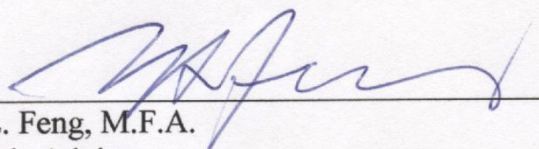**I Still Believe in Detroit**

by

Jarrod P. Wilson

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Radford University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Visual and Performing Arts

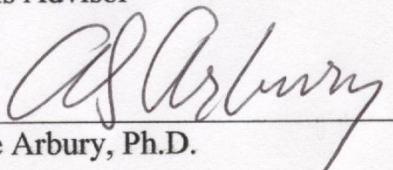Thesis Advisor: Z. L. Feng
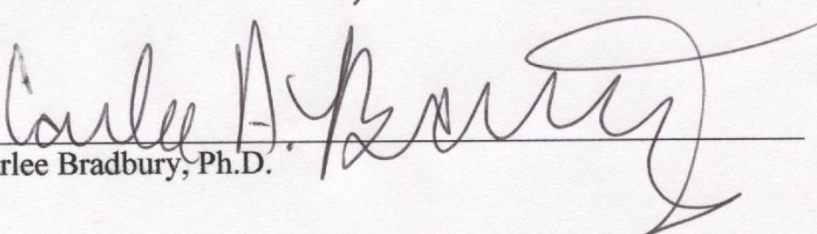
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Abstract

This thesis concerns the wonderful American automobiles of the past as subject matter for my water-media paintings. Images that are frozen in time of motor cars of varying eras are reproduced with precision through a free-flowing medium that is usually celebrated for its more aqueous attributes, not the controlled process, which shall be described herein. Finally, the future of my work shall be discussed in brief.

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my parents, Joe and Elizabeth "Libby" Wilson. It was they who first modeled the work ethic that I employ in the creation of my art. It was founded in Grayson County, Virginia during my childhood. From my earliest memories, excellence was always modeled to me. Sloppiness was not a way of life. Less than one's best was never acceptable and the knowledge that when you had worked hard, labored long, yet not found happiness with your final product, you were still ahead of most everyone else was something that was a constant in my formative years. Success may be a relative term, but the unerring pursuit of it was a notion that my parents instilled in me.

To be honest, this process does get old. And though I often want to give up, I have become disciplined enough to see it through to the end. In those moments when I want to quit, it is my faith that takes hold. My firm belief in Jesus Christ says that I believe that there is something, yea someone greater than myself. Unlike some others, I know that I am not the end-all nor be-all of art. In that manner, I am reminded that it is because of Him and the Father that I am even able to do the work as I am. To give less than my very best would be to dishonor my relationship with the Trinity and the covenant that I have made with the Lord and operate in a manner contrary to what I have been taught and believe. I choose to honor Almighty God and his Son with the very best of which I am capable, and thereby return any honor or praise unto Him who is worthy, for I am not, He "whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose." (John 1:27).

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Introduction

The reason I choose to paint American automobiles is simultaneously an easy and complex answer.

The answer as to why vehicles at all is based on my life's experience. Cars have always been an important part of my life. I can never remember a time when they did not hold a special place in my heart, nor when they didn't in one way or another encircle my world. In that sense, study of my subject matter began with my earliest memories and continues to the present day. Because the subject matter is familiar, it is easy to remember details when in the process of painting.

Love alone is not the reason that I choose to paint merely American cars. My appreciation of the stances taken by and the careers of auto industry giants such as Edsel Ford, Lee Iacocca, and Bob Lutz has shaped how I view the American automobile and her foreign counterparts.

In a grander sense for most people, the automobile represents freedom and the ability to go where they choose when they choose. And while in general the automobiles of today are not as glamorous as their forebears, they all offer that same sense of freedom and mobility that they did when the Duryea brothers first introduced their horseless carriage to a skeptical and somewhat enrapt America. Because of this, I feel that the automobile is a perfect subject matter for art. It is something with which nearly all Americans can identify. Memories are made in cars; remembrance is brought about by the sight of the same auto. They are a part of our daily lives whether we love them or merely tolerate them.

