



J.M.W. Turner

Nina Maguire's beguiling atmospheric visions in acrylic arise from a gradual layering of veils of color and the softening of edges.

the power of suggestion

BY JOHN A. PARKS

IN THE HANDS of Nina Maguire, acrylic paint becomes as romantic, ravishing, and lustrous as oil. Layered, glazed, and scumbled, with edges dissolving into hazy spaces, her paintings succeed through intimation. In *On the Promenade* (at left), for example, two darkly wrapped figures emerge like wraiths from

LEFT: The figure's face in *On the Promenade* (acrylic, 21x22) was giving Maguire problems. Without quite knowing how, she suddenly made it come together with a few brushstrokes. Maguire feels that "miracle moment" made the difference between a successful and an unsuccessful painting.

the soupy mist of a Manhattan night, while in *New York City, Winter 2006*, *The Storm* (page 44), a heavy snowfall all but subsumes a few lonely figures into the indeterminate mass of a city almost lost to view. The subject matter is space, air, and moisture—and the power they have to veil the

world. The viewer experiences a strong sense of atmosphere and place while discovering visual subtleties as the image gradually gives up some, but not all, of its secrets.

Acrylic Summer

Maguire came late to acrylic, having previously worked in watercolor. "I was enthralled with watercolor," she recalls, "however, I started feeling dissatisfied, searching for more depth and richness. That led me to trying 5-ply bristol board, still using watercolor, but layering glazes to get an atmospheric effect." Maguire also tried oils, using alkyds to take advantage of their faster drying time, but she still disliked the time required for the layers to dry, not to mention the way different colors dried at different rates. She also resented having to wait extended periods before the painting could receive its final coat of varnish. She decided to give acrylics a try. "I'd never used acrylics," she says, "and I had some preconceived ideas about them—ideas that all turned out to be wrong."

The artist acquainted herself with acrylics by making copies, on 5x7 boards, of her most successful paintings. "I spent a whole summer doing this and was thrilled," she says. "I could do anything I did with watercolor and oils: apply glazes, use thick paint, lay in washes, and so on. I had no dos or don'ts and basically taught myself. For me, acrylic was a natural

segue from watercolor. I toned gessoed canvases and layered glazes, not only to unify, but also to give luminosity. I'd found what I was looking for!"

Loosely Followed Studies

Maguire begins a new work by making studies from reference photographs she's shot. "I usually do several small, but not detailed, sketches,

sometimes combining parts of more than one image," she says. "I also create several small studies, about 5x7. Sometimes they're of the whole composition, or one study could be just a figure or portion of a larger painting."

Having made her studies, Maguire avoids transferring an image mechanically to the canvas. Rather, she usually takes a brush and raw umber and lays in her image freely. "I

RIGHT: In *New York City, Winter 2006, The Storm* (acrylic, 30x24), directional brushstrokes, primarily in the upper layers, create the illusion of snow blowing toward the left. In other versions of the scene painted over the years, Maguire has pulled in to a square format that crops out the skyline and most of the building's lights, thus lending a deeper note of mystery.



Materials

Surfaces: stretched canvas, mounted canvas, wood panels, and canvas mounted with sekishu rice paper

Paint: Liquitex (mostly heavy body but occasionally soft body for laying in) cadmium yellow medium, Turner's yellow, Naples yellow, yellow oxide, raw sienna, burnt sienna, raw umber, cadmium red light, cadmium red medium, alizarin crimson, cerulean blue, cobalt blue; sometimes ultramarine blue, Prussian blue, cobalt green, soft body Baltic green, Payne's gray; for white—unbleached titanium, neutral gray value 5, and occasionally titanium white; for glazing—transparent raw sienna on an additional palette

