

How Painter Ben Johnson Takes Architectural Representation to Incredible Levels of Realism



Written by James Taylor-Foster

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Ben Johnson is a painter preoccupied by realism – especially when it comes to the two-dimensional representation of architectural space. A British artist practicing in London, Johnson has been working professionally since the mid-1960s. In that time his extensive *œuvre* has encompassed painted [cityscapes](#) and [prints](#) to depictions of rooms designed—among others—by [Norman Foster](#), [John Pawson](#), [I. M. Pei](#), and [David Chipperfield](#).



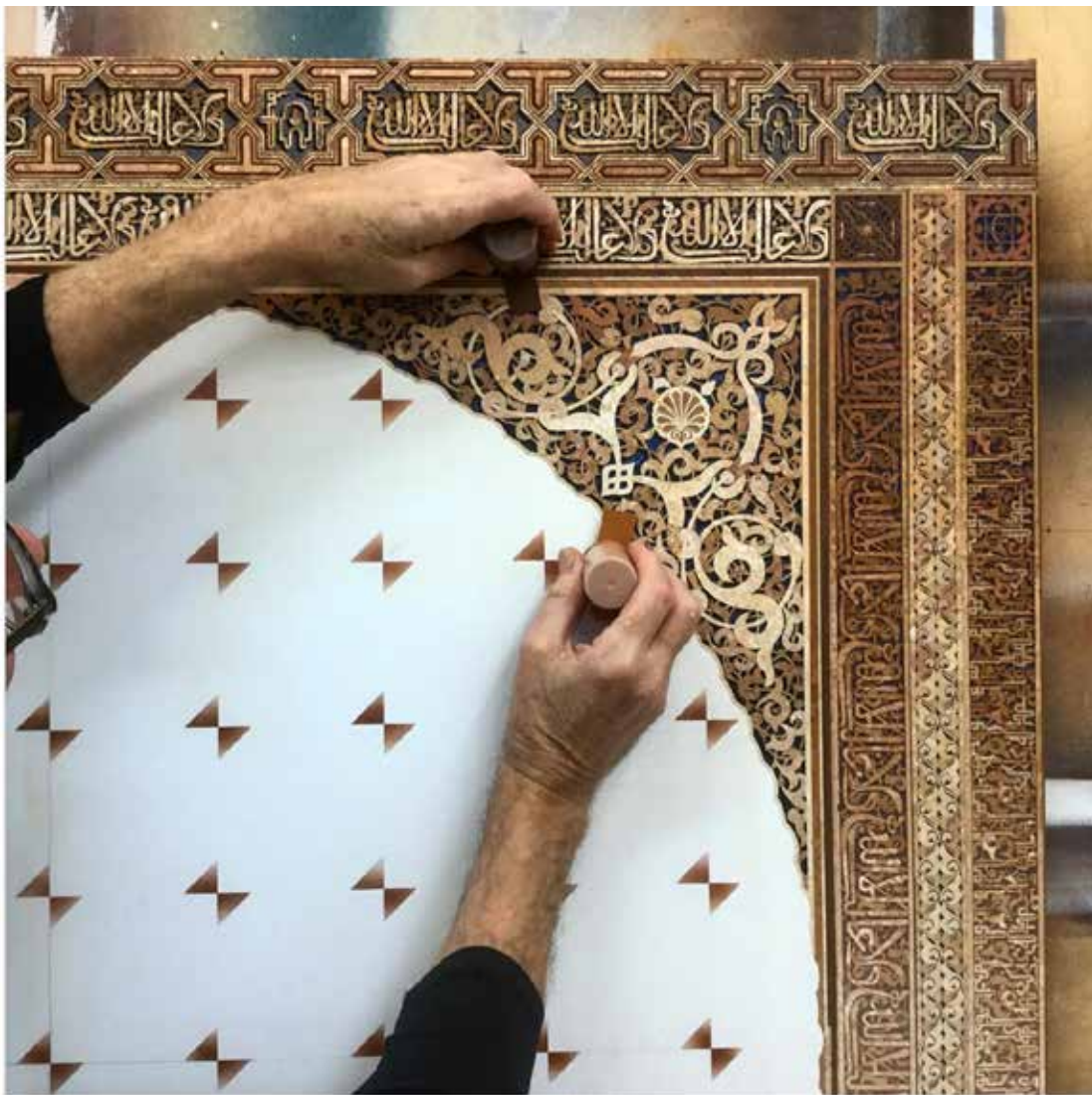
When viewed in the canon of artistic Realism, Johnson's work is almost unparalleled in its accuracy and attention to detail. The closest comparison that could be made might be to Jan van Eyck's [Arnolfini Portrait](#) of 1434, a picture of the 15th century Flemish school which also harnesses the technique of using a geometrically constructed perspective to depict nested space. It also employs a similar level of detail and 'truth to reality' – albeit, by its nature as an interpretive piece, representative of a *suspended* reality.

