MOMENTS OF
ILLUMINATION

For **Raymond Bonilla**, light isn't just a visual element—it's a portal to the memory of the deeply personal moments that shape a life, rendered with painterly precision.

by John A. Parks

There are times when light utterly transforms a setting, sometimes evoking an almost mystical feeling. On a cloudy day, for instance, a shaft of sunlight may penetrate for a moment, illuminating a small section of landscape to produce a glorious blaze of color in an otherwise gray world. Or a ray of late afternoon sun might find its way into a darkened room, striking a small length of wall or the corner of a piece of furniture, like a benign and spectacular visitation. This searchlight effect can carry with it a sense of meaning, perhaps even divine intervention—something that has long been known to painters of religious subjects.

For Massachusetts-based painter Raymond Bonilla, the transformative effects of light are a way of conveying his strength of feeling about scenes that form pivotal moments in his life. Buildings, interiors, outings, still lifes and landscapes are caught at a moment of transformation as the sun bathes them in an unexpected glow. "Everything I draw and paint is a moment in time in my life that holds significance to me," he says. "The act of image-making is my attempt to preserve that memory for myself."

TOOLS & TECHNIQUES

Bonilla's paintings usually start with a meaningful photo. "My process begins by studying and documenting nature through photography," he says. "From there, I heavily manipulate the photo to build a reference that's closer to how I remember a particular moment."

To do this, Bonilla uses Photoshop to crop out or collage elements that aren't in the original photo. He also works on the color and tonality of the image and makes sketches and color studies. "I try to get my vision as finished as possible in the study," he says, "so I'm able to see my initial concept clearly. Then I ask myself what I would change if it were the final piece. I'll either make those changes to the study itself, or scan it into Photoshop and digitally paint on it. Or, sometimes, I proceed straight to the painting with those changes in mind."

Remedy (oil on panel, 24x24)

Bonilla uses a variety of underpainting and overpainting strategies to build up to finishes that range from painterly to polished. "I let the subject matter and the complexity of the composition dictate the type of approach and kind of finish that's needed," he says. "I'm very flexible. I never do a painting the same way twice. Sometimes I'll begin by massing in the image with big blocks of color. Other times, I'll transfer the drawing through a projector."

Another transfer method the artist uses is to make a rough layout tracing from the study, which he can then manipulate a little before printing it out to the size he desires for his finished painting and mountng it on the surface. Occassionally, he'll do a mixed-media drawing, using airbrush acrylic and colored pencil—a process akin to an old-time poster illustration technique. "It gives you a full-color, full-value, somewhat painterly look without having to use any oil paint," he says. "I'll do a small drawing, blow it up to the final size I want, mount it and then paint right on it."

Once the layout is established, Bonilla creates an underpainting—generally a monochrome version of the image—for which he'll choose from a variety of colors. "If it's a very warm image, and I want it to feel warm, I'll start with the warm ground," he says, "and if it's cool, I'll start with the cooler ground. If I want to add color contrast, I might jump in with some colors. Generally, I'll do an underpainting cool, knowing that I'll be putting warm colors on top—and vice versa. And for those times when I don't really care, I'll work on a neutral ground."

The artist also employs a range of different techniques to apply the underpainting. Sometimes he'll do a cursory lift-out—a sketch in which the lights are created by wiping out paint to reveal the white ground beneath. He usually does this in gouache, then seals and paints on top of it in oil or acrylic. Sometimes, he'll do a full opaque underpainting in acrylic or oil, then build up the color. Other times, he'll start directly with color and scrub in the forms.

Once the underpainting is complete, Bonilla again chooses from a few different approaches to develop the painting. "I'll start with bristle brushes if I really need to get some paint on fast because I want to build it up or move it around earlier in the process," he says. If he's going for a more scrubby look, he'll use synthetic brushes instead. "I'll use the paint a little bit thinner but not actually transparent," he continues. "I generally work as opaquely as possible because I find that the color moves in and out of itself nicely. Then I can add broken color on top, a lot later."

Just how far Bonilla pushes his painting also varies considerably. "The finish of my works depends largely on the subject matter," he says. "In every case, I let the painting decide how much information it needs in order to properly communicate its intended meaning. I try to 'listen' to the painting—and then get out of its way."