Chapter 1: Subject Matter

The subject matter of my work is based solely on American automobiles, which covers a span from the earliest days of the automobile through the end of the Muscle Car Era in 1972. I occasionally also paint important cars produced after 1972; however, these are not the bulk of my work. An example of this would be my painting of the 2002 Dodge Viper GTS/RT, *Last of the Brood* (Fig. 1). An earlier subject present in my thesis exhibition is a 1940 Packard, *Goddess of Speed* (Figure 2). These two paintings also show the two different approaches that I take to portraying cars in paintings. These two compositional styles include close-up and three-quarter images. Close-up reveals a section of a car, while three-quarter shows either the front or rear of the car and down one side. Because the sides are identical, with the possible exception of badging, one can assume that one has seen three sides, ergo, three-quarters of the car.

Close-up images are like vignettes of an automobile and include the following paintings: *Aiming for Excellence,* and *Goddess of Speed*. Three-quarter poses include *Blueprint for Speed, Bluick, Chromium!, Fairest of Them All, Last of the Brood,* and *See the U.S.A. in Your Chevrolet.*

Painting in two different pose styles allows for flexibility within my paintings and speaks to two separate audiences. The close-up paintings are created primarily for fine art people. These paintings generally find their way into shows. I have never been in a regional, national, or international juried show with a three-quarter image painting. However, it is the full body or three-quarter paintings that car aficionados appreciate, and those are the images that sell. That does not mean that someone who loves cars will not buy a close-up painting, but it does mean that they at least have a choice between the two images.

Beyond the image is the title. If the romance of the marque is in the heart of the viewer, then often a well-named painting moves them from desire to ownership, just as with a rare

automobile. For example, *Aiming for Excellence* is a painting of a radiator mascot from a 1929 Pierce-Arrow. For those who know, Pierce-Arrow is a legend among the early years of successful high-end luxury cars. These cars were driven by well-to-do individuals. In fact, the official White House limousine during Woodrow Wilson's tenure was a Pierce-Arrow, which is on display at the Woodrow Wilson birthplace in Staunton, VA. The company held true to its original charter to build only the highest quality luxury cars until their final day in operation. A poor national economy was the eventual death knell for the company as sales plummeted. However, until the end they always aimed for excellence in all that they did.

Another such title is *Fairest of Them All*. This painting is of a 1957 Ford Fairlane 500. My father had owned one of these cars when I was a child, in these exact colors, Inca Gold (yellow) and Colonial White. The Fairlane received its name from Henry Ford's home in Dearborn, Michigan, Fair Lane, which was in turn named for the location in England that was home to his ancestors. In this particular model year, Ford outsold Chevrolet, something that has rarely happened since Ford lost majority market share to Chevrolet at the end of Model T production. That would make this Fairlane the Fairest Fairlane of all.

Some of the titles have merely received names based on a play on words from the car's actual model name. *Gleaming Sword* is a Buick LeSabre, while *Out of Orbit* is a Plymouth Satellite. Others are simply taken directly from titles associated with the radiator mascot or hood ornament. Such images where I have employed this usage are *Goddess of Speed*, which is the actual name of the goddess on the 1940 Packard; *Aged Chief*, from a weathered 1949 Pontiac hood ornament; and *Petty's Girl*, from a 1958 American Motors Metropolitan designed by famed pinup artist George Petty. Pontiac was an Odawa war chief in the Michigan territory or Great Lakes region of whom there are no photographs. The original Pontiac automotive logo, radiator

mascot, and hood ornaments of an American Indian chief were used through 1956. At this time, the chief was replaced with the last logo, often called a shield, dart, or arrowhead. The chief, lovingly referred to as "Chief Runamuck" by devotees, is a respectful nod to the man for which the mighty brand was named.

The titles, along with the judicious choice of angles and other concerns, meld together to create an overall feel for the subject, the painting, and the automobile in question.

The choice of subject matter, or "the dance" as I have come to call it, is an exhausting process. To the casual observer, it would likely appear as though I am doing little more than wasting time, scrolling through file after file of digital photographs pretending to work. However, such is not the case. While I am determining which image to paint, nothing is ever set until I have finally begun to put paint to paper. I often vacillate not only between images of a given automobile, but also from car to car. For example, I might decide that I need to paint an Oldsmobile, but then which one? A curved dash Olds from 1901 to 1907 or something later from the 1940s, 1950s, or 1960s? They are all valid. Some cars are more valid than others. However, I may then think, Hudson made some innovative cars; perhaps I should paint a Hornet. Later I may think, I haven't painted a Packard Caribbean, but if I want something that will sell, I should paint a Mustang, Camaro, or Challenger. This process goes on for hours and sometimes days. I consider popularity, importance and innovation of design, as well as the actual presence of the auto in question. However, all of these are trumped by two concerns: one, my personal feelings toward the car; and two, the imagined overall look of the finished painting.

