

Swamp King: Simon Gunning salvages a shipwrecked art

By Chris Waddington

New Orleans artist Simon Gunning emailed “the alchemist’s list” when asked to rank favorite paints:

1. *Ultramarine blue, and French ultramarine.*
2. *Cadmium Yellow (medium)*
3. *Cadmium Red*
4. *Raw Sienna*
5. *Burnt umber*
6. *Titanium white.*
7. *Ivory Black.*



The Ancient Swamp, 2018

“PLUS BLIND LUCK,” he added in capital letters. “Extra large, please...”

Gunning’s luck has held. His fifth solo show at Arthur Roger Gallery, *Shipwrecks and the Atchafalaya*, was a haunting triumph in October 2018, a reminder that alchemy isn’t just a footnote from the ancient history of his trade. Gathering more than a dozen oils and nine related drawings, the show let New Orleans gallery goers take the measure of Gunning’s ambitions — and offered a chance to catch up for anyone who missed his 2016 retrospective at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art.

For Gunning, transmutation remains the primary task. He turns the dross of conventional realism into canvases that radiate meaning — a process that starts on the palette, where he mixes pigments with ephemeral substances: the melancholy hues of times past, cobwebs of lost love, the glow of pleasure, and the dread one feels in a landscape that is slowly yielding to rising seas and coastal erosion — a landscape that could be swept away by a single hurricane.

Gunning packs his paintings with broken trees, rusting scrap, swamp water, voracious birds, storm clouds and stalking predators — imagery that sidesteps overt political statement, but which matches the nation’s current mood. His choice of motifs is unforced. The Gulf Coast landscape abounds in such elements — and they happen to suit a 62-year-old artist who has taken note of his own mortality, and come to a survivor’s accommodation.

In classic New Orleans fashion, however, Gunning tempers the bad news with a fervent, painterly version of the city’s live-for-the-moment spirit. He performs in every picture, sharing what he seeks in the ten thousand marks that constitute his private signature. Pen, pencil, brush or palette knife — it hardly matters. Gunning casts off mundane restrictions — and the sober pledges of traditional realism — with the mad ease of a drunkard who falls in with a second line parade. He paints with abandon, and never forgets the cemetery — and if that sounds like New Orleans hoodoo, be assured that local color doesn’t constrain Gunning’s vision. He may discourse on the tailing habits of redfish, and name all the birds in his paintings, but he’s equally likely to mention Charles Baudelaire, the great French poet, who got to the heart of the matter in *Paris Spleen*: “If you are not to be the martyred slaves of Time, be perpetually drunk! With wine, with poetry, or with virtue, as you please.”

Intoxicated with paint, Gunning invites viewers to partake of the same mystery. He lures one with electrifying draftsmanship — see *Gros Bec*, from his recent show, a vortex of pen and brushwork that suggests both the animation of its avian subject and the artist’s empathy for wild things. Or look at *Tiny’s Tree*, an oil portrait of a moss-draped primeval cypress, in which Gunning’s colors run as deep as a sousaphone’s low notes while ringing brightly in every register — effects achieved through a long-practiced, tonalist method that gives purpose to every layer of pigment, from primed canvas and underpainting to finishing touches laid on slickly with cake-icing textures.



Gros Bec, 2018



Tiny's Tree, 2018

Gunning's technique and his creative bravura go hand-in-hand. Consider *The Ancient Swamp*, a behemoth that spreads 12-feet-wide, across three birch panels, and forms a deep, theatrical space as vivid as a Baroque altarpiece — minus the saints and angels. Among other things, this 2018 landscape underscores Gunning's masterful control of atmospheric perspective and expressive lighting. It's also a vigorous romp, tugging one's gaze with luminous veils of color and a unique calligraphy of squiggles, blots, slashes and image-spanning strokes that verge on pure abstraction when viewed up close, and which suggest solid, three-dimensional forms when glimpsed from a distance.

