

महर्षिबानगजानन्द

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Sunset over Jama Masjid, Delhi I (detail)
oil on canvas, 42½ x 41½ ins, 108 x 105.5 cm

Andrew Gifford | INDIA

8 March – 7 April 2018

John Martin Gallery

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The tradition of plein-air painting goes back to the 18th century. Not much later emerged the persistent caricature of the genteel amateur artist, marooned under a wide-brimmed hat and sending home paintings of ancient ruins and pretty harbours, adrift from the grime, smells and noise of a place. Timothy Spall as the pugnacious ‘Mr Turner’, and more recently Jenny Uglow’s brilliant new biography of Edward Lear gives a more impressive account of the gritty determination, spirit of adventure, humour and bravado that an artist must acquire before putting up an easel in a public place. Unless one hides away to work, painting in public is a performance requiring huge concentration, effortless skill and the confidence of a P.T. Barnum to do all of this in front of a crowd that could as easily hurl abuse at you as bring you a cup of tea. That applies as much today as it did in the 19th century.

Think of Times Square in New York, one of the most frantic public spaces in any city and at night fizzing with neon lights, crowds and party-goers. Swimming against the tide of pedestrians, Gifford set up an easel on a pavement, put on a head-torch so he could see his palette and started painting. He returned every day at the same time, attracting a passing crowd that bantered, selfied and asked questions, before thinning out to a small core mesmerised as a familiar view comes to life.

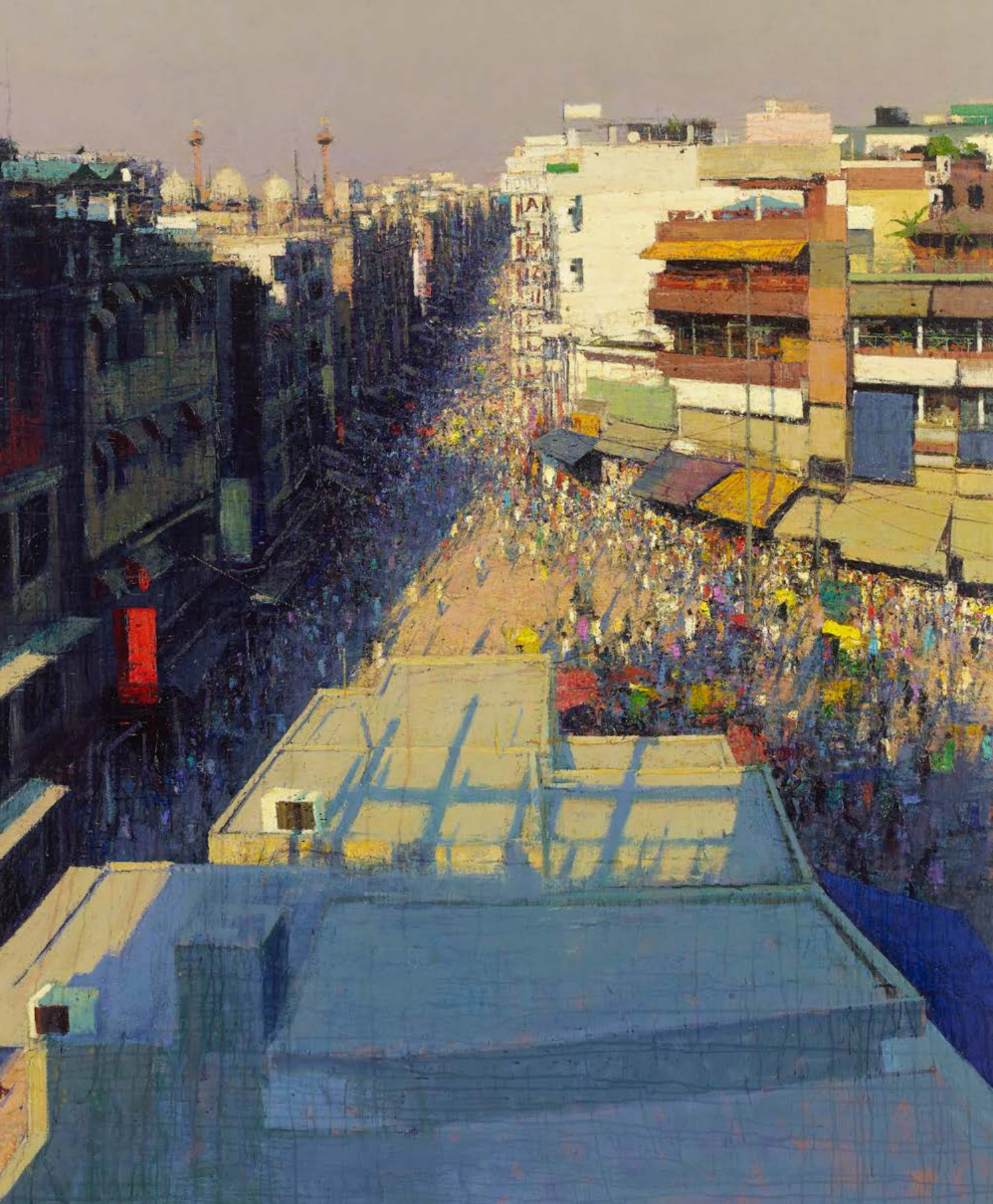
New Yorkers are fluent and familiar with painting, but the public reaction to Andrew working on the streets is identical the world over. In Yemen there is a photograph of Andrew at his easel closely surrounded by about 30 young men, many armed, quietly watching the painting unfold; in Kolkata he wrote of the physical difficulties of being jostled and squeezed by men surrounding him in a circle two deep. Adults are less likely to linger during the day, but in daytime his work would often attract kids. From Bradford to Ramallah they would sit and watch for hours; not the sort of eager students keen to learn and improve, these were normally the kids skipping school, the naughty ones, attracted by a perceived fellow miscreant happy to chat. They would be captivated, spellbound for a day and completely involved in the evolution of a single painting. One wonders why our museums and public galleries agonise about how to engage young people when the magic of painting is so entrancing, so powerful and so easy to understand so long as no-one is trying to explain it?

