of my favourite experiences while reading is seeing references to text and other books that I haven't read...this usually sends me on an adventure to seek out the other material and get a better understanding of where the author was coming from. By utilizing this device, I feel like I am able to bring the viewer into my world and share that same sense of adventure. I don't like to preach to my audience. I feel that it is much better to be cryptic and enigmatic than to plaster my ideas on the paper like a billboard. No one enjoys to be told what to think, especially me, so I speak in a visual cipher. As I discover my fans and they follow my work, my hope is that they enjoy the interactive side of the paintings. They get to be part of discovering a mystery or at the very least, it may spark a creative conversation about the symbols and metaphors. Either way, I feel the paintings leave a lasting impression when seen in person. They create questions...that is one of my goals, to get viewers talking and reacting to what

they are seeing. My use of symbols varies. I've used images like a pine cone, which is a symbol of enlightenment and a hawk, which is metaphoric for a messenger. In "The Alchemist" I utilized a more straight forward symbol in the barcode that's being washed off the figure's chest. In "Paradox..." , the symbolic nature of the tattoos and their meaning is very important. The list goes on throughout all of my recent work. Each piece of the "set" is carefully placed and strategic to understanding the big picture. But I feel the work stands up regardless of deciphering each and every element. This is why my paintings have interesting and poetic titles. They offer a glimpse into the spirit of the work. The titles give additional clues. All of these components are small pieces that fit together to reveal, in many ways, the spiritual nature of each work. One of the more challenging things about working this way is finding the parallels between my journey of self discovery and the commentary at the heart of the idea. I spend a lot of time reading and researching what I include in each painting, because it needs to have a solid core, a cohesive center. What winds up happening is that each painting becomes infinitely important to my daily life and infects my thoughts and activities. I'm constantly reading and writing...It becomes all encompassing. The simplest reason that every painting has symbolism, is because I enjoy it... I love creating a puzzle. It's rewarding to have people give their analysis and offer their take on the work. That energy is exciting. In a small way they can take ownership of that thought that the painting fostered. The fact that the titles are cryptic and laden with metaphors, aids in the search for the underling message. After exploring each piece and symbol there is a sense of a great accomplishment, there is a payoff, and in some cases a lingering frustration to know more.

LB: Looking back on your earlier paintings, how would you judge them?

AK: Art, for me, is a journey... not a job in the traditional sense... it's my life. Each painting therefore has a special place in my heart. That being said, I am (and have to be) more critical of my work than anyone. I need to be decisive and hypersensitive to what I make because it is important to me. Looking back on older paintings I would say that they reveal a part of my world and views but were also a bit immature. Over the course of my career I have strived to explore and expand my concepts. But in my earlier works the ideas tend to be more cryptic and subservient to the technique and slick realism of the painting. Don't get me wrong...I enjoy solid realistic painting... that is definitely a huge part of my work, but I needed to learn how to expose the heart and soul...to let the conceptual ideas reach out from the confines of the frame. I needed to give the viewer more clues about the origins of the work than a poetic title or a surreal point of view. I explored the use of colour to enhance and sensationalize the scene to help drive the uneasy quality of the work, but too often the driving narrative never fully surfaced for my audience. It wasn't until I began adding the figure to my paintings that I started to react differently to the artwork. The figure opened up a world of possibilities to explore. It was like finding a Rosetta Stone...the missing link.

When I look at my previous work, my aim is to tear it apart piece by piece. I take the good and the bad, and try to learn from it. Being able to analyze and critique yourself is a hard part of the process but it's so valuable. For me, this analysis never shuts off, it's always running. I am always trying to render out a better product and a clearer message. When I look back on some of my earlier work I see an artist searching for an identity. The turning point in my artwork is when I started to really reflect and challenge myself to be open and honest. To make artwork that challenged me. I had to speak what was in my heart and not worry about public opinion. I had to incorporate social and political commentary regardless of the volatile nature of either subject. I had to let go. That's when I started to crossover and go in the direction that I'm in now. I feel very comfortable that I haven't left anything unsaid, the ideas are solid and truthful.

LB: How do you see your art evolving in the future?