Over the last decade, Johnson has turned his attention to the great palatial complex of the [Alhambra de Granada](#) by producing a series of exquisitely worked canvases in devotion to its sculptural and spatial eccentricities. From the façade of the *Sala de la Barca* to the *Patio de los Arrayanes* and the *Mirador de Lindaraja*, Johnson's work embodies a capacity to re-present strictly controlled, dimensionless architectural space which is atmospherically dense and makes use—in a non-figurative sense—of *chiaroscuro*. His work balances on the threshold between the false perfection of the perspective view, and the abstracted depiction of an imperfect reality.

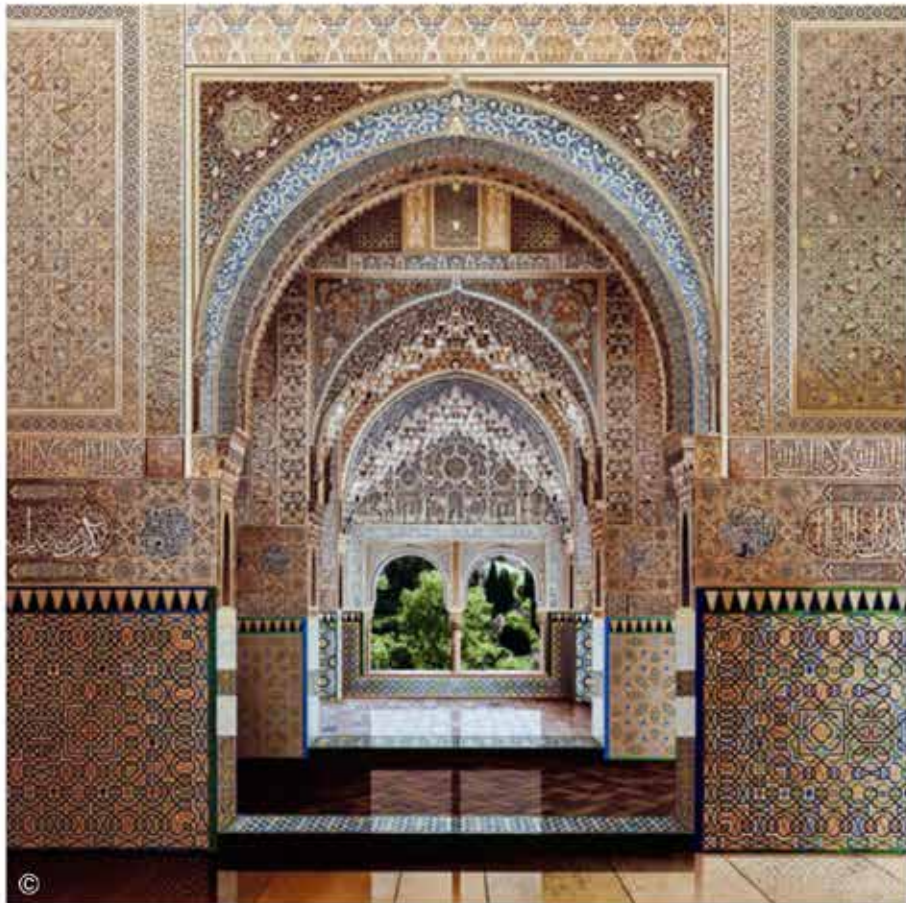


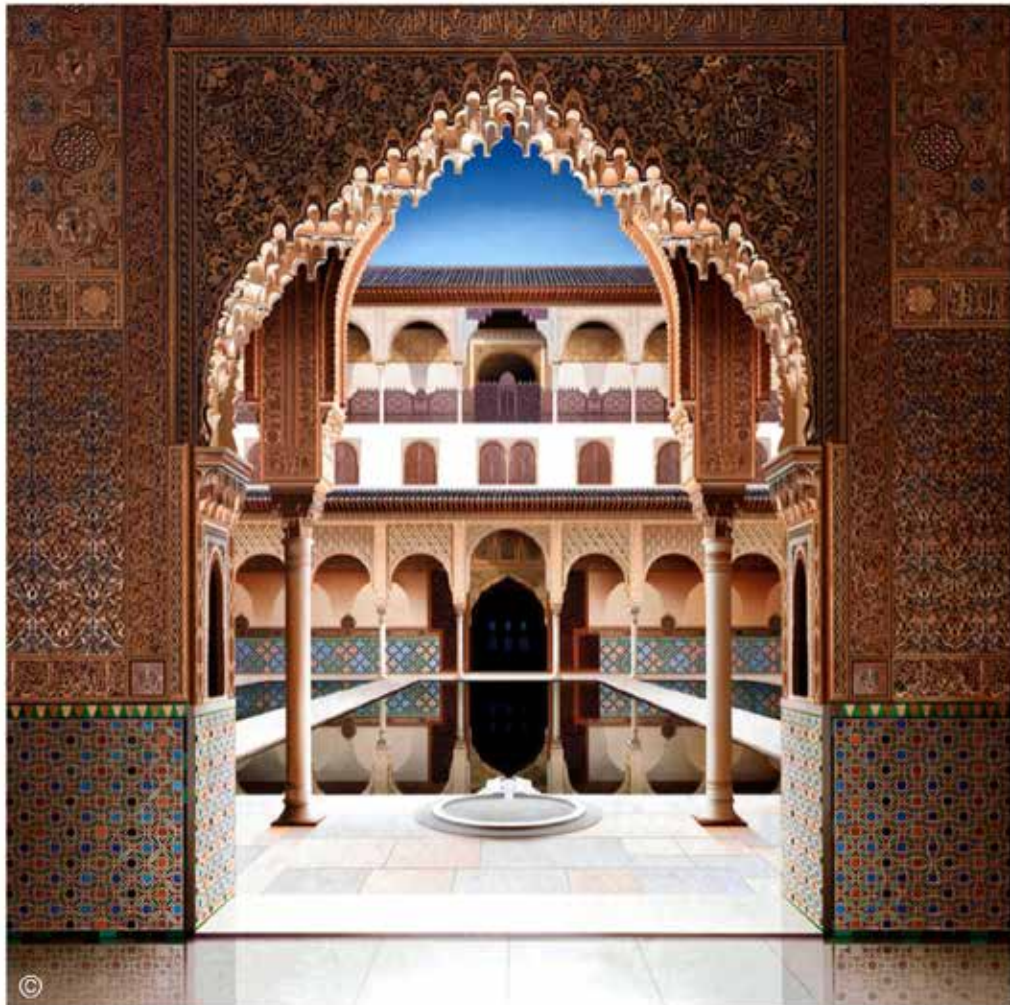


Building the paintings in stages, as one would a collage, Johnson primarily works from photography. Rather than apply paint by brush, he tends to spray it onto the canvas or use sponge to create texture. On a typical painting, he might spend nine months drawing stencils and six months turning these drawings into coloured areas, which then may take a vinyl cutter a further three months to create. Two months might then be spent on colour mixing before Johnson will actually begin painting, which could take between nine and twelve months. He is not alone in this process: "each painting is a collaboration that is more important than me as an artist, or me as an individual," he says. Each work "is a byproduct of collaboration."