Of course, you have to be good. And Andrew paints rapidly so within half an hour the street is recognisable, then explodes with colour as a fresh patch of paint transforms into a street light and a second describes its reflections in a window. The process of painting becomes a fast-paced performance, bewitching and unforgettable in any language. Often the first question is “why here”? Why not a pretty harbour, and why an ordinary market? Why my street?. Andrew is not interested in tired, familiar pretty views, for Gifford a painting made in 2017 should look like it was made in 2017, it should reflect the reality of the moment, the noise and grit of the streets and have a relevance to the people who live there.

Andrew is not there on some worthy mission to inspire. The people he meets as he works are central to his process of painting. It is, after all, their landscape so their approval means more to him than that of anyone else. No-one knows the views he paints better than the people who live and work there. Gifford’s paintings are done for them and his memories are about those special encounters, their observations, comments, criticisms and kindnesses which form an intrinsic part of each painting’s story.

“Found a place for a night painting but forgot my head torch. I asked Mono who drives me everywhere in his rickshaw and uses a higher force to avoid hitting other drivers and seems to sort everything out, if he could find a torch... he turned up with these far-out Hindu wedding lights that lit the place up like a disco... “





Back in the gallery, Andrew's Instagram posts helped us follow his progress through India. They were always characterised by a profound trust in the goodness of strangers. We were about to revise this when one evening he sent a worried message having returned to the hotel to find his clothes, paints and iPad stolen. The next day the thief returned, very drunk wearing Andrew's entire wardrobe. Otherwise the kindness and hospitality he found in India was as moving to those who followed him as it was to Andrew himself:

I was wandering the streets this evening, feeling tired and slightly missing friends and family. I've been painting hard which is emotionally and physically exhausting... carting a heavy paint bag around places with such soul-hollowing poverty and noise had taken a toll. Then a guy on a motorbike ran into me and swore .. not surprising that people get frustrated when you're jammed in and constantly jostling to get somewhere...At this low ebb I looked up and saw a terrace with a figure on the corner of a market. I asked in the shop underneath about painting there. He was suspicious at first but when I showed him some of my work from my phone he agreed to ask. I was shown up a very narrow stairs through a warren of colourfully glowing rooms and on to the terrace.

To welcome me was the most delightful, hospitable, beautiful and highly intelligent family... I set up my paints and was brought every manner of treats and drinks. A little 6-year old boy watched me paint and asked insightful questions telling me he 'liked my style'. Later I ate with them and was taught the Indian way of eating chapati and curry and left feeling humbled and elated. So thanks Pryanka, Preeti, your brother, mum and cousins for rescuing my flagging sou l...they explained that their hospitality was only what you would expect anywhere in India ... it made me ponder how we could do a bit more perhaps in the West towards strangers...

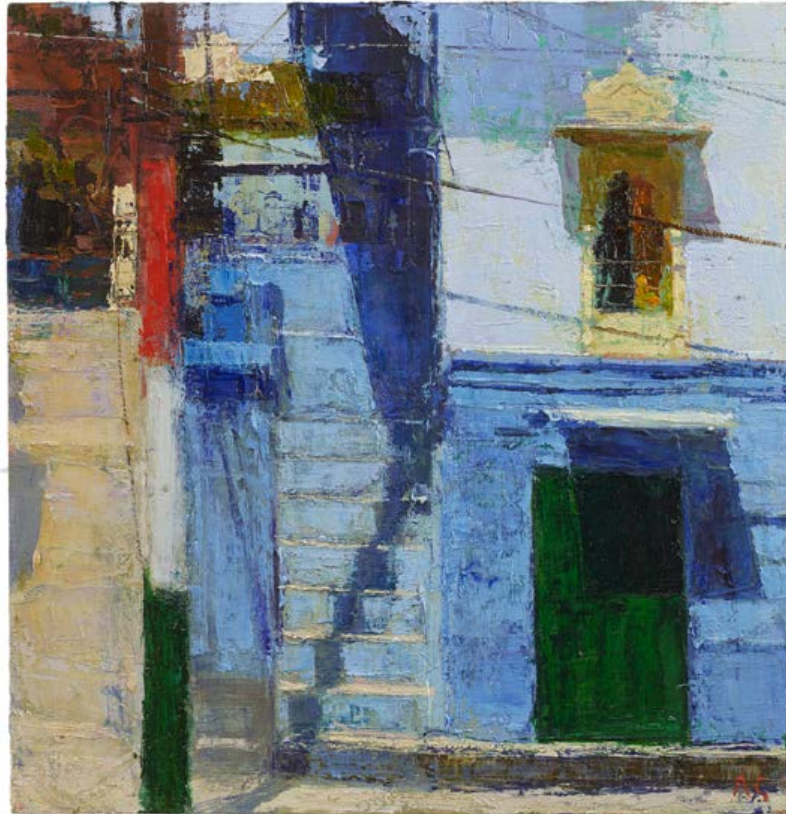
Collectively, the India paintings provide a superb account of the way Andrew Gifford approaches landscape painting and how he succeeds in keeping an enduring tradition relevant, fresh and modern. Painting in a digitally-connected world, the exhibition catalogue tries to bring together Gifford's own accounts and images of the people he met and who helped him, but no doubt there are hundreds more strands of photos and stories archived on phone memories across the sub-continent. Those accounts are out there, but in the meantime we have crammed into the catalogue as much as we can to get the flavour of the journey, with only a passing nod to a timeframe (April, May and December). Otherwise think only of Pryanka, Preeti, Farhan, Mono and John Milton, the taxi driver Andrew met in Pondicherry:

