

Immersed in the intense emotional and physical upheaval of hurricane-torn New Orleans, artist Simon Gunning has learned to see beauty where others see only destruction.

by John R. Kemp

# Seeing Beauty in Unexpected Places

Simon Gunning has an edgy way of viewing southern Louisiana's almost mystical landscape with all its beauty and harshness. His paintings of vast, watery marshes; dark, almost impenetrable swamps; gritty city streets; and the Mississippi River coursing through the endlessly flat coastal delta are not the grand romantic illusions favored by the mid-19th-century Luminists or Impressionists. They are, instead, personal statements about life, death, sorrow, and his personal love affair with an "exotic" land.

The Australian-born artist is among the latest to find inspiration and their artistic voice in the region's watery landscape. For more than a century and a half, painters have explored the marshes, misty swamps, bayous, and streets of New Orleans to capture that perfect moment of sunlight. Even the Impressionist Edgar Degas, who visit-

ed his mother's native New Orleans in the mid-1870s, wrote to a friend in France that he found a lifetime of inspiration in the intensely bright and colorful West Indies-like marketplaces of New Orleans.

"When I moved here," Gunning says in his fading Australian accent, "I felt that nobody was really painting the street scenes and swamps. I felt like Gauguin: I moved to an exotic part of the world and stayed. I loved the smell and the culture. After 25 years I feel a part of it—and I feel like I am still just barely scratching the surface. The local environment, the street scenes, and the swamps still excite me. It's an endless source of subject matter. It's so rich. I love these old neighborhoods, but I don't try to romanticize the city."

Inspired by the work of Edward Hopper and George Bellows—who

both captured the hard edges of life and the gritty streets and images of their 20th-century worlds—Gunning, too, has learned to paint sobering scenes of the culture surrounding him. Paintings such as *Louisa Street Wharf* are not sentimental allusions to an imaginary world. They are filled with intense images of a decaying city, rotting hulls of shrimp boats partially sunken by the water's edge, and rusting ships moored along the New Orleans riverfront.

In paintings such as *The Wreck No. 2* and *Blackwater No. 2*, Gunning captures that element that some call the "heartbeat of place" by forcing the viewer to see the region as it really is: old, worn, and disturbing—yet magnificent. To Gunning, these images are visual songs about life and death. Referring to his recent "Drawings and Paintings From the Gulf" exhibition—which was on



**Blackwater No. 2**  
2005, oil, 48 x 144. All artwork this article private collection unless otherwise indicated.

BELOW

**The Wreck No. 2**

2005, oil, 48 x 72.  
Collection Arthur Roger  
Gallery, New Orleans,  
Louisiana.

BOTTOM LEFT

**Fidgeting With  
Infinity**

2005, oil, 40 x 30.  
Collection Arthur Roger  
Gallery, New Orleans,  
Louisiana.

BOTTOM RIGHT

**Louisa Street  
Wharf**

1998, oil, 40 x 30.

OPPOSITE PAGE

**Blackwater No. 3**

2005, oil, 40 x 30.



view until April 22 at Arthur Roger Gallery, in New Orleans—Gunning says all the paintings were completed prior to Hurricane Katrina—all but one, that is. *Fidgeting With Infinity*, a painting that shows several dead fish strewn about on a sheet of newspaper, is a “metaphor for the people who drowned,” when the storm and failed levees left 80 percent of the city flooded and more than 1,300 people dead.