In its most basic form it is obsession. It can be maddening because there are only so many paintings that I can create, and there are so many images that I want to create. However, when one image holds in my head as this lofty thing for too long before I get to paint it, often I no

longer wish to do so. I have to plan, and I need to look ahead in terms of future projects, but too much consideration makes the luster of the idea wear to a cloudy tarnish. Often it even makes a certain vehicle seem less important. The greater problem with recreating a car is that cars have exacting tolerances. A curve or a crease goes only so far, but not less. A grille has a certain number of sections to it, too many or too few and it is no longer what one is trying to mimic. Everything has to be just right, or neither I nor anyone with the same vehicle will want the painting. Essentially, I am chasing perfection every step of the way. It is that unswerving desire for no less than my best that produces the handful of good images that I show, and equally causes the ones that I question to remain unseen.

While it may seem odd to others, my obsession with realism and cars began during my childhood. My father was a used car dealer, and later also a purchasing agent for a Ford dealer. For him, good was never good enough, especially during my youth when he cleaned up the cars himself. The car left his care as near perfect as was possible. He turned what was average, and often dull, into shining, stunning money makers. He cleaned, buffed, waxed, added custom touches, and brought back to life what once seemed ordinary. This uncompromising tendency toward perfection, along with our talks about stock versus custom, the virtue of fender skirts over the more garish cruiser skirts, and our estimation of important and non-important automotive innovations and designs have stayed with me. All of our conversations, beliefs, and automotive prejudices still affect me and my work today. In fact, my family's insistence on the purchase of Ford and Mercury automobiles for reliability jades my feelings that most other marques are not equivalent in quality to this present day.

Chapter 2: Process

Once I have finally settled on an image, and I begin the under-drawing, I may spend as much as twenty to forty hours on the drawing. This step for me is as essential as it is for *any* realistic artist because if the under-drawing is not exact, everything in the painting will be at least slightly off. Adding paint to an inaccurate under-drawing will only amplify the problems that remain present. Often I will get well into the under-drawing and determine that the image I have chosen is unacceptable, and I will start over with what I feel will ultimately be a better piece of art.

I credit my mother with at least part of such careful attention to detail in the making of my art. She was unwavering in her attention to detail and being as exact as possible in all things, especially my core studies as a student at the elementary and secondary levels. Penmanship was paramount. I had to do things a certain way. I couldn't write a cursive capital W just any way, it had to be the right way. Arithmetic, English, Science, and other subjects were all areas that had exactitudes that were either presented correctly or they were incorrect. Close enough never proved to be an acceptable answer; neither did my assumptions over actual facts. Accuracy, precision, no excuses, were the lodestar to where I am today artistically. Mother never allowed my brother and me to fail when it came to the fundamentals. If I needed help understanding grammar, basic mathematical skills, or anything else, she was willing to invest the time in me. My success was her success. I was her investment for the future, or as the Holy Bible puts it, "Children are an inheritance from the Lord. They are a reward from him." (Psalm 127:3). With our family's Christian faith as her foundation, my mother could do no less. Consistency remains the key to success and with the foundation my mother gave me, I cannot imagine giving something less than my very best, every time.

Upon completion of the under-drawing, the next step is to add wash upon wash of transparent watercolor or gouache to the drawing. I approach recreating the image accurately by visually reducing the image to abstracted shapes of color. In fact, for someone who paints with a high level of realism, my paintings are at least 95% abstraction. Because I work solely from my own photographs, I am a slave to the image that I have taken in the sense that I can use only what I can observe from the photo. I reduce an image, in part, to an amorphous mass of shapes. These shapes create a reality within themselves prior to the final addition of calculated strokes that reveal the high detail of realism. Simply put, I cannot create my reality without abstraction, and it is essential to make note that to abstract anything is merely to abbreviate what is there. The abbreviated forms of the original image are necessary as the building blocks for my finished image.