I guess he was named after the English poet although he spoke very little English. One of my favourite quotes is from Paradise Lost .. "The mind is its own place, and can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven" . wise words applicable to much of life.. particularly if you're living somewhere like Kolkata. I liked this John Milton too, except when he nearly killed us both 80 times on the long road to Pondicherry (his blind corner overtaking manoeuvres were straight from the 'quick steps to death' manual)...and I'll never forget on that dark journey through the twilight palms and marshland of southern India asking, "John Milton can we stop for a pee".

— John Martin.

OPPOSITE

Paharganj main Bazaar I, Evening Light
oil on canvas, 55 x 47 ins, 141 x 120 cm



Sunlight on Stairs, Jodhpur
oil on board, 13½ x 13 ins, 34 x 33cm

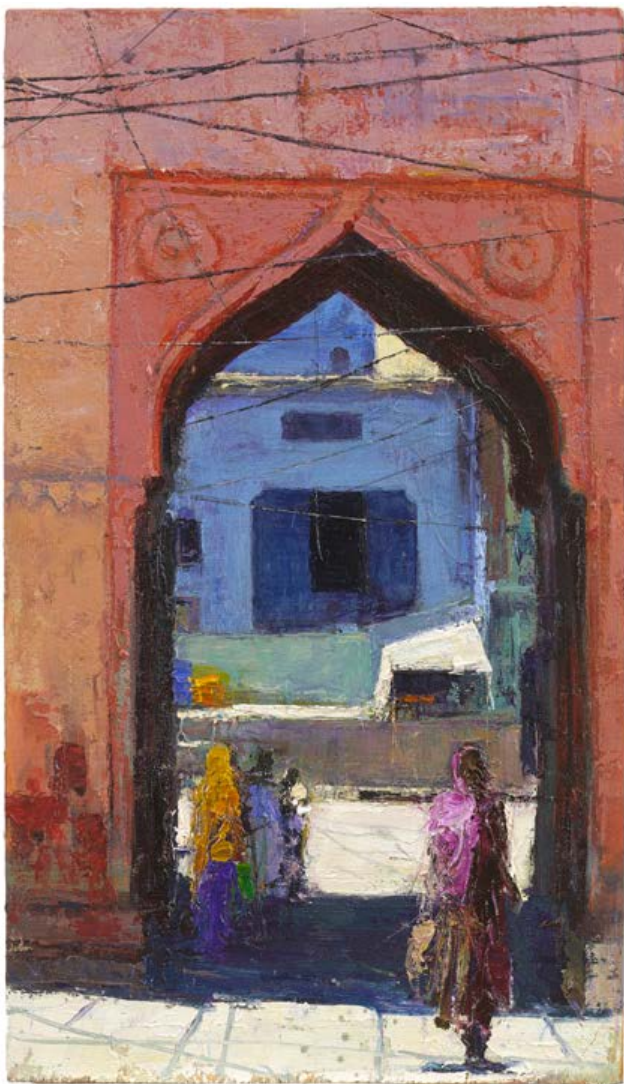


Archway, Jodhpur
oil on board, 13½ x 13 ins, 34 x 33cm

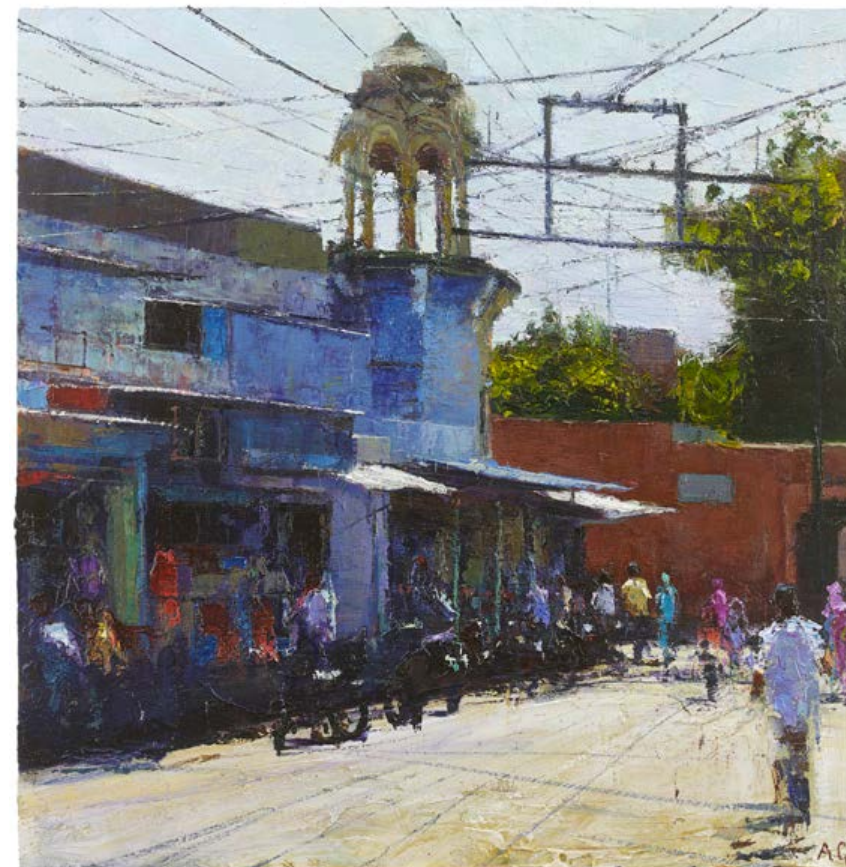
“...Painting today on the side of the road outside Mandore gardens near Jodhpur. People thought it was a bit odd not painting the temples and instead painting a market stall. It was so hot that they erected a beautiful tent for me to paint in the shade...their kindness has no bounds...”