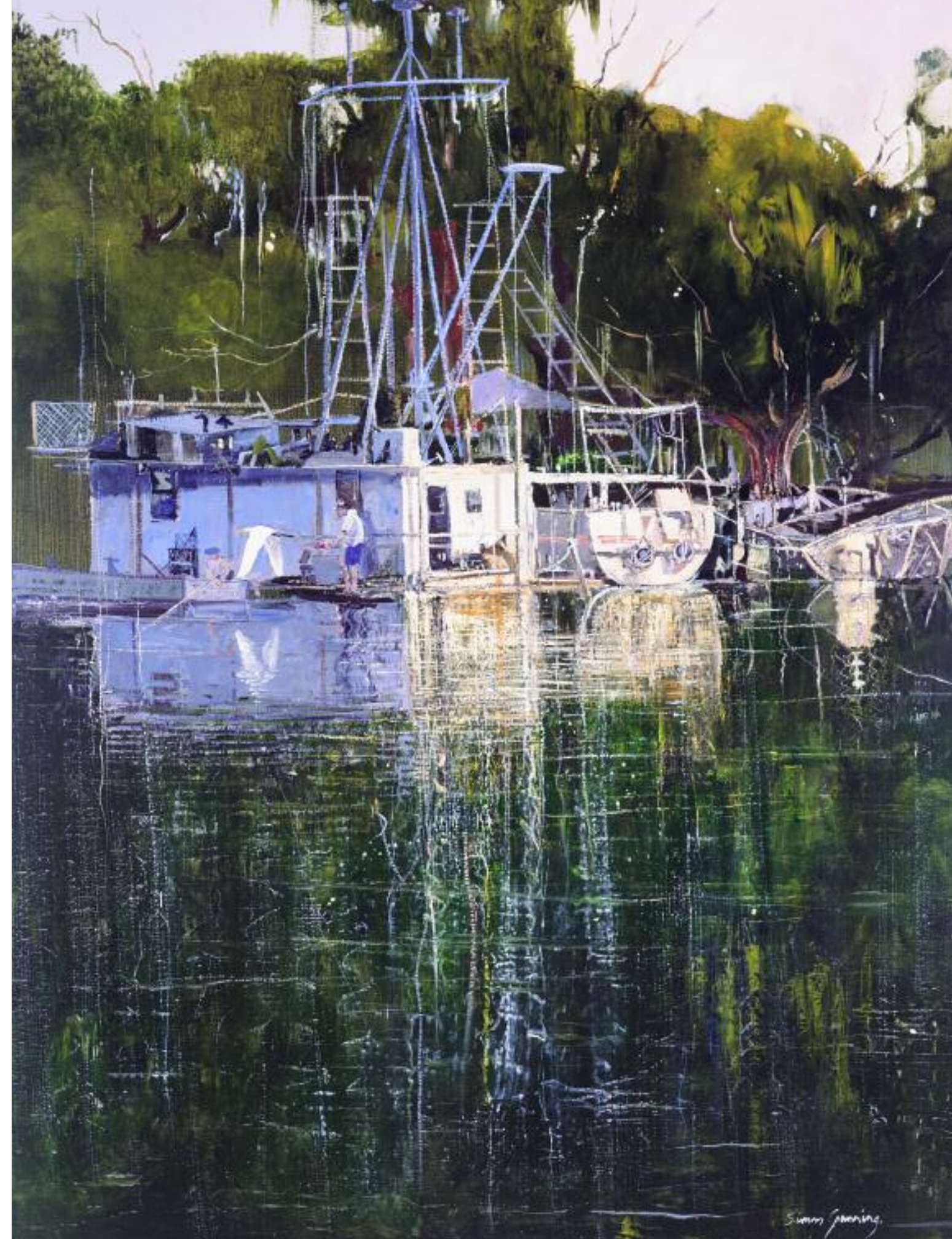
Like many artists in New Orleans, Gunning felt compelled to explore sections of the city that were devastated by the hurricane, hoping to capture and

express the gut-wrenching enormity of what happened there, including the much-reported-on Lower Ninth Ward. “I have some very strong compositions of that area,” he says with slight hesitation in his voice. “I’m very conflicted, though. I want to make good paintings, but I don’t want to be down there just gawking. A lot of bad art came out after the hurricane, and I don’t want to be part of that storm bandwagon. I want to show juxtapositions of what’s normal and what’s not normal.”

The artist did not have to go far to witness the destruction. From a win-

dow in his crowded gabled studio, he could look out on his ravaged early-19th-century neighborhood and even watch a house burn. “It was very depressing for me,” he says, recalling those days shortly after he returned to an almost totally abandoned city in late September 2005. “There was nobody here, and these helicopters were going over, dropping bags of water to put out the fire. It was very real.” That scene resulted in the painting *Looking North From My Studio Window, October 5* [not yet completed]. The destruction, the hopelessness, and the silence were very near and very real. The artist’s challenge was to express that emotion on canvas.