The artist's basic approach to underpainting can be seen in *Bingo* (opposite). The underpainting was begun with a mix of burnt umber and burnt sienna gouache, which was painted as a lift-out. The darks were then reinforced using colored pencil, and the lights were strengthened using white acrylic paint. The painting was then built on top in oil, using heavier paint in the lights and more transparent layers in the shadows. "I was thinking about how much I could let the underpainting 'breathe' in between my strokes," says Bonilla. "That's why I used the hatched strokes. The greater transparency in the shadow areas creates a sense of depth and maintains color activity in the shadows throughout the painting."

ABOVE
New Thing
(oil on panel, 10x8)

LEFT
Bingo
(oil on panel, 24x30)

OPPOSITE
Flamboyan
(oil on canvas, 24x30)

ARTIST'S TOOLKIT

Surface: Strathmore 300 vellum bristol paper for drawings; cradled wood, Ampersand and ACM panels for paintings

Paints: Winsor & Newton Professional acrylics, Griffin alkyds and Artists' oils

Brushes: Robert Simmons Signet bristle and Princeton Summit 6100 flat synthetic

Other Tools: Prismacolor colored pencils

LIGHT & MEMORY

Another painting, *Remedy* (page 00), presents a scene laden with memories of the artist's former hometown, Buffalo, N.Y. The shadowy interior of a coffee shop is pierced by a powerful ray of afternoon sun, striking a brilliant green coffee machine. The effect is dazzling and overwhelming, yet benign. "After a long, stormy winter, we finally had a day nice enough that we could be outside," says Bonilla. "My wife and I decided to stroll to a neaby coffee shop and get a cappuccino. I remember walking in, and the afternoon light was hitting everything just perfectly. I said, 'This is like medicine, just being outside and being with each other.' And so, if you look at the table, you'll see a cast shadow of two figures—that's my wife and me."

Here again, the painting is built over a warm ground of burnt sienna and umber. The spectacular saturation of the green is reinforced by more restrained color throughout the rest of the painting.
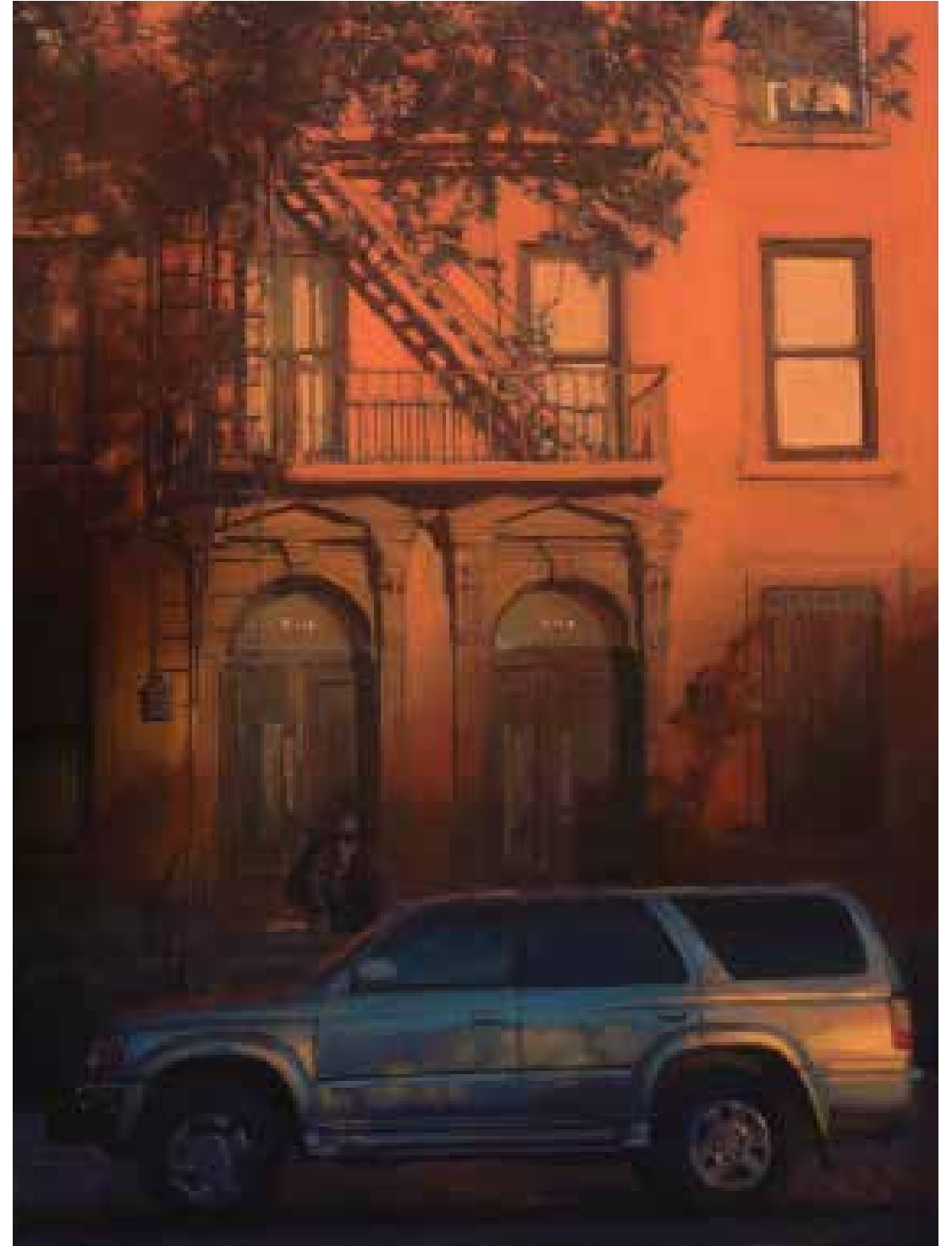
"I LET THE PAINTING DECIDE HOW MUCH INFORMATION IT NEEDS IN ORDER TO PROPERLY COMMUNICATE ITS INTENDED MEANING. I TRY TO 'LISTEN' TO THE PAINTING— AND THEN GET OUT OF ITS WAY." —RAYMOND BONILLA

