

# “Nothing is forbidden when you’re making art”

*Lars Eje Larsson*



**Urgent Call**  
Watercolour,  
56 x 34 cm

SWEDISH ARTIST LARS EJE LARSSON FIRMLY ABIDES TO THE RULE THAT THE END JUSTIFIES THE MEANS. BE THEY LANDSCAPES OR HYPOTHETICAL MOVIE SCENES, HIS PAINTINGS BEAR WITNESS TO HIS INVENTIVENESS.

**The Art of Watercolour: How long did it take you to reach this style of yours? Was it a long process of trial and error?**

**Lars Eje Larsson:** Yes it was! I have been painting watercolours for nearly forty years and before that I worked in oils. I started painting in 1966. One day, a friend of mine showed me the works of Andrew Wyeth: before that, I had always thought that watercolours had to be light and pure. Today I understand that you can do anything you want in watercolour. I love mixing drybrush and wet techniques in the same picture. I have tried to discover the same things as Andrew Wyeth, but I realise that to really feel what you are painting, you have to be committed to what you want to express. It's not enough to try and mimic another painter's technique.



**Terrace.**  
Watercolour, 56 x 72 cm.



**Diner II**  
Watercolour, 38 x 56 cm.

**TAW: What are the advantages and/or disadvantages of watercolour compared to another medium you use, eg acrylics?**

**L. E. L:** I started with watercolour in 1977 because it was odourless and easy to use outdoors. After discovering the paintings of Andrew Wyeth, I acknowledged the fact that I could do so much more with watercolours than with oils. I discovered how to take a step back and keep a clean painting. Watercolour allows much more freedom than I had previously thought. I was also delighted by its speed: with watercolour, time is of the essence. With other media, you can just paint and stop whenever you want – but not with watercolour. You have to be very precise. I have two different spray bottles, one

for specific areas and the second for my washes. Sometimes there is no time to fiddle about with the spray bottles when the colour is being applied: watercolour is painting in action!

**TAW: Are there any rules you follow or purposely break?**

**L. E. L:** When I paint I have no rules. I hate it when people ask me if you're allowed to do this or that in watercolour. I tell them that nothing is 'forbidden' when you're making art. Everything is allowed if it makes the picture better. With other painting techniques, such as oil or acrylics for instance, no one would ever claim that something is not allowed. I personally use opaque white in my watercolours, which is prohibited by some. It was the great Swedish artist Anders Zorn who made

**Waiting**

Acrylics, 50 x 100 cm.

"My paintings look like stills from an unknown movie. This is something I consciously try to push through. It started with me watching a movie one night. Suddenly a scene that was very exciting and rich in terms of colour and value appeared on the screen. I realised I had to paint it – or another scene like it. Scenes in movies are usually stronger and richer than real life in terms of values and colours. I like to lend my scenes a cinematic aspect."

*"A good painting is when there is nerve, tension and drama. Values and colours must be correct."*

me stop being 'orthodox'. He painted a small watercolour of two white houses in Southern Europe. The first house was just white paper and the second was painted with white paint. The differences between the houses brought the picture to life. The light vibrated. After seeing this little watercolour, I realized that the most important thing was being orthodox, but making good painters.

**TAW: What other painters have inspired you?**

**L. E. L.:** I am inspired by the works of Adrian Ghenie, a Romanian painter who has a level of skill I have not yet reached... and probably never will. The Norwegian painter Lars Elling is another source of inspiration. I also like Edward Hopper's pictures, not so much his painting technique, but his motifs and compositions.

**TAW: If your way of painting were to be 'dissected' or broken down into several steps, what would they be?**

**L. E. L.:** It depends on how I paint. I can either start an intuitive painting with no preconceived ideas, or I can rely on a picture or a model. Sometimes I find elements from several pictures and combine them together. In the case of a painting based on intuition, I start with what I call an 'approach'. I lay down my first wash and then look at the painting to see how I can proceed. In other words, I have a conversation with the painting. When I have a reference picture or the photo of a model, I usually start by doing a sketch on the paper or the canvas and then paint up more or less like the photo. Usually I

leave the model after a while and work more freely. The most important thing for me is knowing how to build my values.

**TAW: What are the elements you look for that will make a good painting in your opinion?**

**L. E. L.:** For me a good painting is when there is nerve, tension and drama. It is important that the values are precise, and the colours correct.

**TAW: Can you explain how you manage to create the effect of light in your paintings?**

**L. E. L.:** Light is an important element for me. I work a lot with contrasts and I want to have as many contrasting values as possible in my paintings. For me, values are like the keys on a piano keyboard. I want to use all the keys, to play all the notes. If you get the light right, in other words if the values are correct, you get an illusion of reality even if the rest is not perfect.

**KEY FACTS**

Lars Eje Larsson is a member of the following societies: K.R.O, B.U.S, Konstnärscentrum Väst, (KC-Väst), Nordiska Akvarellsällskapet and Göteborgs Konstnärsklubb (Chairman 1993-1998, Honorary Chairman since 1998). His recent solo exhibitions include Galleri Abante Stockholm (2010), Galleri Sander Norrköping (2011), Galleri Uddenberg in Göteborg (2012).

**TAW: What are you working on at the moment?**

**L. E. L.:** Right now, I am working a lot with night shots, partly inspired by a visit to Cuba in 2012. What fascinates me are the beautiful patinas of the old houses, all the American cars from the Fifties and above all the warm light from the street lamps and the cold light from indoor fluorescent lamps – the reverse of Sweden! Here we have cold light outdoors and warm light inside. The play of light fascinates me.

**TAW: What is the best piece of advice you've ever been given?**

**L. E. L.:** I cannot think of a single piece of good advice that I have ever received, either as an artist or in other areas. However I have learnt, often the hard way, what is important. Integrity is important, as is the ability to see both one's strengths and weaknesses. Humility is also important so you can see the strengths of other artists. If I could give one piece of advice to a young artist today, it would be: "If you feel something's right, it is right, no matter what anyone else tells you!"

**TAW: What one piece of equipment could you not live without?**

**L. E. L.:** It would be very difficult for me to paint without my spray bottle!

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**Colours and pigments**

I almost exclusively use Winsor & Newton watercolours. It is not because I think they are much better than other brands, but because I know their pigments. The properties of colours - Raw Umber for instance - vary from brand to brand, but I want to have the same properties for all my pigments, qualities that I feel comfortable with. I started using W & N in the 70s and I have continued to do so ever since. My basic pigments are the earth colours, such as Sienna and Umber. I call earth colours the 'workers' and metal oxide colours such as Cadmium and Cobalt, the 'officials' or the 'clerks'. The newer synthetic type Quinacridones are 'divas', that should be used sparingly. Earth colours have the most full-bodied characteristics in terms of granulation.

I sometimes use pure pigments that are in fact cheap earthen colours from the South of France. During the ten years we had a house in Provence, we visited Roussillon a few times. I bought myself a large array of earth colours. In the beginning I mixed them with gum arabic, but then I used them straight on the paper mixed only with water.



I paint in acrylics in the same way as in watercolour, although it's more difficult in fact because acrylics dry faster. With watercolours you can still make changes afterwards, but acrylic paint dries in a few minutes and after that no changes can be made.

**My paper**

I fell in love with the Italian paper, Fabriano. Its properties perfectly suited the way I paint, *alla prima*. It's a graphic paper with clear markings and a wide range of textures. Unfortunately the quality of Fabriano paper changed during the 2000s. For me, it is now not as good as it used to be. The bonds between the fibres are now looser and the paper has less 'tooth'. I have now gone over to Arches and Saunders/Waterford.