Street Market near Mandore Gardens, Rajasthan
oil on board, 13½ x 13 ins, 34 x 33cm



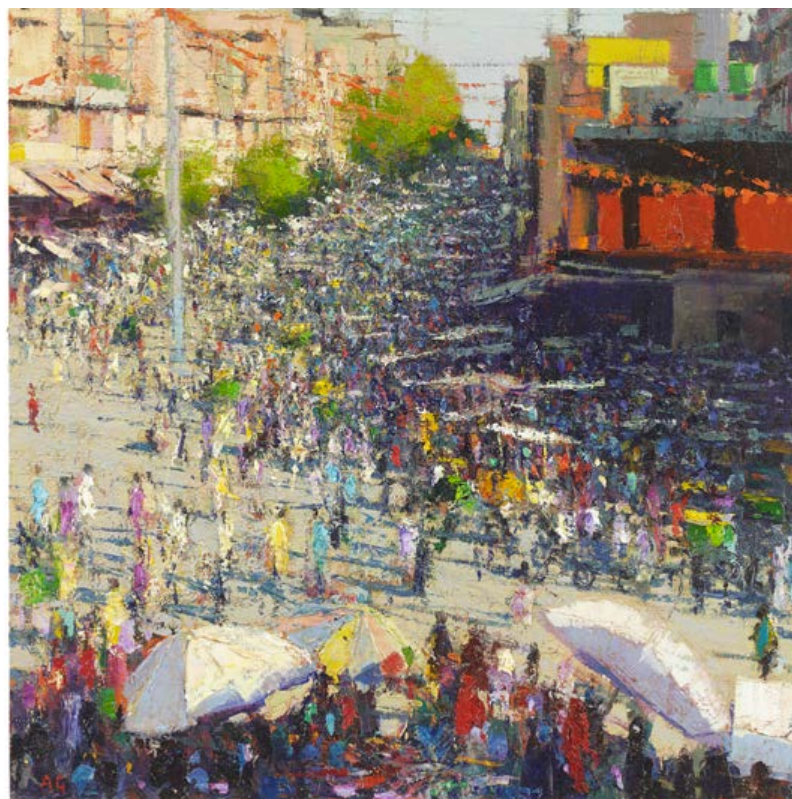
Gate, Jodhpur
oil on board, 13 x 7½ ins, 33 x 19 cm



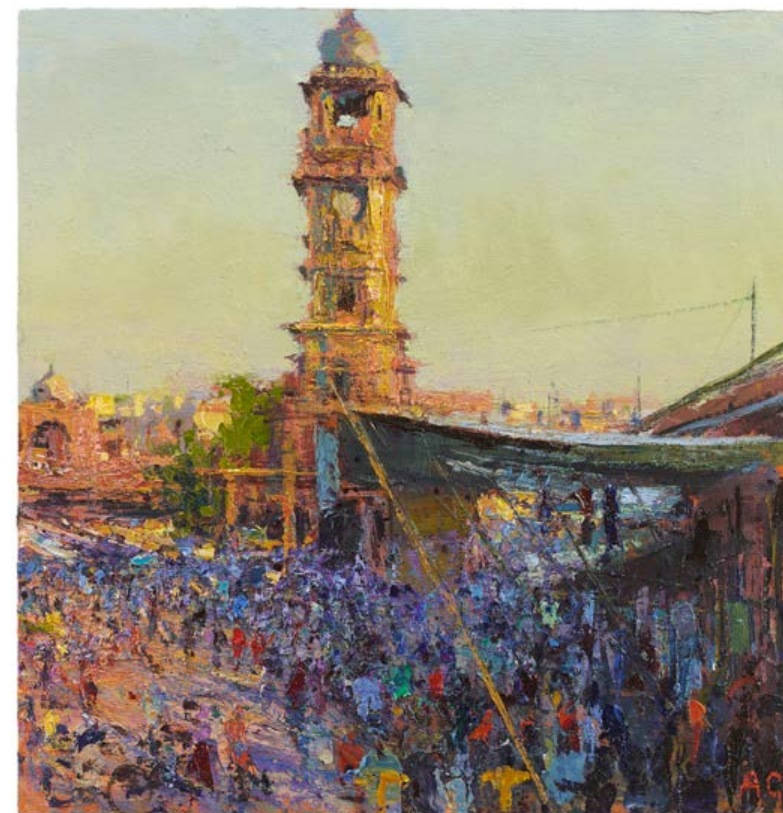
Street Corner Jodhpur
oil on board, 13½ x 13 ins, 34 x 33 cm



