BEN

Ben Johnson: *Berlin Pool,* 2022, 120×180 cm (47×71 ins), acrylic on canvas

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JOHNSON

THE MASTER OF ARCHITECTURAL PAINTING

Article by André Lichtschlag

Photorealistic and hyperrealistic painting is characterized by exceptional individuals who work on a single image for weeks, months, or even years. Such dedication to one's work requires a particularly indomitable will on the part of the artist, absolute self-reliance, and a drive for independence.

Ben Johnson: *Hong Kong Panorama,* 1997, 1.83×3.66 m (6×12 ft), acrylic on canvas

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Born in Wales in 1946, the British artist Ben Johnson is now world-renowned for his painterly exploration of architecture, characterized by his passion for symmetry, geometric forms, and perspective, and by his perfection in color, texture, light, and materiality. Only late in life did Johnson question his passion and publicly address his difficult childhood. His father was a reckless gambler and bon vivant, married six times; his mother, also frequently married, was an artistic, glamorous and femme fatale. Half-siblings, of whom he was unaware, repeatedly entered his life. In fits of rage, his eccentric father would not only throw tables and chairs out of windows, but also wreck the entire home. Does this explain Ben Johnson's choice of subject matter: refined, orderly, beautiful houses, both inside and out, that invite living and well-being?

Materially, his childhood fluctuated between overflowing wealth and sudden deprivation. Sometimes his father would unexpectedly bring home a pony for little Ben, or 2,000 hats would be waiting in a delivery van for his mother after she had complained that a proper husband should occasionally give his wife a hat. And then everything would be back to normal.

At school, Ben Johnson was a disaster; he dropped out at 13 and decided to become an artist. At art school, he was a high-flyer, being ushered into the graduate program as a child and working with colleagues much older than himself. Johnson was quickly discovered by New York art enthusiasts and highly sought after in wealthy circles on the US East Coast. He was just in his early twenties and had made it – with abstract, expressionist paintings. But Johnson questioned himself and abandoned his secure career to dedicate himself to his own unique forms of figurative, precise, and increasingly photorealistic painting – always keeping in mind the architecture he admired. He never painted people, not in a single one of his pictures.

Johnson explains the artistic transition: "In 1971, I was fortunate enough to have a solo exhibition on Madison Avenue in New York. Despite, or perhaps because of, the financial success, I was able to objectively examine and evaluate my paintings, which were influenced by German Expressionism. I realized that I needed to find my own language and direction. Living in New York for the first time, I experienced the dynamism of a cutting-edge city. Construction sites everywhere, and all the energy to celebrate something new. I also came across the photorealistic paintings of Richard Estes and found them not only contemporary but also expressing perspective. I realized that this could be my guidepost for the future. I also noticed that in my sketchbooks, which I had kept since I was 14, almost every page contained snippets of contemporary architecture. This seemed to me an important area to be honored. I had also always had a passion for geometry. So, I combined geometry and architecture with the language of perspective to move forward. I feel that I have continued in this direction for the last 60 years."

Even as a photorealist, Johnson remained unique. He considers photorealism as a movement to be long over, "a short period, perhaps extending from the 1960s to the mid-1970s, as an expression of the prevailing artistic spirit of the time." Johnson explains that he believes "we should all take skill for granted; it alone is not enough. Skill does not create a work of art. The subjects have always been important to me. I wanted to honor the ambitions of architects and engineers alike. I was never interested in reproducing a photograph."

How does he choose his subjects? "For me, the need for balance and tranquility is always paramount. The classical and contemporary buildings I paint are also characterized by a very strict geometry. Norman Foster was one of the first architects I began to paint after." He is also fascinated by Zaha Hadid, "because she breaks with conventional architectural geometry." Johnson also appreciates the clarity of Richard Meier's architecture and his handling of light in space. He increasingly admires the work of engineers as well – "today I spend just as much time researching engineers as I do architects."