Medium: Liquitex matte medium

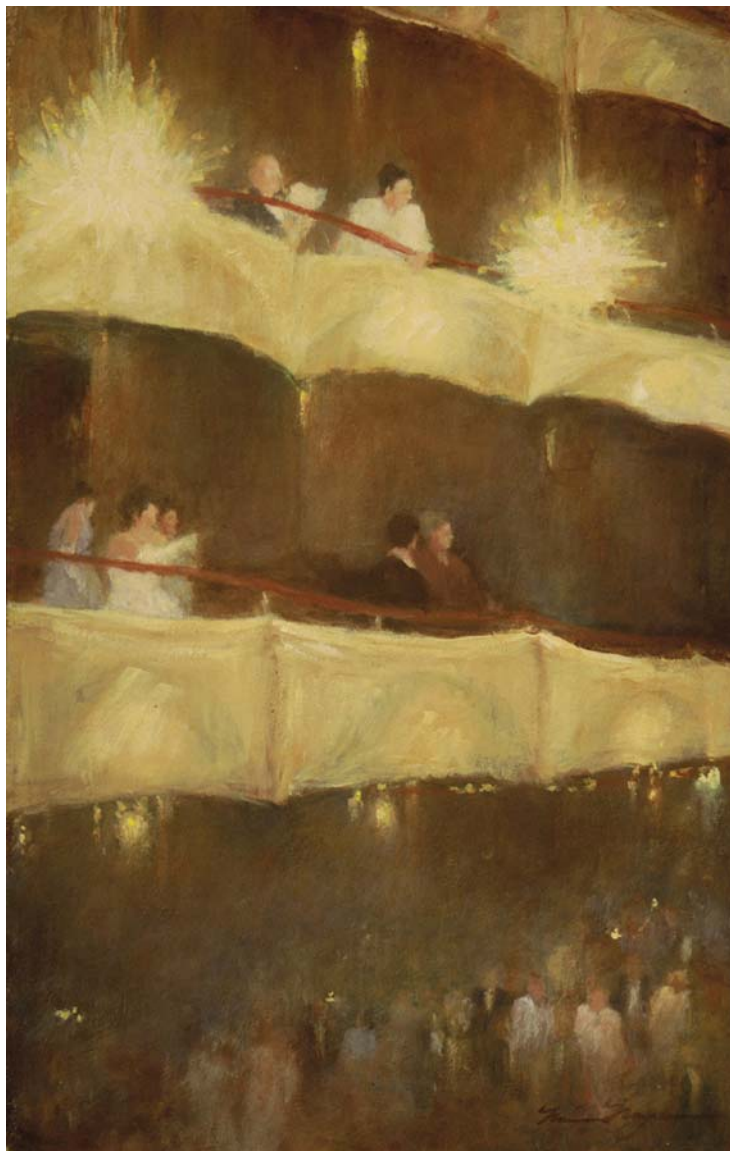
Brushes: Zoltan Szabo 1- to 2-inch bristle and synthetic sable slanted brushes; Winsor & Newton University white sable Nos. 2, 4, 5, 8, and 10 rounds; Robert Simmons Expressions angle shaders in all sizes (Maguire finds that when these shaders are "worn down to stubs," they're excellent for scumbling and working atmospheric effects, such as fog and snow.)

started doing this years ago. I love to draw, but I found that creating a careful drawing on the canvas led to a tightness that I didn't want. When figures are involved, however, I continue to draw more carefully—working out the attitude and proportions beforehand and sometimes transferring a study to the canvas. Every painter has to find what works best for her." As the painting progresses, Maguire adds successive layers, scumbling, and glazing to achieve depth and luminosity.

Color Whisperer

One of the hallmarks of Maguire's paintings is her muted palette, a feature that greatly contributes to tone and atmosphere. In some paintings the color seems limited to browns, blues, and yellows. Other paintings appear to show only browns, pinks, and a small amount of yellow. "I started using a muted palette when I was transitioning from watercolors into oils and finally acrylics," says Maguire. "I restrict my palette to create a mood—that's always been foremost in my paintings."

Muted color, though, does not necessarily mean limited color. "You'd be amazed at how many colors I sometimes use in a painting (see Materials, above)," says Maguire. "I'm not a colorist, although my palette looks colorful."



The muted effect, however, isn't an end in itself. When more color is needed, more color is added. Maguire points out, "I've recently done some interiors of Palazzo Isolani (a restored 15th-century building in Bologna, Italy) that are colorful—for me—in order to portray the ambience."

Origins of Themes

Like many artists, Maguire has pursued a number of distinct themes over the years. Snowstorms, firework displays, opera houses and concerts, and chefs and restaurants are joined by a number of portraits and figure paintings. "My subject matter is influenced by what has special meaning to me," says Maguire. "My chef series derives from my one son's love of cooking. His management of several clubs over the years has provided much source material, including the cooking classes he and a chef

ABOVE: The painting surface for *Opening Night*, Lincoln Center (acrylic, 22x14) is board mounted with sekishu rice paper. The wispy, fibrous texture of the paper, although difficult to see here, gave Maguire an additional means of creating her atmospheric effect.

