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# THE BEST OF **Watercolor**

SUMMER 2025

Winners of the Splash 26 Art Competition

## **MAKING MAGIC! 122**

Paintings to  
Inspire & Ignite  
Your Creativity





THIRD-PLACE WINNER

# Tony Armendariz

An intimate and illustrious portrait captures the lessons at the heart of travel.

BY STEVE AUST

**The majority of tourism** ads we encounter tend to emphasize historic landmarks that attract big crowds, or captivating town squares with restaurants and other trendy gathering spaces. This type of marketing, however, misses the heart of what so many of us take away from our travel experiences. We travel to renew our spirit, and—while taking in the landscape and architecture of a new place is certainly part of the adventure—it’s the people we encounter along the way that resonate for years in our hearts and minds.

This is the inspiration behind Tony Armendariz’s watercolor *Wilson Tells It*, third-place award winner in the Splash 26 competition. All the artist’s inspirations derive entirely from his travels, particularly Cuba, which he has visited seven times. The resulting portraits celebrate cross-cultural commonalities and how every individual has a worthwhile story to tell. “One who does not travel, does not learn,” says Armendariz.

## CREATIVE ROOTS

Armendariz’s creative impetus was cultivated by his family. His great-grandmother created oil paintings, his mother sewed, and his father was a journalistic photographer whose work focused

on portraiture. “My mother helped me learn to think about color and design with my subjects, and my father had a great eye for composition and detail,” says the artist. “He taught me to not let tools get in the way of a great idea; to make my tools work the way I want them to.”

Armendariz studied at the American Academy of Art, in Chicago, under Irving Shapiro (American, 1927–94), the influential watercolor artist known for his landscapes and architectural subjects. Although grateful for the lessons he learned, Armendariz acknowledges that artistic mentorship has evolved since that time. “It was a tough class. I didn’t get any As,” he recalls. “Back then the atelier model consisted of a single master tearing down the work of students. I think that artists today have a better understanding of how ideas can come from anywhere, and that creation is often collaborative, with many influences.”

After graduating from the Academy, Armendariz honed his skills as a commercial artist, which he credits with contributing to his growth as a portraitist. “The planning and composition for both are similar,” he says. “Developing a concept using 3-D software is akin to the way you consider a painting’s composition.”



**Tony Armendariz** is an artist living in Palatine, Ill. Born into an artistic family, he learned to create with textile, photography, drawing and painting. While he was still a student at the American Academy of Art, in Chicago, he began his 20-year career as a graphic artist, illustrator and web designer. His work has been published in many fine art magazines, including *Watercolor Artist*, *Fine Art Connoisseur* and *American Art Collector*. The artist is a Signature Member of the American Watercolor Society, the National Watercolor Society and the Illinois Watercolor Society, where he also served as director. Armendariz is represented by Hilliard Gallery, in Kansas City, Mo., and currently teaches watercolor painting at the Oak Park Art League, in Oak Park, Ill. Visit [armendarizart.com](http://armendarizart.com) to learn more.



**WILSON TELLS IT** (watercolor on paper, 30x22)





## AN INSPIRING SUBJECT

When it comes to selecting subject matter, Armendariz looks for people undertaking everyday tasks. While Chicago locals provide some inspiration, it's more often travel that fuels his passion. It was in a section of Havana replete with industrial plants and loading docks that the artist encountered Wilson, the subject of his prizewinning watercolor. "I noticed his fair hair, the lines on his face and his bright orange hat," he says. "Everything about him was so expressive. I knew I had found my subject."

Armendariz began talking with Wilson in Spanish about work, family and the travails of everyday life, all the while capturing multiple reference shots from different vantage points. Juror Stephen Zhang was impressed by the rich storytelling the numerous points of view convey. "*Wilson Tells It* presents a creative composition, offering multiple angles of the subject, allowing us to feel very close to him, as if we know him intimately," he says. "The painting also demonstrates the artist's confident command of human anatomy, lighting and color design."

## WORKING THE PROCESS

In the past, if Armendariz had wished to document a subject in multiple poses, he would have simply painted individual portraits. To capture the deep texture in Wilson's face, however, he decided to depict three portraits within one piece. "There was so much emotion and so much contrast within the shadows," he says, "I thought it would be most impactful to capture it all in a single painting."

Prep work for *Wilson Tells It* included a graphite drawing to perfect the shadowing texture, and a miniature study to perfect the brushstrokes. "I like to use as many brushes as I can to create deeper layers and detail," says the artist.

Armendariz progressed through the painting, working from light to dark and pinpointing white space before building up layers of paint. He wanted to accentuate the hard lines and deep, nuanced shadow that emphasize the subject's skin tone. To play up the shadows and accents of hues, he avoided a monolithic backdrop and imparted a dark supporting tableau that imparts tones of purple, blue, black and burnt sienna.

With travel playing such an integral role in his work, it's a bit surprising that Armendariz doesn't have a ready list of destinations, but instead remains open to new scenes and challenges to allow space for new ideas. "Art doesn't get easier unless you paint the same thing repeatedly," he says, "but if you only do that, you aren't growing."

Steve Aust is a Cincinnati-based writer.



OPPOSITE  
**JOSÉ**  
(watercolor on  
paper, 37½x12½)

ABOVE  
**FEEDING NAIROBI**  
(watercolor on  
paper, 18x24)

RIGHT  
**TOUCH OF RED**  
(watercolor on  
paper, 24x18)

FAR RIGHT  
**THE LIAR RETURNS**  
(watercolor on  
paper, 24x16)