To paint with such improvisatory freedom takes planning. Gunning starts the process with small preparatory sketches in graphite or ink, field notes that focus on details — a stand of trees, a bird in flight, a broken ship, a vista seen through a scrim of foliage. His drawings display a naturalist's passion for fact, and a draftsman's delight in complexity. To make them, he must dwell in the moment. Recording outward appearances is only part of the job. He needs to absorb all that a scene has to offer.

Even in his most casual sketches, Gunning probes for essential mysteries, seeking a thread to bind his private story to the jumbled stuff of familiar vistas. Drawing equals thinking for him. His eyes measure and decide; his hands operate with a kinesthetic intelligence akin to that of a surgeon.

Gunning's drawings range from palm-sized croquis to the sprawling multi-sheet compositions he produces when reprising the themes of major paintings. His sketchbooks and flat files contain thousands of works on paper — the fruit of decades, and most never shown in public. To examine them is revelatory, like sitting in when musicians rehearse: ideas are being refined, arrangements developed, essentials brought into focus.

Photography also plays a role in the development of Gunning's images, although his finished paintings show little sign of it. For him, the camera is a practical tool — one employed by representational artists since the 19th century, and doubly handy for a painter whose interest in plein air observation puts him in the field with insects, precipitation and the sauna-like heat of Louisiana's swamps.

Gunning knows how to use this aide without emulating its tell-tale limitations. He never copies the camera's monocular distortions and avoids its slavish attention to the quotidian. Rather, Gunning treats his snapshots as a form of visual shorthand, a way to quickly capture the broad outlines of a scene, or to focus on transient effects. Once back in the studio he cuts and crops them, assembling collages to test compositional ideas. Gunning often sketches on these composites, rethinking the space of the photographs and finding his way to designs that suit his painterly goals.



Cypress, 1989

How Gunning found himself in Louisiana

For those who prize the sensual cuisine of painting, Gunning serves up a Louisiana feast. For lovers of our humid swamps and estuaries, his paintings are as welcome as a postcard from home — even if their message veers from touristic blandness. In my case, Gunning’s latest exhibition offered all that and more, forcefully suggesting why his work has held my attention for a quarter-century.

In the 1990s, I reviewed his breakout exhibitions for *The Times-Picayune* newspaper, impressed by surging landscapes that showed a young artist’s rare fidelity to place and to craft imperatives. Eventually, I became a visitor to his Faubourg Marigny studios — first in the stifling attic above his living quarters, and more recently in a restored, 1814 shotgun house that sits across a brick walkway from his home. Over the years, I sifted through Gunning’s sketchbooks, and watched him scrape nearly finished canvases to the nub. I sailed with him to the South Pass of the Mississippi as he foraged for fresh material. I pounded his door when a nearby house fire threatened his studio after Hurricane Katrina.

That makes me a biased observer — and a lucky one, too, happy to claim a front row seat for the ongoing development of a serious, somewhat unfashionable talent, one who has gone from strength to strength since coming to New Orleans from his native Australia in 1980.

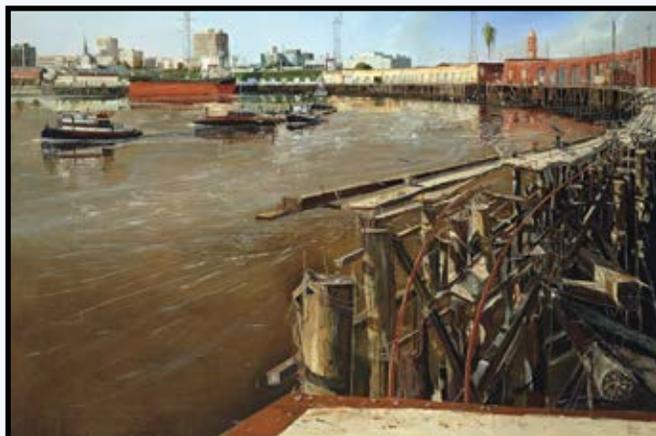
In the course of our friendship, Gunning has shared many stories. How surfing, sailing and a passion for drawing shaped his boyhood in Sydney. How he mourned a brother who died as a teenager. How he jumped from a military prep school to Australia’s most prestigious college of art — and survived the culture shock. Seduced by Arthur Rimbaud’s hallucinatory writings, Gunning soon abandoned the verities of middle-class Sydney, instead choosing the French poet’s course: “a long, gigantic and rational derangement of all the senses.” Amid this delirium, Gunning traveled alone through the hill country of Thailand — a pilgrimage that started as an art student’s risky bow to the *maudit* manner, and which climaxed, on a jungle night, when the seeker encountered a candlelit procession led by scores of elephants in glittering raiment.