BELOW: Photo references for **Piazza San Marco, Venice, The Bird Lady** (acrylic, 22x28) show a sunlit city square filled with people, and carriages. In order to establish an accurate rendering, Maguire originally drew the background colonnade and other elements with more precision. Then, to avoid a postcard look, she scumbled out most of the details.

conducted for their club members.”

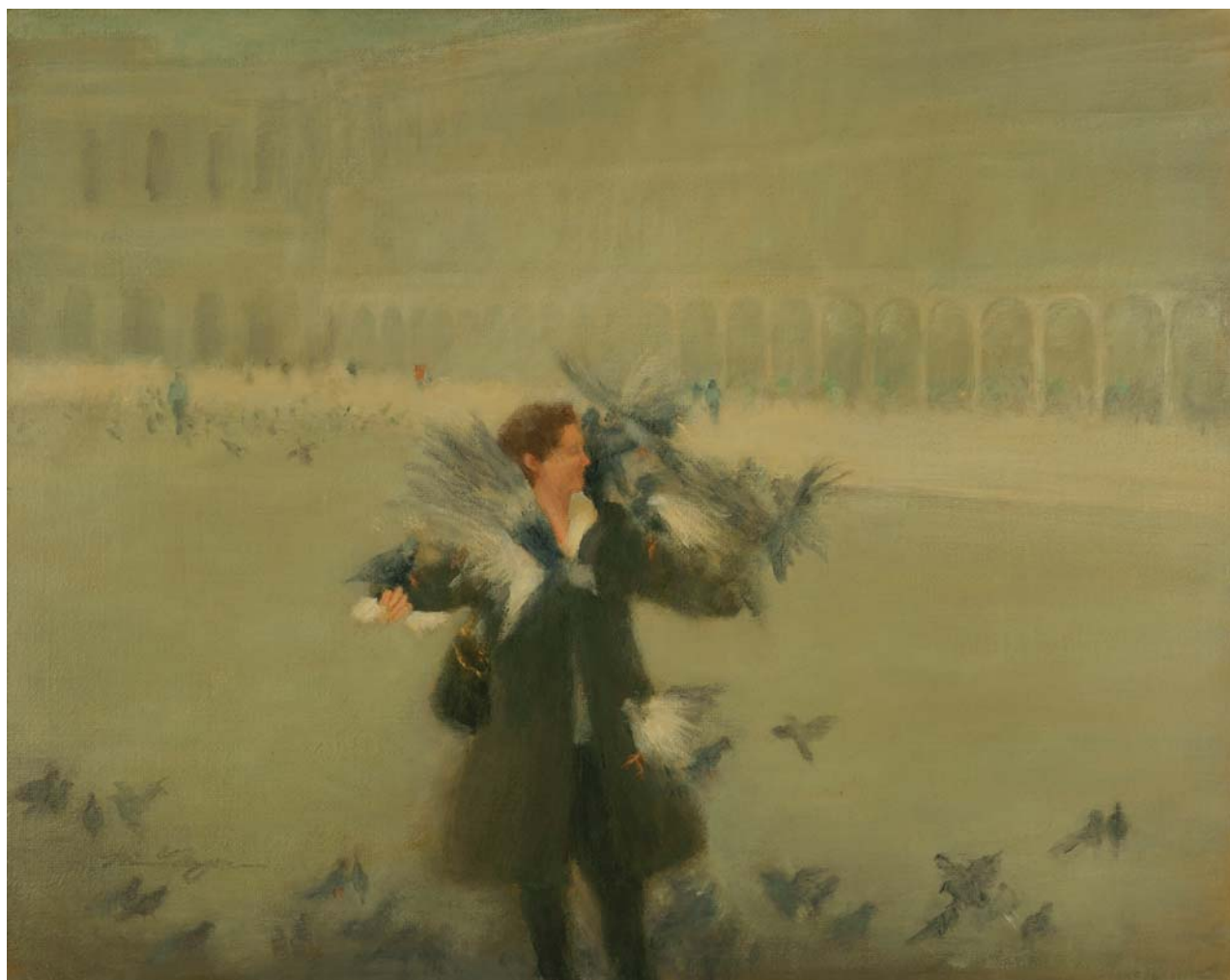
Her father’s love of opera inspired her music series. “One day I was rummaging through the music bench of my piano and found a libretto from the old Metropolitan Opera House performance of *La Traviata*,” she recalls. “It brought back a flood of memories that inspired many paintings” (see *Opening Night, Lincoln Center*, page 45). Similarly the artist’s paintings of Italy, such as *Piazza San Marco, Venice, The Bird Lady* (below), are influenced both by her Italian heritage and the many trips she’s made to Italy. On the other hand, the paintings of New York City and Westchester County arise from a deep familiarity with locations where the artist has lived her whole life. “My children and grandchildren,” she says, “have also been a wonderful source of imagery and inspiration.”