Achieving the poignancy of these emotional works involves a process for Gunning that includes both painting on location and using photographs as reference back in his studio. The artist says he uses a camera only sparingly to make visual field notes in conjunction with on-site sketches. He prefers working en plein air, although he does take photographs of objects and scenes that interest him to use for future pieces. Back in the studio, he cuts selected visual elements from each photograph and rearranges them into a collage to create a desired composition. Photographs, he says, can capture motion and rapidly changing landscapes, which proves useful when he’s indoors. “Photographs are good,” he is quick to say, “as long as they’re used as a tool and not a crutch. The camera can help you recollect, but it is very one-dimensional. A drawing you can work from every angle. It’s very elastic; you can walk around and change a line. If I can get a good drawing, I don’t need a camera. I can draw more accurately from life than I can from photos.” Gunning, who taught himself to draw, is a disciple of the traditional credo that drawing is the architecture upon which a good painting is built.



BELOW  
**Study for Blue Rigolets**  
2005, pen-and-ink, 34 x 46.

BOTTOM  
**Blue Rigolets**  
2005, oil, 60 x 68.



RIGHT  
**The Wreck No. 3**  
2005, oil, 36 x 48.



OPPOSITE PAGE  
**The Entrance**  
2006, oil, 4' x 12'.



He believes it is the power and classical beauty of the line that made the works of Leonardo and Dürer timeless.

Extolling the advantages of working in his preferred medium of oil, Gunning states, “The physical characteristics of oil are boundless, and it offers you the opportunity to express yourself as well as you can manipulate the paint. It has no limitations. I can get anything I want out of oil, and I’ll be using it until I die.” The artist prefers Rembrandt and Winsor & Newton paint, and his brushes are red sable.

In building a painting, Gunning follows three steps. First, he draws the image on canvas in charcoal and then covers the entire canvas with a translucent, monotone wash of Rembrandt sepia paint thinned with Winsor & Newton Liquin. He uses Liquin as a medium because it dries quickly, prevents the paint from cracking, and allows the same area to be reworked the next day. The ratio of paint to Liquin depends, he says, on the tone he wants to create. The artist then paints in the color, working from dark to light and from back to front. “I can build depth of space that way,” he says. To bring out the colors in the completed painting, he applies a thin coat of Liquin. A final varnish coat comes a year later, once the painting has fully dried.

Besides painting landscapes of areas of destruction, Gunning also captures some of the more familiar scenes of

New Orleans. Paintings such as *Blue Rigolets*, which depicts a navigational pass just east of New Orleans, and *The Entrance*, which shows an extraordinary and monumental 4'-x-12' diptych image of a ship entering the mouth of the Mississippi River, are dramatic images of well-known places in southern Louisiana. Yet, to Gunning, these and others—such as *The Wreck No. 3*, which shows a shrimp boat partially submerged in misty and calm waters surrounded by heavy clouds and a white bird flying into the sun—are cryptic expressions in line and color of how he dealt with his mother’s death in 2003. “I attach my life experiences directly to the canvas,” he says. The wrecks, the light, and the ship passing through the mouth of the river are about death, while the partly opened bridge “symbolically frees me of that grief,” he says.

Whether working on familiar scenes of New Orleans or on the more recent images of the city post-Katrina, Gunning says the challenge is “how do you take something ugly and make it attractive?” Answering his own question, Gunning says, “You can’t—unless you’re a hopeless romantic like me. I go back again and again.” ■

*John R. Kemp is the deputy director of the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities and the author of several magazine articles and books on the arts, including Rolland Golden: The Journeys of a Southern Artist (Pelican Publishing Company, Gretna, Louisiana).*

## About the Artist

As a young artist in Australia, **Simon Gunning** received a scholarship to study art in London. His trip included a layover in the United States and, after visiting The Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York City, he decided that he was going to study art in America—he never made it to England. For the last 25 years the artist has been living in New Orleans and making a name for himself in both the local and international art scene. His work can be found in private and corporate collections in Paris, London, New Orleans, Los Angeles, and Australia. Gunning has also participated in a number of juried shows, including the New Orleans Museum of Art’s 2001 New Orleans Triennial and the Washington, DC-based Inter-American Development Bank Cultural Center’s “New Orleans: A Creative Odyssey” exhibition in 2000. For more information on Gunning, visit his website at [www.simongunning.com](http://www.simongunning.com).