AK: I see my work transforming rapidly as I progress as an artist. I see it following my transformation and journey into the unknown. As I learn more about myself, and what drives my passion, I expect the work to become more personal and ultimately more powerful. This all hinges on demanding myself to become a better communicator, and storyteller. By challenging myself to grow I constantly rework my concepts and the angles in which I attack them. I also take into account the necessity to reflect and digest my experiences. This introspection is paramount to unearthing the essence of my creativity. Challenging myself is such a major component of my process, that it will not allow me to become stagnant. I am a competitor, and as an artist I expect great things of myself. I believe change is part of progress and it cannot be overlooked. Our world is changing at astounding rates. Society, politics and the global community are ever-changing and more interconnected than ever. As I explore different narratives and expand to include more subjects into my visual realm, I will have to expand my vision and capacity. Looking into the future of my art is extremely exciting. I see a journey with no ending point. Each decision leading to the next, while revealing the mysteries of the universe.

LB: Please explain how you achieve those dark backgrounds?

JG: Please speak about the lighting you include in your work, which I know is an important aspect for you.

AK: The dark backgrounds are a more recent aesthetic choice. I have always loved the surreal lighting in Caravaggio's work and the intimacy he creates with intense chiaroscuro. Visually, colour and detail explode off the dark background and capture the viewer's attention.

How I make a powerful black...

I make a mixture of Red, Blue, & Brown in equal parts for a neutral Black...if I want to tint it, I add more of any one of the components. For example, If I want it to be cooler I will add more blue...warmer I'll add more brown etc. whatever the painting needs.

The lighting is very important to the painting...I love a single light source... it creates a dramatic cast shadow and isolates the subject. It gives a painting an intimacy that resonates...it is very seductive. I enjoy creating a lighting experience that is surreal and foreign to our world. This aids in elevating the painting to a dreamlike state that exists beyond reality. In this world I can push the boundaries of light, colour, and contrast all while being grounded to a natural representation of objects.

LB: Please explain your use of photography in your composition and paint processes.

Some of your pictures on facebook shows a tablet computer next to you while painting. How long have you used it for your paintings? What are its uses? How has it changed your approach to painting?

AK: Photography has become a wonderful component to my art making...I have the ability to capture reference material for paintings instantaneously. The camera allows me to explore compositions quickly and fluidly while I work with the model or subject. I might see something during my shoot that speaks to me and brings an added energy to the piece that I didn't expect...that spontaneous environment crackles with electricity. I feed off the moment and I try to be open to letting an idea

evolve and grow. I am very particular about my process but in this moment I have to set that aside and focus on collaborating with the idea as it comes to life. The challenge is allowing the model to flex their creative muscles within the framework of the idea. I might build a scenario in the sketchbook that doesn't work in reality, so I challenge the models to help me facilitate the feeling of what I was trying to communicate. Usually this mixture creates a powerful outcome.

I have just started using the iPad for viewing my references about 8 months ago. It is terrific... I used to print multiple 8x10's and work from them...this was ok but it handcuffed me to colour and contrast. The iPad allows me to make any changes on the fly and upload them to my tablet instantly. This saves a lot of time and in my opinion aids to the final outcome. It also allows me to carry my portfolio with me everywhere. As an artist I am always looking for opportunities to show my work or find valuable representation. The iPad is a wonderful tool for showing your work to interested parties. It also offers applications that help with the business side of my art...i.e. contact lists, budgets, profit/loss...etc.

LB: Your studio is in the Banana Factory Arts Center, in Pennsylvania. Please explain us the ins and out of this community studio. Is it run by the artists themselves, for instance? How has working next to different artists influenced your own work?

AK: The Banana Factory is composed of studio and classroom spaces that are run by the non-profit organization, Artsquest. The space houses approx 30 artist studios, performing and visual arts classrooms, and multiple gallery spaces. Being a part of an artist community has great benefits because you are surrounded by other creative thinkers and their varied forms of expression. It is an awesome experience to be part of a community of artists and have the opportunity to work next to great people. Seeing fellow artists making artwork helps to keep me striving and continually improving. If you're open to growth, you see the positives of each individual's perspective, and in turn you can look at your work and constantly push yourself. You also forge wonderful friendships and professional working relationships. There are numerous benefits to working in a community with other artists, from the occasional critique to a side conversation, which can spark and inspire you in various directions.