Joe Camel, Stop Smoking, 1998

Like many aspiring artists, Gunning was beguiled by exotic things. He sought rarities at the far horizon of his experience. He chased that mirage, beloved of youth, in which novelty and authenticity mingle. No surprise, then, that he should land, at age 24, in New Orleans — not the tidy tourist destination that would rise up after Hurricane Katrina, but a strange and extravagant place to bury one’s talents. To stay here, Gunning gave up a scholarship at the Royal Academy of Arts in London. He skipped the booming art scene of 1980s New York and never went home to Australia. Instead, he claimed a dying banana port split by a mile-wide river, an island ringed by swamps and brackish bays, a musical fountainhead, a booze-soaked backwater slumbering amid antebellum swag. New Orleans was America’s murder capital, home to Bourbon Street and the “world-famous Mardi Gras,” a black majority city where the street culture came straight from Africa and blue bloods still wore calfskin gloves to debutante balls.

Gunning wasn’t alone in his fascination. For generations, New Orleans had been a mecca for outcasts, especially those from small towns across the South. It provided time and privacy. It turned a blind eye to folly and saved a place for freaks of every persuasion. Romantic gestures were celebrated here — and Gunning succumbed swiftly, marrying Shelly Mapes, a New Orleans native, whose steadiness sealed a partnership that has held for 35 years. For the young painter, New Orleans also offered practical advantages. It had cheap rent, a bohemian ethos, collectors who prized local talent, and a nucleus of committed artists who showed work alongside national figures in a cluster of commercial galleries. Most importantly, New Orleans offered permission — a gift that Gunning seized upon from the start, even if he wasn’t sure how to proceed. “When I stepped off the plane, I didn’t know what to paint — or how to paint it,” he said. “New Orleans was full of clichés — magnolia blossoms and French Quarter courtyards — but mostly it looked like a big green mess to me.”



Condemned, 2003

Gunning found his answers in unexpected places, from industrial sites and collapsing riverside docks to a swampy pond near a friend's rural blueberry patch. Challenged about his draftsmanship, he sketched most of the animals at Audubon Zoo. He set up his easel on the potholed streets of his neighborhood, capturing the funky vibe of Faubourg Marigny in the 1980s: a place where schoolboys played trumpets at bus stops and gunshots echoed at night. In these settings, Gunning honed his skills, learning to capture the humid distances and foliage-tinted light of the Gulf Coast. He probed the inner architecture of his subjects, and began to see their expressive possibilities, building close-knit compositions in which sunlight slashed across lines of perspective and angled between bold verticals — palms, cranes, masts and power poles — to create dramatic shadows. More often than not, Gunning doubled and distorted these crisscross elements in the mirroring waters that seemed to be everywhere in Louisiana.

For locals who paid attention, Gunning's paintings presented a host of fresh subjects. Yet the young Australian was more than a sharp observer. He looked outward, at visible things, and also peered into himself. Mere topography was only the starting point for his artistry. In his first mature paintings, form became metaphor: Raw brushwork and cartoon exaggerations sustaining a range of moods, from carceral gloom to ecstatic release.