I use a variety of techniques in transparent watercolor. Only small areas that can be painted quickly and often painted back into are done using a wet-on-dry process. Areas of reflected chrome, especially, need to be painted with a maximum level of efficiency in order to prevent a bleed back area that will not appear accurate in terms of those reflections in the chrome. In order to achieve this it is necessary to paint in heavy wet color and then smooth out an edge where the color begins to fade with clear water. This allows for a more delicate color transition. I only use wet-on-wet areas when I need to paint a large area, either body panels or backgrounds in a smooth even color, or paint an area that produces a smooth transition between colors or values of a single color. Utilizing wet-on-wet in this manner allows me to keep the image clean and smooth, denying a bleed back from wetter areas into dryer ones, thus eliminating the phenomenon that many watercolorists refer to as "color blossoms." A good example of my process in this sense can be seen in the 2002 Dodge Viper,

Last of the Brood (Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Last of the Brood*

To me, color blossoms and other "happy accidents" are unacceptable. They create something that is foreign to producing an image that is clean cut, with crisp, hard lines. I prefer to control and be in control of the medium. When one paints in a manner that allows the painting to "paint itself" as some often say, then one is not in control of what the paint is doing. In this manner, one is a slave to whatever happens within this fluid, free-flowing process. I plan out every aspect, not on paper, but in my mind, of what I want to accomplish in the painting and what I expect to see when the painting is complete. Basically, my target audience is car people. Most car people *do* want their vehicles to look their best. So, it makes sense that my work, with a perfection-oriented target market, be devoid of imperfections that are controllable. Unquestionably, it takes longer to paint in this manner. Many other watercolorists who are open to the unexpected changes the medium can produce begin and finish paintings in much shorter amounts of time. There is nothing wrong with the shorter amount of time; however, there is no way for me to get the depth of shine, color contrast, or modeling of shapes to create a realistic image without layering washes consecutively. It is generally a very slow buildup of color. This produces luminous reality if the paint is kept clear and clean and not allowed to get muddy.

Patience is a formidable part of making this process work to its fullest, but patience alone will produce no good paintings.

The sad reality is that color loss through the process of drying exists in transparent watercolor. Often the loss of saturation can be up to 50% from laying a wash down to the point at which it then dries. This is distressing. There is no way to accurately gauge to what extent the color loss will be when mixing and applying the paint. It is better to err on the side of caution and be forced to paint several successive washes to achieve the desired color or saturation level, than to guess wrong and over saturate an area with a singular wash. In hopes of combating this, I have turned to gouache as an alternative. Gouache is a refreshing medium. It is far more forgiving than transparent watercolor. However, it does not have the luminous possibilities that transparent watercolor does. In essence, these paints are brothers cut from the same cloth. One is transparent watercolor, the other opaque watercolor. They have similar qualities, yet it is obvious which one is the life of the party and which one is the reserved intellectual. Transparent watercolor has a depth and breadth, replete with possibilities that gouache will never know. Gouache is a medium lending itself to versatility and forgiveness, whereas transparent watercolor is unforgiving and often uncontrollable. Accidents are not easily fixed; however, the gamble of choosing to paint in transparent watercolor is generally rewarded with greater visual depth to the painting.

For me, I think that certain images lend themselves best to certain media. I have always felt that way. Some things should simply be drawn and not painted. Some things look better in Sumi ink than in graphite. Other images may be interesting in paint media yet never in graphite or photography. I reserve gouache for the less involved subject matter. Anything that is heavily laden with chrome always looks better painted in transparent watercolor.

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A noted difficulty is that I have not necessarily noticed a change in time spent on a painting despite the fact that gouache should be a faster medium due to the lack of color loss. The bottom line is that I still layer with gouache. I still find it necessary to add in those special touches that subtly say, "This is what reality looks like."

I primarily paint with the French watercolor paints from Sennelier. However, there are some lovely and versatile colors from other manufacturers, such as Cheap Joe's, M. Graham, Winsor & Newton, and others. For gouache, I use two manufacturers, Holbein and Winsor & Newton. I need the consistency that the paints from all of these manufacturers provide.

My support of choice is Arches watercolor paper. Generally, I use 140 pound; however, when one uses from off a roll, the poundage increases; not in a substantial manner, but it does increase. With the increase in poundage comes a greater or more pronounced texture or tooth to the paper surface. I have used 300 pound, sparingly, but see no real reason to alter my use of 140 pound. Unless I saturate an area for wet-on-wet, the paper dries at a fairly quick and consistent rate.

I mostly use flat or wash brushes to paint; however, I use small pointed rounds (size 0 and 1) for small details and precise well-defined lines. I also use small filberts and brights for small areas of importance, such as the bevels in sealed-beam headlights. In this instance, I am using nothing larger than a size 6 filbert or bright. Larger areas painted in wet-on-wet must be painted with a two-inch flat brush or larger. Using anything that is smaller has the potential to create lines that overlap, ruining a flowing, smooth appearance that perfect automotive finishes should have. Those tiny amorphous shapes of color in the goddess hood ornament in *Goddess of Speed* (Figure 2) and in the chrome of *Chromium!* (Figure 3) are painted using these small brushes.

