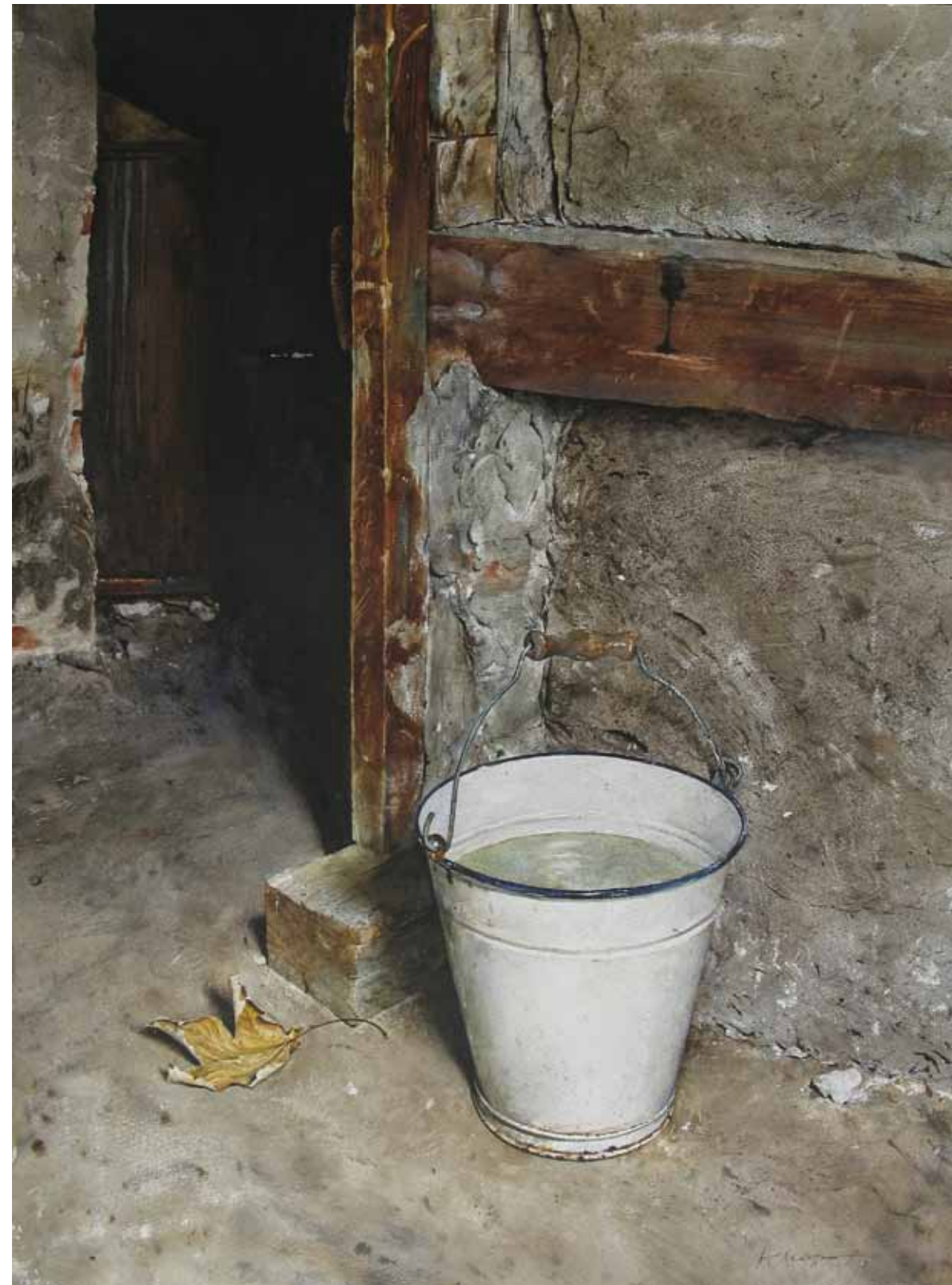


Layers of Time

With brushes, sticks, fingers and cloth, **Atanas Matsoureff** creates haunting watercolors that show the past is so close, we can touch it. **BY** Ani Kodjabasheva



met Atanas Matsoureff at a beer garden in Sofia, Bulgaria, on a bright summer day in July 2020. At a time when most meetings were happening remotely, it was a privilege to talk in person, especially with an artist who cares so much about materiality. When

I asked Matsoureff how he chooses his subjects, he pointed to the nondescript wall behind me where a roughly hewn stone stuck out of the thickly plastered cement. “I’ve been looking at this stone for the past 10 minutes and wondering how to paint it—what color it is and which paper I’d use for it,” he says.