Spoonbills, 2018

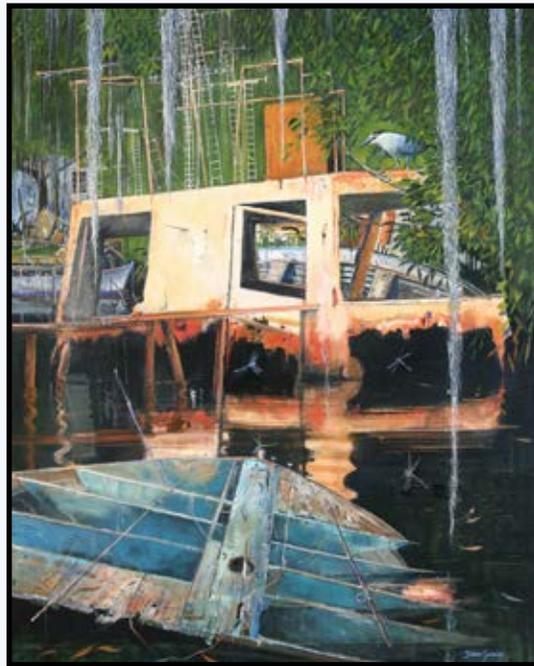
Gunning gave himself to the tempest, and harnessed its power during long productive days in the studio — a balancing act few artists master in youth. Even today, having survived the storm, he explains his obsession by quoting Brett Whiteley, the mad, bad genius of Australian art: “The rules of the game are quite simple. In a given arena, on as many psychic fronts as the talents allow, one must visually describe the center of the meaning of existence.”

For many art world observers, such ambitions will seem a romantic stretch. As evidence, they will point to Whiteley's death, by overdose, at age 53. They will giggle about “the meaning of existence,” cast doubts on the continuing relevance of painting, and look to the market for guidance. Don't these Aussies know that irony rules the roost?

None of that takes Gunning's talent into account. Working quietly, far from the center, he has poured his life into a time-consuming discipline, a potentially quixotic enterprise brought to triumphant climax in paintings that could come from no other hand. And Gunning's success is not just a matter of style. His best work explodes the stodgy reputation of his chosen genre, putting him in company with notable American contemporaries — John Alexander, April Gornik, Neil Welliver, Rackstraw Downes, Russell Chatham and a handful of others who treat landscape as a vehicle for self-examination, a tool for understanding the world.

Gunning learned to take landscape seriously before leaving Australia. He grasped its possibilities during visits to Sydney's museums, and later, in Melbourne, where he attended the National Gallery School of Art. Back then, he always had paint under his fingernails, ink stains on his clothes — and he kept his eyes open, studying the rich landscape tradition of his homeland. He absorbed the tonalist, 19th century vistas of the colonial era; the flickering impressionist manner of Arthur Streeton; and the disparate influences of Whiteley, Arthur Boyd, Sidney Nolan, and other 20th century rule-breakers. His art school mentor, Fred Williams, also left a mark, showing the young Gunning that landscape painting and modernist abstraction could fruitfully cross-pollinate.

If those Australians set daunting standards, they also showed that the ultimate prize — transcendence bound into paint and canvas — was not just achievable, but still worth the struggle. Gunning's confidence stems from that underlying belief. It's the taproot that anchors him to Australian art after decades as an expatriate.



Baudelaire's Dream, 2018

Shipwrecks, swamps and sensual pleasures

Gunning's confidence came through strongly in his recent exhibition, where several pieces ranked with the best of his career. In these landscapes, he paints with reflexive vigor, tugging the visible world toward a private vision — each mark shaped by a lifetime of muscle memory, by faith in a beloved process, by an athletic acceptance of risk.

One can feel it in *Baudelaire's Dream*, where he hooks viewers by embedding a barbed lure into his thickly painted canvas. This scene of nautical ruin is as densely tangled as Piranesi's prison capriccios, its foreground filled with a half-sunken hull in glossy black water, its beckoning distances screened by another hull's rusting cabin. Gunning animates his design with a host of painterly tricks: the optical push-pull between warm and cool colors; the chiaroscuro drama of shadow and light, the appeal of impasto surfaces yielding to illusionistic space.

Gunning shows equal confidence as a visual storyteller. In *The Graveyard*, for instance, a cluster of beached and listing wrecks nudge each other in funereal stillness. Their tipped forms, surmounted by cruciform masts, resemble old tombs settling in Louisiana muck. The ruined objects scattered over their decks — tires, oyster shells, frayed nets and acetylene canisters — seem like votive offerings in this context, and they speak to Gunning's faith in his medium: tangible artifacts spawned from quick smears, clots, and crumbles of pigment applied with a palette knife.