Clock Tower at Dusk, Jodhpur
oil on board, 15½ x 15¼ ins, 39.5 x 40 cm



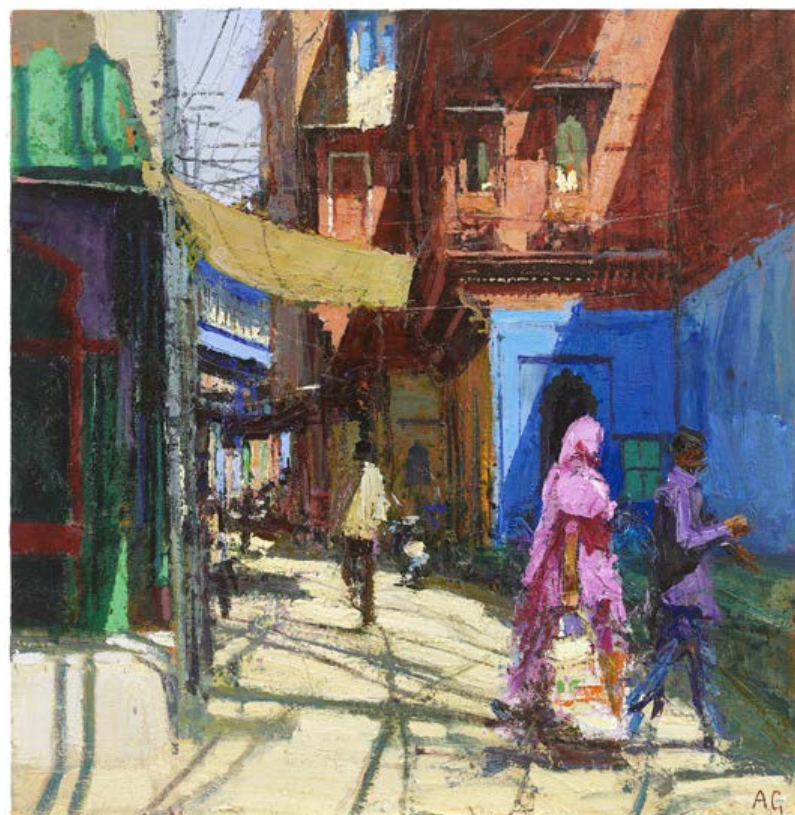
Market Outside The Clock Tower Square, Jodhpur
oil on board, 15½ x 15¾ ins, 39.5 x 40 cm