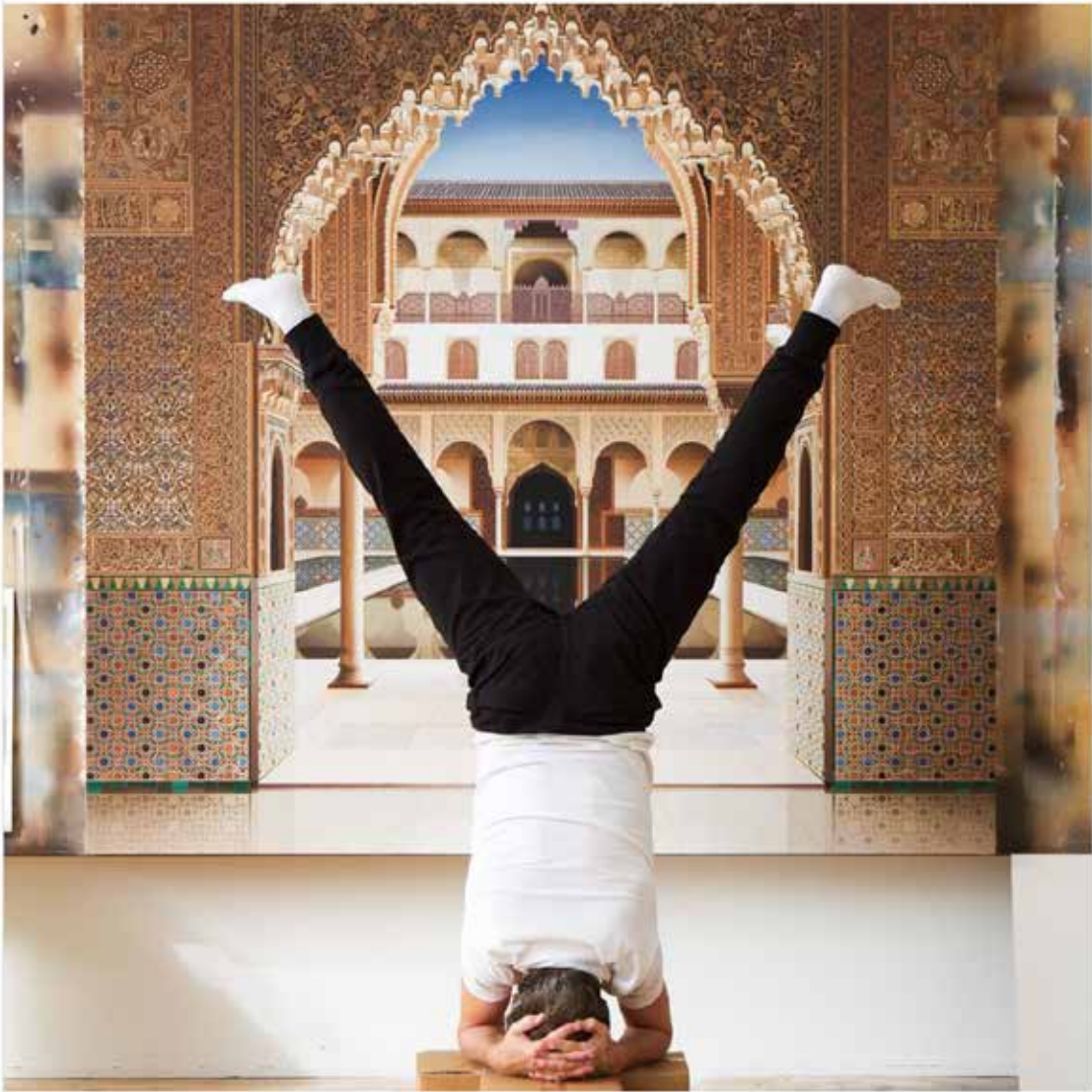






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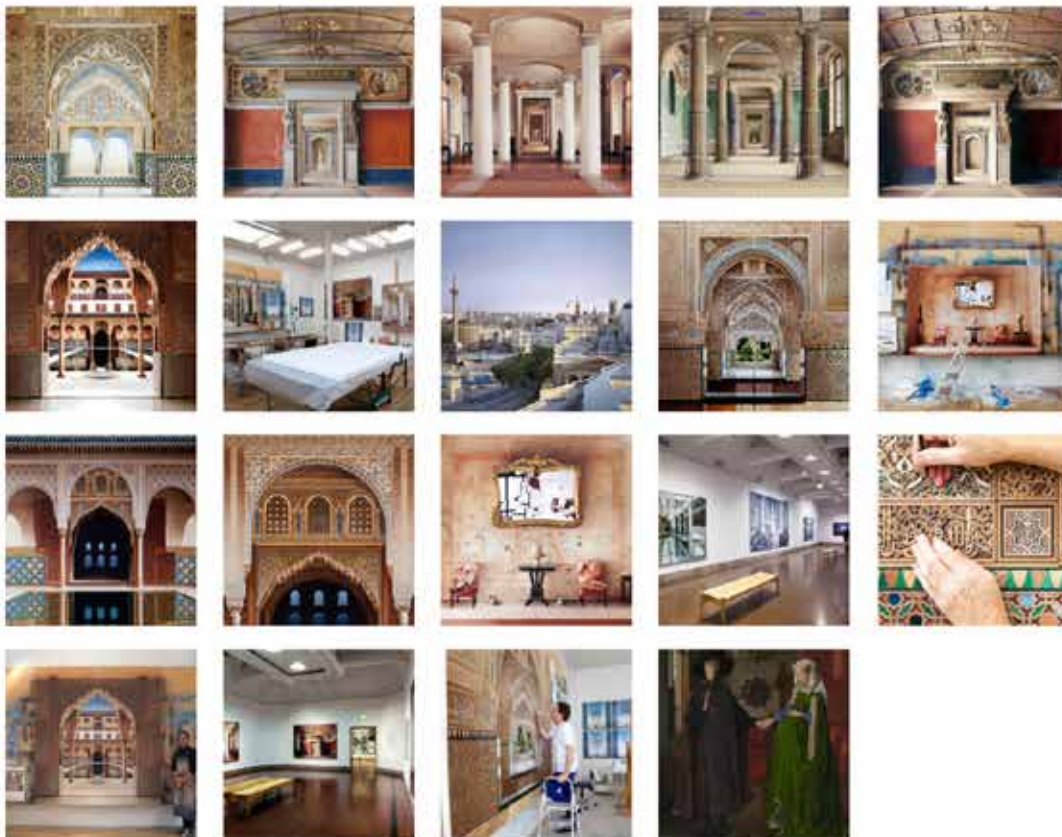






A major retrospective of Johnson's work, *Spirit of Place: Paintings 1967-2015*, is currently on display in Southampton City Art Gallery (UK) until the 23rd January 2016.

Image gallery



About this author



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