The Haunted Wreck of Lady Pontchartrain, 2018



The Graveyard, 2018

Gunning expands on this narrative impulse in *The Haunted Wreck of Lady Pontchartrain*. Here the setting is theatrical: storm clouds, high horizon and an arched concrete span confining a shipwreck to center stage, its half-submerged stern and cabin filled with the imps of Gunning's imagination. Squint through the glare and his cartoon familiars emerge from their naturalistic setting: Poe's raven framed in a window; a pelican escaped from the flag of Louisiana; a dangling skeleton; and Ned Kelly, the Australian outlaw, wielding both shotgun and paintbrush. Even the water tells tales, its surface rippling into yin-yang symbols and the painter's elongated monogram.

Even in his biggest oils, Gunning shuns contemporary bombast — the verbal inflation and easy ironies that mar so much art in this era of distracted audiences. He gives one much to ponder, but internalizes his truths as pictorial language — no clever slogans, no progressive pieties, no scaffolds of theory to sustain his claim to importance. Instead, his paintings shock with their audacious physicality, like a stand of cypress materializing in the white-walled precincts of contemporary art. They startle, too, with their radical insistence on craft — a risky gambit that can make Gunning seem like a preservationist, when, in fact, his entire focus is on the future, on the next blank canvas, on the existential struggle that ensues when facing the void.

Consider the exhibition centerpiece, *2 1/2 Hours with a Cottonmouth*, which manages to be both monumental in scale, and intimate in feeling. Here Gunning places viewers in mid-air, close to an egret as it skims the dawn-lit surface of Lake Verret. The bird races down a receding line of moss-draped cypress, and, at first glance, seems to be star of the show — but where is the missing cottonmouth of the title?



2 1/2 Hours with a Cottonmouth, 2018

Gunning isn't dealing in jokey non sequiturs. In this painting, he has a real snake in mind: the one that hid beside him for 2 1/2 hours as he sketched the morning view from a dock on Lake Verret. When the cottonmouth startled Gunning from his plein air idyll, it left him with a choice. He could transform his snake-free preparatory drawing into an anecdote, a herpetological genre scene suitable for a *Field & Stream* cover; or leave out the serpent's form while preserving its venomous essence in every detail. By sleight-of-hand, he has managed the latter in his finished canvas, imbuing dawn's pink and gray with a hint of menace, and leading one's gaze deep into the cypress grove, where the ultramarine of his underpainting comes through like a note of doom. In those depths, the scattered presences of roosting birds — white amid shadow — look like floating question marks. Every twist of Spanish Moss could be a snake in motion. Rippling reflections take on a serpentine cast.

Is it clear that such landscapes are more than long chores of representation for Gunning? They map a world and memorialize their own making — each brushstroke part of a welcomed servitude, pure drudgery distilled into dreams. To make them, Gunning taps his private store of eternity. He spends his time freely, not measuring it by the cost accountant's clock, but by the slow accretion of mark upon mark, paint accruing in geologic layers and changing with the daily progress of light through his studio.

His finest works give us what Frost once claimed for the poem: “a momentary stay against confusion.” Isn't that enough? Modesty makes Gunning a trustworthy guide to the whirlwind. A seeker trapped in the mind of a skeptic, he charts his own course and bids attentive viewers to follow. He leads a pilgrimage through New Orleans streets, and lets us meander the swamps and streams of Louisiana. He takes glorious detours. He pauses amid splendors of distance. He dwells in light and kicks the trash at his feet. For those who choose to follow, Gunning unveils riches — worldly things that we are destined lose — and, finally, like the greatest artists, he beckons us back to ourselves.

Copyright 2019, Chris Waddington

Chris Waddington writes frequently for The Magazine Antiques, and has contributed to many national magazines, including Oxford American, Condé Nast Traveler, Outside, Art in America, and Utne Reader. He worked as a critic, editor and reporter at daily papers in New Orleans and Minneapolis. His publications include several museum catalogs about contemporary artists, among them, Russell Chatham, Jean Seidenberg, Nicholas Africano and Steven Sorman.