The Clock Tower, Last Light, Jodhpur
oil on board, 10½ x 10 ins, 26 x 25 cm

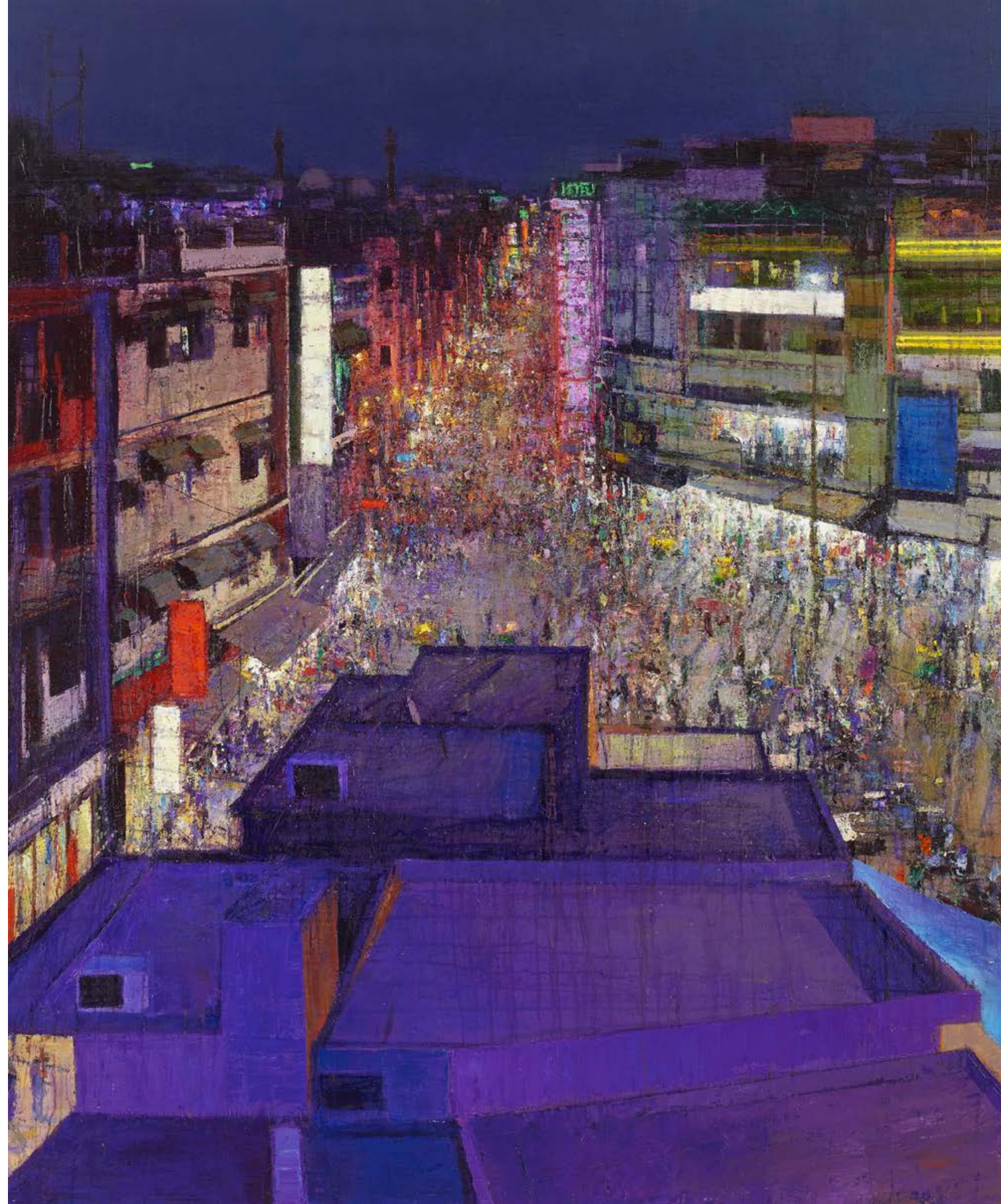


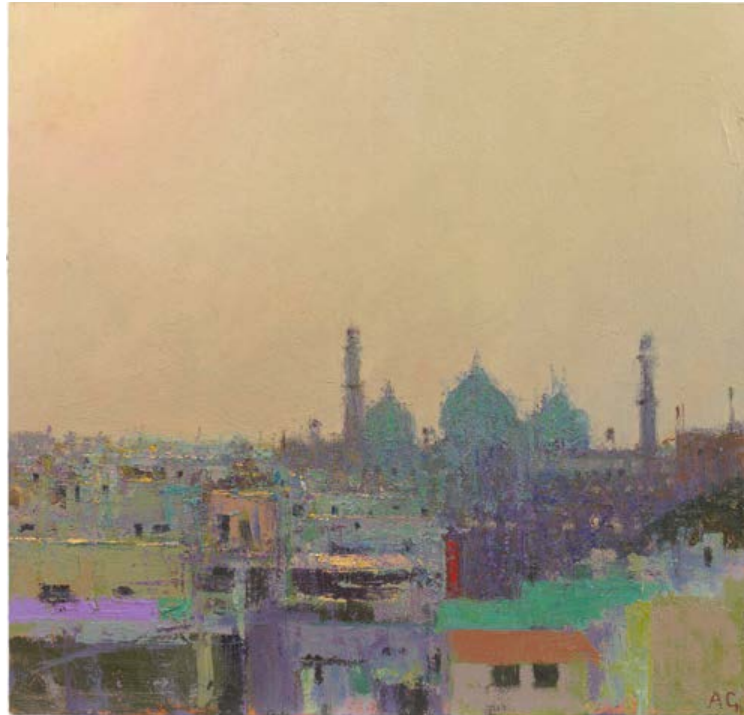
Paharganj Bazaar, Delhi
oil on board, 18½ x 19½ ins, 47 x 49 cm