In some paintings, Bonilla seems more interested in the overall condition of the light rather than a searchlight effect. In *New Years Day, 2018* (opposite) for instance, a snowy, wooded landscape is suffused with a golden afternoon light as a group of figures trudges away down a broad pathway. Once again, the image is memorable for the artist; it depicts his family's tradition of taking a hike on New Year's Day, whatever the weather. Here, the light imparts a feeling of warmth and hope in an otherwise wintry setting. Applied over a warm ground, much of the painting is achieved with tiny dabs and strokes of color.

Other works address parts of Bonilla's early life. His family is from Puerto Rico, and, although the artist grew up in the United States, he spent many summers there as a boy, staying with his grandparents on their small farm. *Flamboyan* (page 00) portrays the artist's grandmother looking over a valley to a large, colorful tree—a Flamboyan—which stood on the family property. As a boy, Bonilla was always impressed by the brilliant color of the tree. When he returned to Puerto Rico as an adult, after his grandfather had died, he took a walk with his grandmother, which this painting memorializes. "It's not exactly what the camera saw, but it's the way I remember it," he says.

AN INSPIRED VISION

Bonilla's command of a variety of painting techniques stems from his deep interest in technical processes in illustration and painting. As a child growing up in Queens, N.Y., he was interested in comic book art and eventually studied art in college—first at Fredonia, SUNY, and later at the University of the Arts, in San Francisco. Although his initial major was animation, he soon became interested in painting.

ABOVE
Struggle
(oil on panel,
24x30)

OPPOSITE TOP
**New Year's
Day, 2018**
(acrylic on
panel, 24x24)

As mentors, Bonilla cites William Maughan, Craig Nelson and John Rush—all of whom taught him the fundamentals of picture-making. "I was also fortunate to study under renowned artists such as Lisa Berrett, Jeannie Brunnick, Tomutsu Takishima and Zhao Ming Wu, to name a few," he says. "And I was very lucky to befriend the Hall of Fame illustrator David Grove, who was instrumental in guiding me during my studies."