Matsoureff is especially mindful of the marks left on various surfaces over time. In his painting *The Door* (opposite) a leather jacket hangs on the back of a door. The leather is naturally polished at the elbows and shoulders and creased around the collar, having been molded by wear over time. It’s as if the owner’s body is still present, giving mass and form to the garment. The area below the door handle is stained yellow from the touch of countless hands. A sense of dwelling is captured in simple, evocative details.

“It’s not your typical spontaneous watercolor,” says Matsoureff, who crafts his paintings in a very physical way, an approach he likens to building a sculpture, layer by layer. The artist creates a variety of textures using smudging, stamping cloth and sponges. “Anything that can help me heighten the sense of realism—I use it,” he says. “I’ll even use weeds or twigs that I picked up from the area

LEFT TO RIGHT

The Door

watercolor on paper,
29½x22

The Corner

watercolor on paper,
29x21

“I like it when the paper surprises me, and sometimes, because of this, things happen that I couldn’t do otherwise.”



TOP TO BOTTOM
Under the Snow
watercolor on paper,
16x23

Thorns
watercolor on paper,
18x18½

I’m painting—something that’s a part of the landscape.” A self-taught artist, Matsoureff developed his sculptural approach to painting through a lot of practice and experimentation.

DISCOVERING THE MEDIUM

Asked about his personal story, Matsoureff quips, “It’s very short.” He was born in the mountain town of Bansko, south of Sofia, Bulgaria. His grandfather, an art teacher, encouraged him to play with several different types of art materials and media. Matsoureff remembers assembling mosaics out of grains and sculpting animal figurines out of clay. In high school he took classes in interior design and woodworking. Yet despite three attempts to enroll in the Bulgarian National Art Academy, he couldn’t pass the exam. Disappointed but determined, he resolved to find a way to make a living as an artist.

Although Matsoureff had been experimenting with different media, it took a chance encounter to show him the true possibilities of watercolor. While leafing through an old Russian magazine, he came across an article about Andrew Wyeth. “When I read that this was watercolor, I didn’t sleep for two nights. I told myself, if watercolor can do that, I need to do watercolor. It was so close to my sense of what I had to do—and so well done—it gave me a kind of foothold.”

The artist bought every type of paper he could find and started experimenting with mixing his own paints. He spent the next few years teaching himself the medium in this manner. “The best way to learn something is by doing,” says Matsoureff. “Once you discover things for yourself, they’re yours, and nobody else can do them your way exactly. It’s also a form of research—I always discover something new.”



TOP TO BOTTOM
Layers of Time
watercolor on paper,
22x18

Wisdom
watercolor on paper,
19x26

TRUSTING THE PAPER

While Matsoureff no longer makes his own paints, having since found a 28-color palette that gives him the necessary range, he continues to work with different kinds of paper. “For me, paper is the main thing,” he says. The artist paints only on vintage handmade sheets he has collected over time. The oldest one, he says, is from three centuries ago. Choosing a sheet is an important part of his process, as the grain defines the painting’s textures and even guides his hand. Damage the paper has sustained over time can become part of the work. “I like it when the paper surprises me,” he says, “and sometimes, because of this, things happen that I couldn’t do otherwise.”

The artist knew just the surface to use for his painting, *Facade* (22x13), when he saw a small window cut into a discolored façade in Fabriano, Italy. “I had a sheet of rare handmade English paper from the mid-1800s that was yellow and stained around the edges,” he says. The sheet also experienced foxing—orange dots, like speckles of rust, that appear due to iron in the water. “There’s always a risk working with older papers, but sometimes that helps,” he says.

In *Layers of Time* (at top), the age and texture of the paper perfectly suited the facade of the old building, which the artist says painted itself. “This wouldn’t have happened in the same way on different paper,” says Matsoureff. He believes that a painting is complete when idea, execution and material work as one. In this case, they fell together quickly.

The artist’s reverence for architecture and its facture comes through in every painting that features buildings and structures. Matsoureff’s depictions of such subjects offer an appreciation of craft and labor, even when they lament the passing of time. The same holds true with paper: his





desire to bring out the possibilities encoded in each sheet makes him a collaborator with the people who produced it centuries ago. Trusting in technique and material, Matsoureff sees an agency in inanimate objects. This leads him to a philosophy he calls “magical realism.”