ABOVE
Woman with a shopping bag, Jodhpur
 oil on board, 13½ x 13 ins, 34 x 33cm

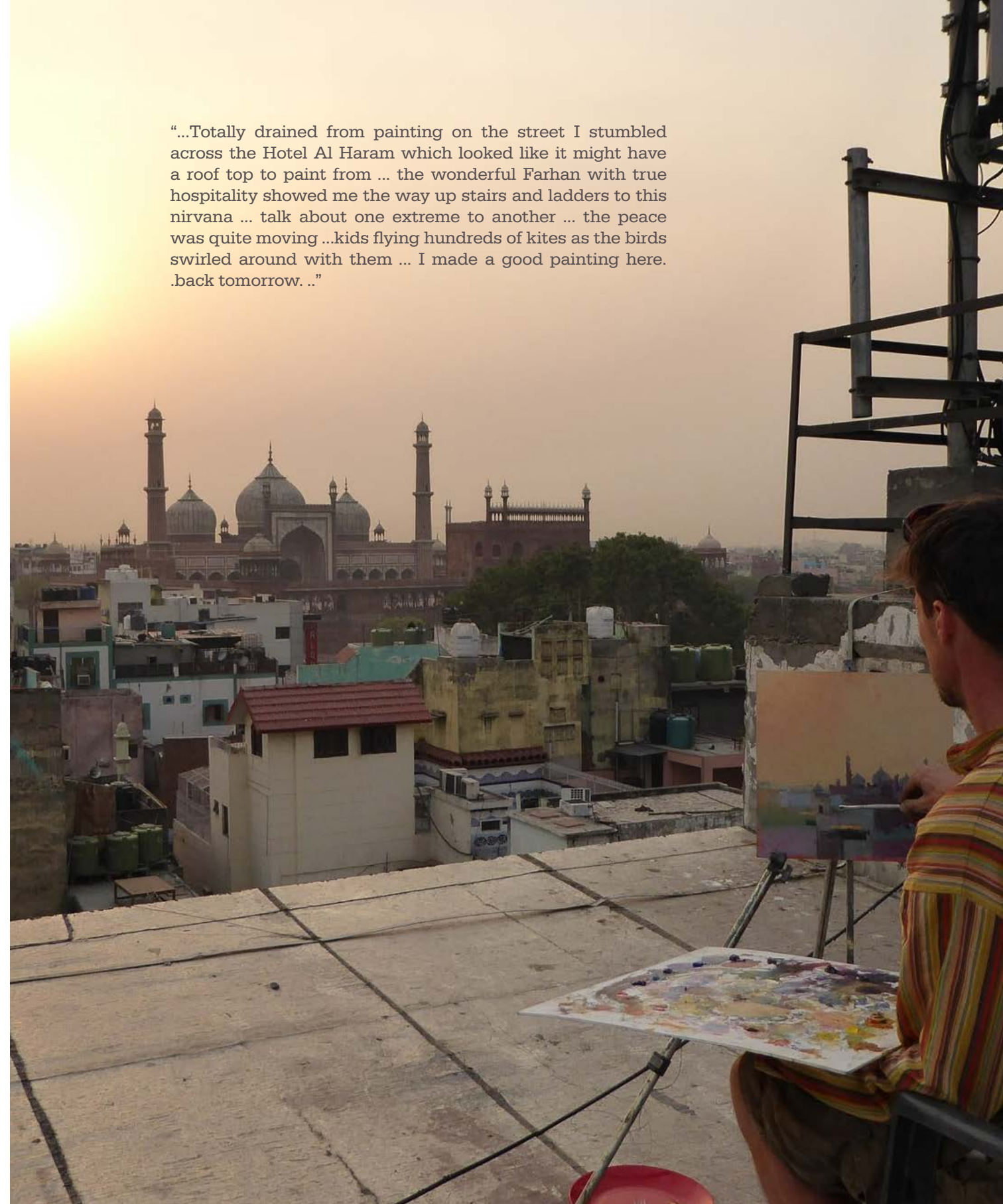
RIGHT
Paharganj main Bazaar II
 oil on canvas, 55 x 47 ins, 141 x 120 cm





Sunset over the Jama Masjid, Delhi Study I
oil on board, 13 x 13½ ins, 33 x 34 cm

"...Totally drained from painting on the street I stumbled across the Hotel Al Haram which looked like it might have a roof top to paint from ... the wonderful Farhan with true hospitality showed me the way up stairs and ladders to this nirvana ... talk about one extreme to another ... the peace was quite moving ...kids flying hundreds of kites as the birds swirled around with them ... I made a good painting here. .back tomorrow. .."





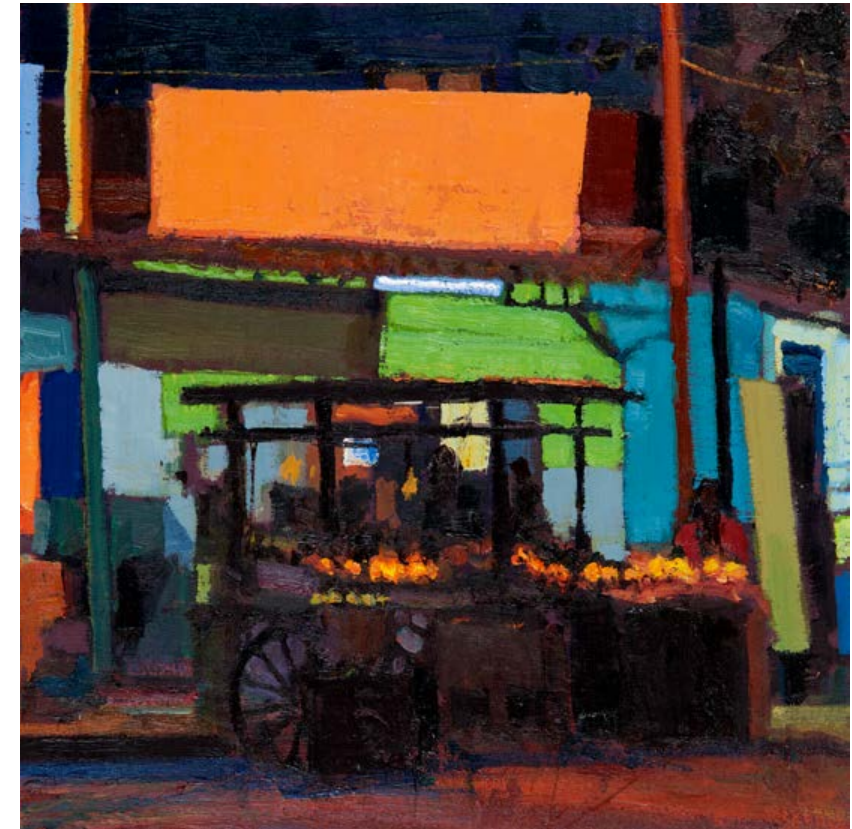
Sunset over the Jama Masjid, Delhi Study II
oil on board, 18½ x 19 ins, 47 x 49cm

RIGHT
Sunset over Jama Masjid, Delhi II (detail)
oil on canvas, 42½ x 41½ ins, 108 x 105.5 cm





