

THE BIG IDEA: WORKING IN WATTS'S GREAT STUDIO

Alexander Creswell, watercolour painter



Left
Basilica of Maxentius, Rome
Watercolour on paper 24" x 40", 2011
Right
Alexander Creswell in
Watts's Great Studio.
Photograph by Nick Wood
Below right
Atlanta Millenium Gate, Maquette II
Watercolour on paper, 30" x 22", 2011
© Alexander Creswell

The purpose of my time spent working in Watts's Great Studio during 2011 has been to explore the idea of magnitude in painting. Watts painted some of his greatest works in this studio, a space built specifically to work on paintings whose magnitude had outgrown his London studio. Watts wasn't afraid to tackle paintings whose size and intent were massive. The knowledge that he had carried out such work in this space gave me the idea that working in his shadow, so to speak, would enable me to think on a much bolder scale than before. The confines of my domestic working environment at home hadn't prevented me from painting some very big watercolours in the past, but working in Watts's studio would give me the opportunity to explore a grander intent in a larger space.

Magnitude was, for me, the word of the year.

I had various subjects in mind, so went back to Rome in the early summer, where there are several buildings I had painted before and now wanted to explore again - the Pantheon, the Arch of Constantine and the Basilica of Maxentius. All are monuments to magnitude and I looked at them afresh. Too often we are distracted by superficial questions when appraising a work of art or architecture. How big is it? How long does it take? How much does it cost? Art cannot be quantified by lifeless facts while its cultural value is missed. Magnitude is the impact of the idea rather than the scale of its execution. A large painting is not good simply because it is big, but perhaps the intent or inspiration

needs to be big in order for the work to be good.

I tend to measure impact by the experience of the building or place or event. It's the experience which first grabs my attention and causes me to sketch. If the sketch is good it represents the experience rather than just the place - the light, the movement, the beauty, the sensory thrill of just being there. That's the inspiration. A work of art must capture the experience not just the representation - the character not just the face.

Since Rome I've been painting large scale explorations of the interior of the Pantheon and the Basilica of Maxentius, the contained volume of light and air. These have been painted in Great Studio with increasing magnitude.

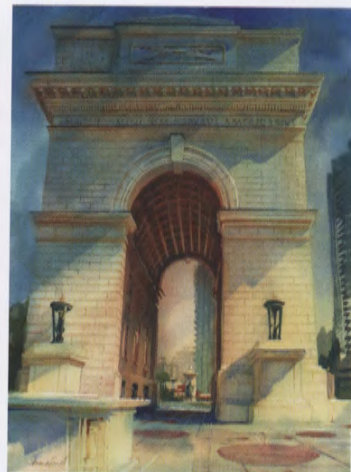


I've worked on the Arch of Constantine with its detailed carved panels which tell the storyboard of the emperor's conquests in delightfully complex passages of light and shadow, cartoons in stone and light - all explored on a growing scale.

In contemplation of these ruins, we consider the future, the fragility of the present, and the futility of the past. In painting them I am contemplating magnitude as an element to inspire and uplift the human spirit, both in the subject and in the painting. Magnitude, like beauty, can't be measured but it can be missed when it's absent. And both have been missing for the last century. It is fitting, then, that the passing of that century has spawned another significant large watercolour in Great Studio,

whose subject is the Millennium Gate in Atlanta, USA. This new triumphal arch, British designed and recently completed, stands as an exhortation to the new century and as an admonishment to the shabby mediocrity of the last century which surrounds it. It is a notable building in an important city and the painting was commissioned by a remarkable young collector from California. His beliefs in the cultural responsibilities of the future and the importance of magnitude of spirit would have found great resonance in Watts's time. Having painted this work in G.F. Watts's Great Studio I hear that resonance. I am not sure that I could have succeeded elsewhere.

© Alexander Creswell
November 2011



If you would like to hear about Alexander Creswell's future exhibitions and events please submit your details online at www.alexandercreswell.com