Ben Johnson: *Silent Study,* 1998, 85×68 cm (33⅜×26⅞ ins), acrylic on canvas

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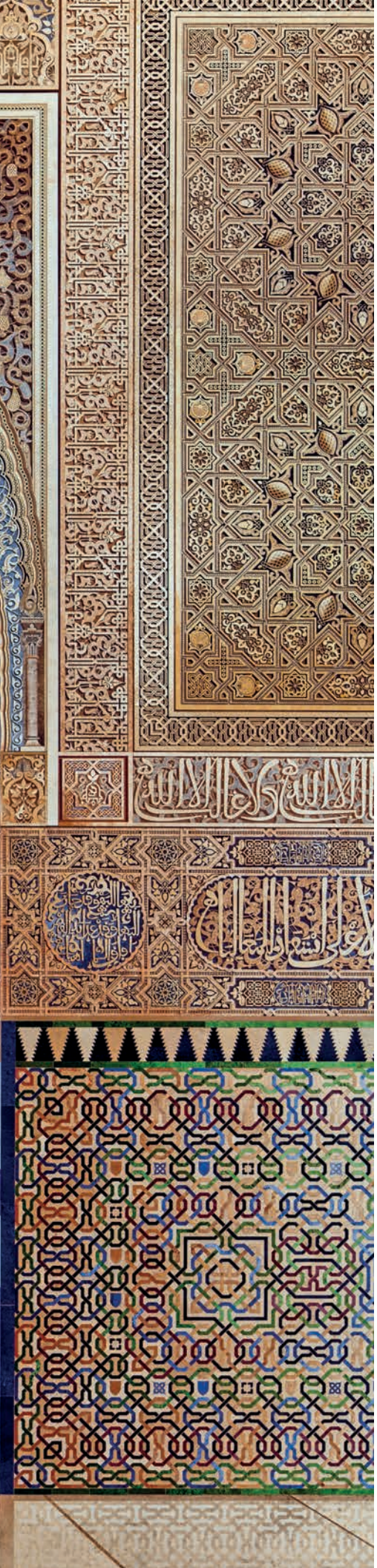

And which painters does he particularly admire? He mentions the late medieval Netherlandish painter Jan van Eyck, the early Renaissance Italian Piero della Francesca, of course the master of light Jan Vermeer, the neo-Impressionist pointillist Georges Seurat, the Russian Expressionist and pioneer of geometric abstraction Wassily Kandinsky, and finally, Chuck Close, a leading figure from the first generation of photo-realists. Johnson adds astutely: "This short list may illustrate the importance of the relationship between art, science, the material, and the spiritual in my painting."

Ben Johnson achieved worldwide renown for his paintings based on architectural spaces and, above all, for his large-format, richly detailed cityscapes. His large-scale, model-like works, devoid of people, include panoramas of Hong Kong, Zurich, Jerusalem, Liverpool, and most recently, his view of London, created in 2010 during a residency at the National Gallery in London.

The Liverpool cityscape, painted in acrylic on canvas measuring two and a half by almost five meters and depicting several hundred thousand buildings, was a three-year project – 18 man-years – worked under Ben Johnson's strict supervision from April 2005 to the end of March 2008. The team included the master himself, supported by three draftsmen, a stencil cutter, a paint mixer and studio assistant, and 37

Ben Johnson: *Mirador de Lindaraja,* 2013,
220×220 cm (87×87 ins), acrylic on canvas
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Ben Johnson: *Zurich Panorama,* 2003, 200×400 cm (79×158 ins), acrylic on canvas

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other people, many of them volunteers. The complete painting covers five square miles. Over 3,000 reference photographs were taken, and a total of 22,950 stencils were used. The painting was finally completed and publicly displayed during a six-week residency at the Walker Art Gallery.

Several worthwhile videos available on Vimeo and YouTube offer a good impression of this project and the extraordinary personality of the distinguished British artist Ben Johnson. The new, nearly half-hour documentary "Architectural Painting" by the film studio DOGMA85, released on YouTube at the beginning of 2026, is particularly recommended.

Ben Johnson is an honorary Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects for his contribution to the public understanding of contemporary architecture and was made an honorary fellow of Glyndwr University in Wales in 2015 for his services to art education. In 2017, he became a Fellow of the Royal Cambrian Academy in Wales. He has completed commissions for the Royal Institute of British Architects, the British Museum, and the National Museums Liverpool, as well

as for IBM, HSBC, JP Morgan, British Steel, Hong Kong Telecommunications, and many other companies. His works are included in the permanent collections of museums worldwide, including the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Regional Services Museum in Hong Kong.

The author of this article had the opportunity to admire three of Ben Johnson's works in the spring of 2026 as part of the major exhibition "Rivaling Reality: 60 Years of Photorealism" at the Museum Frieder Burda in Baden-Baden (on view until August 2, 2026; highly recommended). His marble floors, painted with acrylic on canvas, for example (gleaming in perfect light, arranged in symmetrical harmony), truly give the viewer the impression of seeing hard, polished stones. Magical? Stunning! ●