Unleashing the Muse

The sense of nostalgia and wistfulness arising from Maguire’s work may stem in part from

her delayed start at becoming a professional painter, yet she says, “Art has always been part of my life.” Her earliest recollections include a large box of Crayola crayons, and she enjoyed the art training provided by the nuns at the Ursuline School in New Rochelle, New York. She wanted to go to art school when she graduated from high school, but her father, favoring her scholarly over her creative leanings, insisted that she pursue a full academic course. She did, nevertheless, major in art at the College of New Rochelle. Then came marriage and four children.

Maguire continued to make time for her art, but she didn’t get serious about it until her youngest child had been in school several years and, in 1977, she took a trip to Italy. “There,” she says, “everything took fire. I signed up for a class without telling my family, in case my painting didn’t work out—but it did. I found everything within me waiting to burst out, and it did double-time.”



RIGHT: Maguire originally painted *East Side Drive, NYC* (acrylic, 20x20) in a rectangular format. After seeing it hung in her gallery, she retrieved it twice for reworking, making the scene more atmospheric and changing the format to a square. "You sometimes see what needs to be done after you've been away from a piece," she says. "The people at Cavalier Galleries have at times told me that I *cannot* remove and rework a particular painting one more time."

Like Whistler—and Not

It's impossible, when painting atmospherically and suggestively, to avoid being compared to Whistler. Working in the late 19th-century, Whistler was one of the first artists to realize that dissolving line and using soft layering of closely toned color could re-create the suggestive effects of light. This technique also allowed for paintings that were both carefully designed and highly representational. Like Whistler, Maguire has painted a number of pictures of fireworks, a subject that gives maximum effect to her handling of light. Whistler also seems something of a presence in paintings like *East Side Drive, NYC* (at right), where a figure, reduced almost to an abstract shape, is placed in a cityscape whose composition has a carefully designed geometry.

In general, however, Maguire's work doesn't rely on an underpinning of classical draftsmanship (as did Whistler's), nor is Maguire preoccupied with the aesthetic concerns that consumed Whistler. As a leading member of what became known as the Aesthetic Movement in the 1870s, Whistler sought to deliver a pleasurable experience of beauty achieved through design and careful control of color. Maguire, on the other hand, in a painting such as *On the Promenade* (page 42), is clearly concerned with conjuring a romance of atmosphere and a real connection to a time and place. Whistler's mature art seems to lead us away from the world while Maguire points us back toward it.

Some paintings take on a direct narrative element. *Piazza San Marco, Venice, The Bird Lady* (page 46), for instance, seems very much a re-creation of a classic tourist experience, played for fun.

What seems to run through all of Maguire's work is a genuine sense of involvement in and relish for the life going on around her. More than any technical accomplishment, it's this quality that undoubtedly resonates with her admirers



Meet Nina Maguire



Nina Maguire earned her bachelor's degree with a major in art from the College of New Rochelle, in New York, where she studied watercolor under Ernest Thorne Thompson, AWS. She didn't seriously pursue an art career until 20 years later. Since that time she has shown her work in group and solo exhibitions and has received numer-

ous awards, including the 2010 Robert Sanstrom Gold Medal Prize from the National Society of Painters in Casein & Acrylic. Cavalier Galleries, Inc. (www.cavaliergalleries.com), which has locations in New York City; Greenwich, Connecticut; and Nantucket, Massachusetts, represents her work.

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and collectors. "Painting is a passionate journey that will never end," says Maguire. "I don't have a plan, except to grow and get better. There's always more to master. I'm in a constant search for the magic." ■

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