Figure 2. *Goddess of Speed*   Figure 3. *Chromium!*

My painting *Chromium!* is a case study in many of the problems that my work entails. This painting measures 22" x 30". I chose, to my detriment, 300 pound cold-pressed paper for this painting. There are two things about this that need to be stated: (1) the paper weight elongated the drying time, extending the time that was needed to work on the painting, and (2) the maze of tiny shapes of colors to make the reflections appear real and correct, along with the chosen size of the painting, also extended the time frame for the painting. Chrome takes time to paint, as I found out in the execution of the painting, *Bluick* (Figure 4). *Bluick* is a painting of a rare 1956 Buick Super Sedan. The front end is composed of an intricate chrome bumper, emblem, and grille. That chrome took me a month to paint. In the past I had added reflections and merely moved on, but with this painting I kept working the chrome, adding successive washes of paint until the result was a believable chrome bumper and grille that felt weighty and solid. The shine and reflection of the chrome also feel real visually. That is the key to making these images stand forth from the page. However, the mere addition of paint is not the answer alone. The washes must be applied in a very controlled manner of thin and weak washes. The process is a very slow buildup of color. The slow buildup is necessary to garner the reality, but it is something that is only achieved after the artist does the work again and again and is familiar with the qualities of the paint and paper.

Figure 4. *Bluick*

A further problem that I consider is color. It seems that an inordinate number of restored cars are done in black or red. This creates a genuine concern for me because I do not want everything that I paint to be either black or red. There are two problems associated with this: (1) black automotive paint acts like a mirror and reflects everything around it, generating more work and a painting that takes more time to execute and (2) in my opinion, red is *always* the hardest color of paint to work with no matter what type of paint it is. I find the use of red difficult because it always seems to cover unevenly. What I paint on smoothly appears anything but. It can give the appearance of a buckled area or simply just be spotted more heavily from one section to another. There is no rhyme or reason as to how the paint settles. I want to create a variety of images, and I feel that if all of the cars are the same two colors, then the work will become very trite and boring. For that reason, I either choose not to paint certain images due to their colors, or I will change the color altogether in order to have cars that are blue, yellow, green, etc.

My automotive works consist of two basic styles: one style is for juried shows, the other style is for sale to and painted in the interest of car enthusiasts. A certain look in an automotive painting is necessary for an art show entry. A section of a car with highly polished chrome and reflections is almost universally easier to get into a show as opposed to a full body shot.

Examples of close-up sections of cars painted primarily for juried shows would include:

Goddess of Speed (Figure 2), *Chromium!* (Figure 3), and *Aiming for Excellence* (Figure 5).

Figure 5. *Aiming for Excellence*

Examples of works that are full-body shots, generally painted in a three-quarter shot,

would include: *Last of the Brood* (Figure 1), *Fairest of Them All* (Figure 6), and *See the U.S.A. in*

Your Chevrolet! (Figure 7).

Figure 6. *Fairest of Them All*

Figure 7. *See the U.S.A. in Your Chevrolet*

I feel that I spend the majority of my time caught in the headlights and grille, as in *Chromium!* (Figure 3), or any other richly ornamented area of a vehicle. Sometimes a highly polished chrome surface or a painted body panel that is black, navy, or another dark color is just as problematic because it reflects everything around it. Though not related in terms of what they look like nor their visual display, these three areas, are, however, all possible powder kegs replete with problems that can and will hold up the painting process, becoming complex labyrinths in which a painter can easily be lost. I spend at least part of my time referring back to the original photograph to make certain that I am painting what is there. It may seem like being so exacting is not necessary. Who would know, except for me, that the image was painted differently than it actually appeared in its original state? The problem isn't with hyper-accuracy. I never follow the photo to the letter. The problem is with believability. That separates my work from that of someone who has the passion to paint cars but lacks the requisite artistic skills to do so. Highlights, cast shadows, warm tones, cold tones, and a myriad of other concerns have to be noted and continually addressed as well as considered in order to make a believable image. Even if one can't easily determine what is wrong, one knows in a visual sense that something

significant is wrong with the image. It is tedious efforts such as these that either win the day or lose it wholly.

However, vigilance is insignificant when considering small reflections that appear to be nothing more than circles or ovals of white. There is no possible way to paint a full body panel and keep these important areas pure white. In order to maintain the raw white surface of the paper in these areas, I use various forms of masking fluid or liquid frisket. Masquepen is especially helpful in the process of keeping these lines. Masquepen is much like a pen and comes in two sizes with an applicator end similar to a hollow needle point. With this applicator, it is much easier to follow previously drawn lines, fill minute areas, and create very delicate tracery-like effects that give watercolor a chance to stand with other paint media in versatility and greater definition.