THE MAGICAL MOMENT

“I’m mostly oriented toward the past,” the artist says. Sofia, the city where he lives, rarely finds its way into his art except in the form of old buildings worn out by habitation—as in a monochrome watercolor of sagging

roofs and brick chimneys darkened by smoke. Matsoureff never paints modern urban life with its surface sheen and anonymity. Scenes with lots of cars, bars and lights don’t excite him. Luster without texture doesn’t captivate him.

For a series of rural scenes, the artist spent two months living in a small, nearly depopulated village in the Rhodope Mountains in southern Bulgaria. In addition to documenting the construction of walls and the damage time has wrought upon them, he painted a number of still lifes that hint at the locals’ everyday life. Onions and

dried peppers adorn a rickety wooden door in *Old Stories* (opposite); a bunch of herbs hangs from the rafters in *Raining December* (pages 40–41).

These exquisitely detailed paintings seem to capture a moment that has just passed. Water overflows a metal pot under a faucet; the leather jacket hangs on the back of the door, as if just left there by its owner. These almost-present moments unfold against backgrounds of crumbling walls that further reinforce the melancholy mood.

“In some way, I leave traces of a human presence or some kind of

life—a movement in the landscape, even if it’s invisible at first sight,” he says. Matsoureff points to his painting *Layers of Time* (page 37), as one such example. Plaster peels off the facade, revealing red brick underneath. Plaster-cast ornaments framing a window look incongruous against the decay. Everything in the picture is a record of reality, except for a pigeon—almost the same gray as the wall—resting on the windowsill. “At first, you don’t even see it,” he says. It’s a minor intervention—although pigeons often alight there,

this particular bird was placed in the scene by the artist.

That subtle change is the magical moment to which Matsoureff aspires. “At first, you look at a window, and it’s nothing but a variety of textures,” says the artist. “Then you really start looking and see there’s a pigeon. Suddenly, the whole picture tells a different story and everything has a different nuance.”



ABOVE
Address Unknown
watercolor on paper,
22x30

RIGHT
Old Stories
watercolor on paper,
28x25



“The best way to learn something is by doing. Once you discover things for yourself, they’re yours, and nobody else can do them exactly your way.”



ABOVE
Raining December
watercolor on paper,
27x31

LEFT
In Blue Dress
watercolor on paper,
30x22

LAYERING TIME

When freely composing a scene, as in a portrait, Matsoureff finds more ways to achieve temporal depth. In his painting *In Blue Dress* (opposite), the model (his wife, curator Eugenia Matsureva) poses for a Renaissance-style seated portrait. To save the painting from a dry exactitude and give it character, the artist used the area around the figure where he would paint the background to test his colors and shape his brush. (He normally does this on a separate piece of paper.) The staining enlivens the wall and adds a bit of texture that can be difficult to achieve in the thin, transparent application of watercolor. Once again, every surface is marked by traces—in this case, of the artist himself.

Matsoureff’s marking and staining techniques go way beyond brushes. He often uses cloth, sponges, the side of his hand and his fingers. “There’s no better tool than your hands,” says the

artist. Matsoureff’s fingertips navigate the intersection of paint and paper. He can paint an entire portrait with only his hands, using his fingernail to sculpt hair, pupils and eyelashes. Sometimes, architectural details may be almost etched into the page with a sharp point. “I paint in a more graphic way than other watercolorists,” Matsoureff says. “I’m a relatively slow painter.” His meticulously crafted details capture a subject’s materiality, showing it defiantly present against the passing of time.

LIVING MEMORY

Observing and remembering the world around him is an essential part of Matsoureff’s work. He doesn’t use photographs; the scene has to come alive in his mind. He prefers to complete landscapes and architectural scenes en plein air, which involves coming back again and again to the same spot.



MEET THE ARTIST

Atanas Matsoureff (matsoureff.com) is a self-taught watercolor artist. He was born in the town of Bansko, Bulgaria, and graduated from the woodcarving class in his native town before eventually moving to live and work in the nation’s capital, Sofia. His work has won many prestigious awards in Bulgaria and abroad, and his drawings and paintings are in galleries and private collections around the world. The artist also leads master classes across Europe and Asia.

To begin, Matsoureff makes a detailed, proportioned drawing, which will become the painting’s “backbone.” This mental map, which can take a day to complete, allows him to render everything else. “When you’ve looked at something, it stays in your memory—the eye remembers,” he says. Matsoureff can envision the color and temperature of each shadow, even if he only drew it in pencil. After that, the actual watercolor flows quickly, from both memory and from life.

On one occasion, Matsoureff couldn’t finish a seascape. It remained only partially painted for six years until one summer day, when he returned to the same spot and finally finished the piece. It was as if no time had passed at all. 🍷

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