

Nigel Wade and the Art of Watercolour Realism

Eight hundred hours went into a single painting of a Dover hotel, and every window in it repays the viewer.

Richard Elsen · The Art Notebook · 26 August 2026



Dover Marina Hotel & Spa, watercolour. Wade's most technically demanding painting to date, and the one he describes as his most significant.

British watercolourist Nigel Wade gave eight hundred hours to the Dover Marina Hotel painting, spread across most of a year and taken in short bursts with the news or music playing, and by his own account the question that kept surfacing as he worked was how on earth he was going to keep going.

It remains the most demanding thing he has painted, and the difficulty was largely a matter of windows. There are a great many of them, each one requiring its own reflections and its own decision about light, and there is no available shortcut through a row of Regency glazing rendered at the density Wade works to.

"I do short bursts, I listen to the news, I listen to music," he says. "It's the only way: little and often."

By that standard the Ouse Valley Viaduct, which he painted on commission last year and which carries thirty-seven brick arches in strict repetition, was straightforward. “All those arches were a breeze in comparison,” he says, which is not the answer I expected when I asked how he stopped it becoming a mechanical exercise.



Ouse Valley Viaduct, West Sussex, painted on commission. Thirty-seven brick arches, and by Wade's reckoning the easier job.

Wade paints in watercolour, at a level of detail people routinely mistake for photography, and he calls it watercolour realism. He was born in Brighton, grew up next to the sea in Hastings, and read History of Art and Architecture at Reading, where he became interested in the Pre-Raphaelites and the English landscape painters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. After the degree came marriage, and with it a career in retail that paid for everything while the painting continued alongside as a hobby.

The output figure tells you more about the work than any description of the style could, and it is worth stating: since leaving university he has completed one hundred and one finished, framed paintings, of which seventy-two have come in the last ten years, after early retirement made full-time work possible.

He has never painted outdoors from life, and does not intend to start on his current terms. “It wouldn’t work for me,” he says. “However, it would be nice to do, so maybe I will sometime, but it would be to paint in a looser more impressionistic way.”

What happens instead is a visit with a camera, and for the Sussex coast paintings that meant going back to Hastings and Pett Level and Brighton and waiting there for the light and the sea to do what he wanted before taking a set of reference photographs. Afterwards he works from an iPad, which lets him magnify detail as he goes.

This is the point at which a certain kind of critic loses interest, and it is worth saying that Sickert worked from photographs and Richter built a career on them. What Wade does with the photograph is in any case not transcription. He removes whatever gets in the way, naming vehicles, aerials and drainpipes in an architectural street scene as the usual casualties, and he departs from the source most freely in skies, colour, light and tone. The photograph supplies the armature, and the atmosphere is his own.



It's Brightening Up, Pett Level. Wade returns to the Sussex coast he grew up on, and it is in skies like this one that he departs furthest from his reference photographs.

The drawing that follows is the part he insists on, and when I put it to him that it must have to be right first time, he contradicted the assumption flatly.

“I certainly don’t get it right first time. Lots of measuring and scaling up to ensure it’s correct and lots of rubbing out and redoing it. I never throw a piece away at this stage, I just work on it until it’s right.”

The same patience applies to the paint. Watercolour dries darker than it appears when first laid down, so the mixing has to anticipate a tone that is not yet visible, something Wade says has simply become instinctive over the years. When it does go wrong he has no intention of abandoning the sheet, since a wash over the top will lift the paint again, and once that has dried he can go back and do it properly.

His technical heresies are cheerful and deliberate. Sometimes a wash, sometimes colour neat from the tube, and considerably more white gouache and ivory black than traditional watercolour teaching permits. "It's the effect that matters to me, not the process."

He has tried acrylic on large canvases and once painted a piece on wood that ended up on the back of a yacht, but oil holds no appeal, partly for its slow drying and partly for the shine that varnish gives it. He also likes that hyperrealism is unusual in his medium.

There is a rule about finishing, and it exists for a reason. Some years ago he went back to five completed paintings, took the frames apart, and spent hours reworking pictures he had decided he could improve. He now refuses to sign anything until he is certain it is as good as he can get it, on the understanding that the signature closes the matter.

That rule was in force in 2024, when Wade delivered a watercolour of Fetcham House, a Georgian house in Surrey owned by Bill and Betty Williams. Williams was once his boss, and is now a friend, which accounts for a good deal of the pleasure he took in the commission.