The masking fluid in Masquepen is harder to pull up than any of the other brands, but it doesn't harm the paper as do others. I do not believe that it contains ammonia. Most of the popular masking fluids include ammonia as a substantial ingredient. It is my belief that the addition of ammonia creates certain alterations in the composition of the painting surface. I find it very difficult to paint over such areas when these ammonia heavy masking fluids are applied to a given section for any length of time. I have often applied and removed the offending masking fluid in 24 hours or less, the prescribed maximum time of application and use. Even in this case, the ammonia or aggressive compound in the masking fluid has leeched into the paper and created an inalterable barrier that keeps the paper from fully accepting paint as do sections just surrounding where the masking fluid has been applied.

Another masking product that I use is a frisk film. The medium tack film allows me to cover a large area, usually an entire car or section of a car. This gives me the freedom to freely

paint the background of the painting without fear of ruining the car. A perfect example of this practice in my work is *Blueprint for Speed,* (Figure 8).
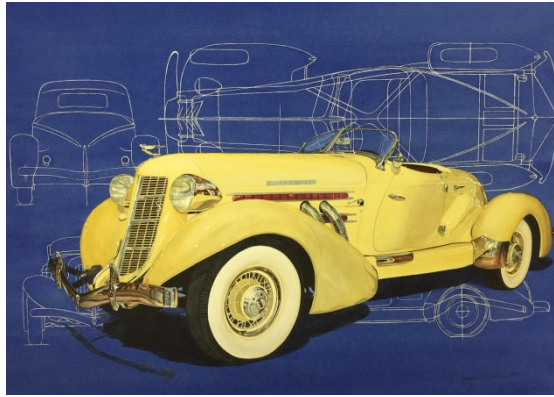

Figure 8. *Blueprint for Speed*

For this painting I purchased a copy of an original Gordon Buehrig blueprint drawing of the 1935 Auburn 851 Boattail Speedster from the archives of the Auburn Cord Duesenberg Museum in Auburn, Indiana. I wanted the background to look like a real blueprint; the car was to be yellow. I cut out the Art Mask film to almost completely cover the car, then I sealed the edge, bumpers and anything else that protruded from the body of the car with the Masquepen to ensure zero leaks. The result was a blueprint and the car and its preserved drawing. This left the perfect area to then render a highly modeled vehicle.

From start to finish, the process of making a painting of an automobile has virtually as many steps as the process that creates a real car. Attention is paid to every area of the painting. No part is less important than any other. Sections painted with less detail than highly modeled areas are created in a purposeful manner. This allows for a more complete painting, where the subject is allowed to dominate the complete image, and not compete with other areas of the picture plane. With consideration to elements such as these I paint in a consistent manner, thus honoring my subject matter fully.

Conclusion

As I look to the future, I anticipate painting works of greater scale in terms of size and larger breadth in terms of composition and execution. In this vein, I hope to produce paintings in sections, perhaps in a windowpane fashion where the image stops at one mat and continues in the next mat over within a separate frame. I also want to explore placing cars in significant and period backgrounds, such as that of Route 66 icons and in front of other important buildings.

Furthermore, I hope to expand on the idea that I worked with in *Blueprint for Speed*, where I placed the car in a related background. While the background had nothing to do with a physical place it was an essential extension of the car. Additional sections of the car, engine, other blueprints and schematics, among other things are backgrounds that I am considering for future paintings. I believe that this will make more complete images that better tell the story of a car. I want to better reveal the history of the automobile.

Having been in some national and international watercolor shows, such as the American Watercolor Society, Watercolor Art Society-Houston, and the Transparent Watercolor Society of America International Exhibition, I will continue to enter shows and hopefully continue to have my works accepted. Exhibition entries help keep me searching for better subjects and compositions as well as keep my art in the public eye.

The sky is the limit, and the thesis exhibition isn't the end of my work, but rather only a far better-focused beginning than when I entered Radford University in the fall of 2012. I always look to the next painting as the best painting. The new idea brought to life on the finest watercolor paper money can buy is the muse that beguiles me for a short time, as Madame X transfixed John Singer Sargent…for a moment. Then the moment passes and the next towering

idea begins to come into view. The muse is new, and the opportunity she brings is greater than the one just prior.