Working between the worlds of illustration and painting, one of Bonilla's most powerful influences became the Brandywine School of painting, which was built around Howard Pyle and included such legendary artists as N.C. Wyeth, Frank Schoonover and Harvey Dunn. Their use of light, rich color and the ability to create fully realized worlds in their pictures continues to impress him.

Other artists who inspire Bonilla feature a mix of illustrators and painters, including John Singer Sargent, Dean Cornwell, Thomas Blackshear, Mark English, Daniel Garber, Diego Velazquez, The Brothers Hildebrandt, Haddon Sundbolm and Andrew Wyeth.

While Bonilla has clearly absorbed an enormous amount of knowledge and expertise in painting and drawing, his real achievement is using it all to forge a unique and highly personal vision driven by his own life experience. Asked how he'd like viewers to respond to his work he says: "I think one of the greatest compliments that I ever received was from an incredible artist by the name of Kazuhiko Sano, who told me that my work makes him want to share stories of his own. If I can make the viewer feel that, I will have accomplished what I set out to do."

John A. Parks is a painter and a member of the faculty at the School of Visual Arts, in New York City. He writes regularly for Artists Network magazines.
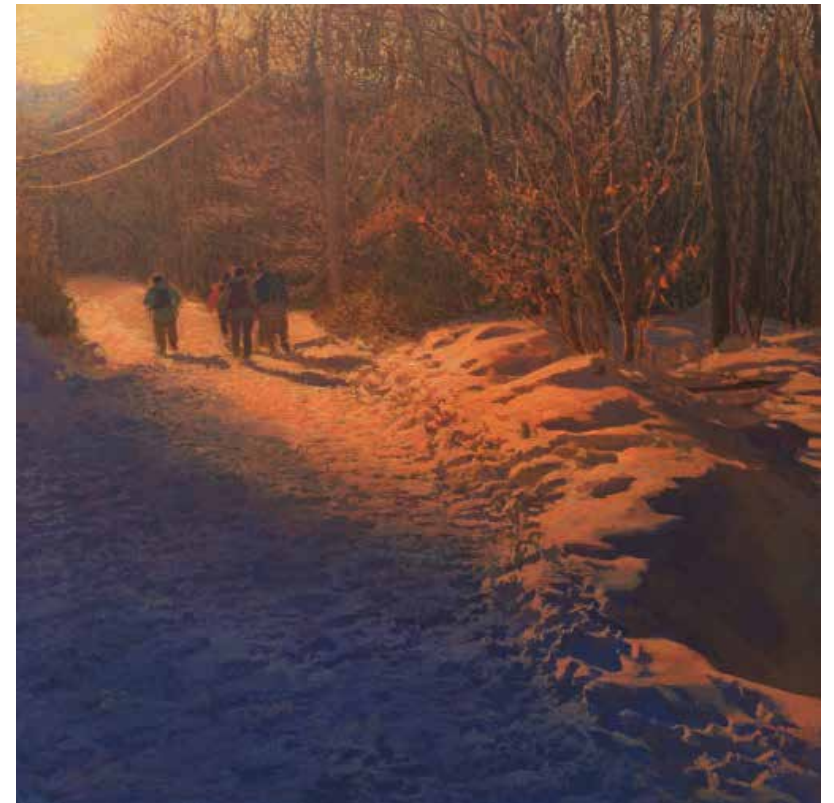
MEET THE ARTIST

Raymond Bonilla was born in Queens, N.Y., and spent his childhood summers in Puerto Rico with his extended family. "I grew up reading lots of comic books," says the artist. "One day, I went to the comic book shop and I saw a line of people waiting to have their comic books signed by someone. When I asked who the person was, I was told that he was an artist." In that moment, Bonilla decided that he, too, wanted to create imagery that makes connections with others. He studied at SUNY Fredonia, with the aim of becoming an animator, but soon also became interested in illustration and painting. He went on to study 3D character animation at the Academy of Art University, in San Francisco, where his interest in painting continued to grow. After college he worked as a freelance illustrator and began showing his pwork in art galleries. He's represented by Meibohm Fine Arts, in East Aurora, N.Y.; Principle Gallery, in Alexandria, Va.; Abend Gallery, in Denver, Colo.; and Momentum Gallery, in Asheville, N,C. The artist makes his home in Mattapoisett, Massachusetts.

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