The village around the house carries a good deal of history. Dr Thomas Monro, the physician whose informal academy fed and paid and instructed a generation of young watercolourists, rented a property at Fetcham from the mid 1790s until about 1805. He took his protégés down there to sketch, Turner among them. Thomas Girtin went too, born in the same year as Turner and dead at twenty-seven with his reputation still climbing.

Wade had seen the earlier images of the neighbourhood before he began and felt honoured rather than intimidated by them. His painting has since been reproduced in Selby Whittingham's *Turner's Unknown Surrey* and *A Walk Round Turner's Clapham Common*, published this year, which for an artist with no dealer and no academy letters after his name is a considerable thing to have happened.

Whittingham founded the Independent Turner Society and has spent half a century on Turner, so Wade's painting is in serious company.



*Fetcham House, 2024, 60 x 42cm. Painted for Bill and Betty Williams, and since reproduced in Selby Whittingham's *Turner's Unknown Surrey*.*

The Pre-Raphaelite inheritance from his Reading years surfaces here, though not where you would expect. "Not in the subject matter but in the style," he says. "The people that buy my work have a connection with a place and want it to be accurate, so I have to make it so."

Every leaf and pebble individually rendered is neither possible nor desirable, in his view, but there is always an approximation of every leaf and every pebble. That is close to the Ruskinian position, arrived at through the practical business of satisfying somebody who knows what their own house looks like.

Accuracy of that kind is what most of his commissions ask for, which makes the outlier in his work all the more striking. Look was commissioned in 2022 by the singer-songwriter John Howard as the cover for an album telling the story of Danielle Du Bois, a fictional transgender star born Daniel Wood who leaves an early-sixties English pop career for Paris. Howard drew the character from his friend April Ashley, among the first British people to undergo gender reassignment surgery and the first outed by a national newspaper when the Sunday People exposed her in 1961.

Wade knew all of it going in, and says the knowledge made the painting make sense to him while he worked, with Howard's album playing as he did so. The apartment was assembled from a mass of period photographs he gathered to Howard's brief, put together like a jigsaw, with the design and

layout of the room coming out of his imagination. The two figures were adapted from photographs and altered so that they appear to observe one another without being mirror images, since Daniel is looking into the glass and imagining how he will look as Danielle. Wade found the figures the hardest part, portraiture being something he generally avoids, and thinks Hockney was working on him subliminally.



Look, 2022, painted for John Howard's album of the same name and now in his collection. The apartment is invented; the year is the one in which April Ashley was exposed by the Sunday People.

Howard had intended to give April Ashley a limited edition print of the painting, but she died in December 2021, some months before the album appeared. The original went to Howard, as a gift.

"The Look cover would probably be done using AI now, just a few years on," he says, "so I'm glad that this commission happened when it did."

That remark about AI turns out to be central rather than incidental, because Wade is philosophical about people telling him his paintings look like photographs, on the grounds that they mean it kindly, but there is a version of the compliment that lands badly.

“When people insist a painting I’ve done is AI or a photo and start to argue that it is, then that is galling. It is tantamount to calling an artist a liar or suggesting that all that work could have been done just by pressing a button.”

Anyone who has spent eight hundred hours on a row of windows might be forgiven the irritation, and he is in any case clear that resemblance was never what he was after. “I don’t want my paintings to look exactly like photos. They have to have painterly qualities otherwise there is no point in them. I actually aim always to improve on reality and on the photo I use.”

On the status of his medium he is unbothered in a way that suggests the question has been put to him before. Watercolour is widely held to be the hardest thing to master and simultaneously treated in some quarters as the amateur’s option, with the finished work valued accordingly. “I just do what I do and don’t consider it any less worthy than oil.”

The business has arranged itself accordingly, with five hundred and twenty-five limited edition prints sold through various outlets, the occasional exhibition, and very little to do with galleries these days. Commissions arrive from people who find him or know him or have bought from him before, and he now has close to three thousand followers on social media, which has changed the arithmetic of who those people are. Asked whether he would want a dealer to take him on properly, the answer is no: he would not want to tie himself to one.



Great James Street, one of the paintings Wade names alongside the Dover hotel when the subject of counting windows comes up.

That is a working painter's economy rather than an art-world career, and it has produced a hundred and one paintings in a lifetime, seventy-two of them since he stopped going to work. One of those hangs in a Georgian house in Surrey, and has since found its way into a book by the man who founded the Turner Society.