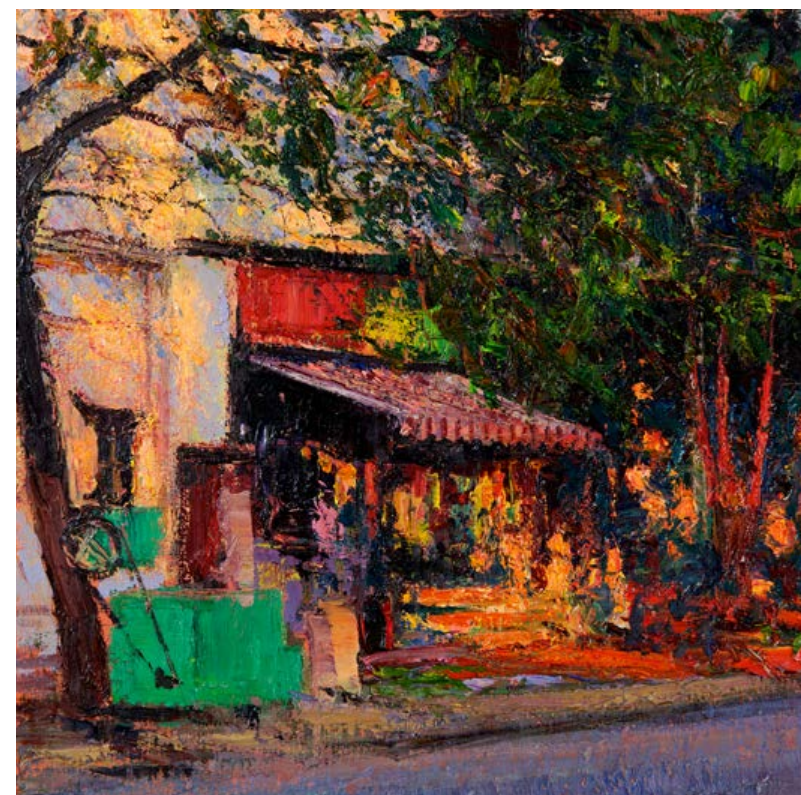
"...the first of two night paintings that I made in Kolkata tonight. made very difficult because I was standing inside a ring of people two deep. I had to peer through gaps to see the view....I managed to make a painting ... and a lot of new friends. So after painting I went for a walk and stumbled upon a street celebration ... they grabbed me and we danced along the street together.... I love this place it's so alive."



Fruit stall at night, Pondicherry
oil on board, 10 x 10½ ins, 25.5 x 26.5cm



Shops at night, Kolkata
oil on board, 11¼ x 12¼ ins, 30 x 31 cm



Shops, last light. Pondicherry
oil on board, 8¼ x 8¼ ins, 21 x 21 cm



Backwaters, Kerala
oil on board, 11¾ x 11¾ ins, 30 x 3 cm





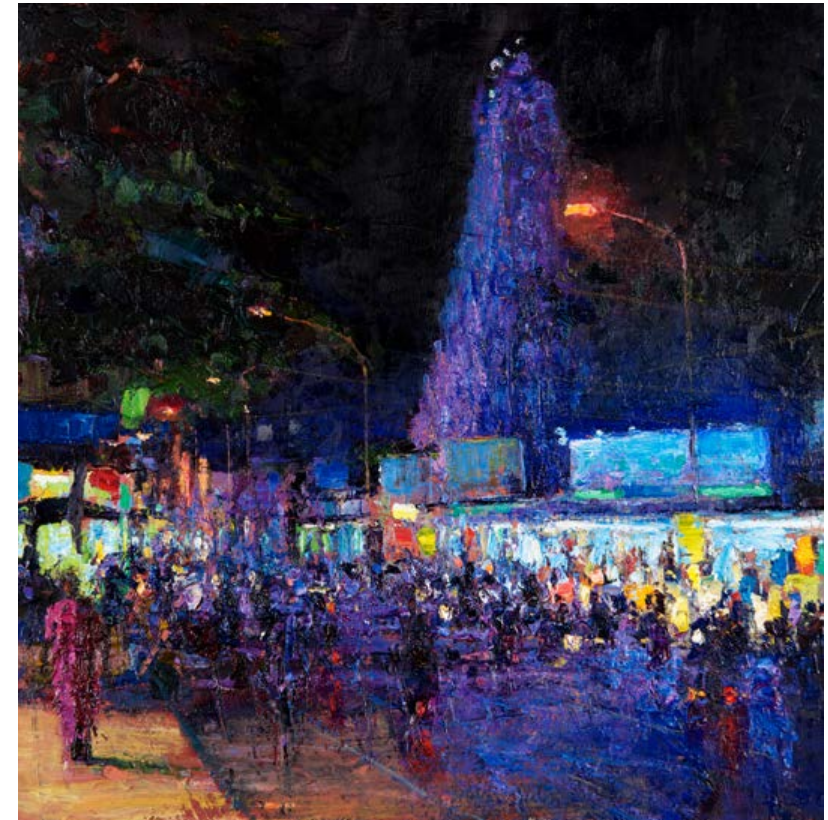
Dappled Street, Pondicherry
oil on board, 13½ x 14¼ ins, 34 x 36 cm



Light on Old House, Pondicherry
oil on board, 8¾ x 10¾ ins, 22 x 27 cm



“...down to the furniture shop where the guys set me up with a chair and table and I worked on the temple painting. It’s such a joy to rework a painting the next day, most of the compositional mind benders are out of the way and you can get on with creating light through layering...”



Chetty Temple, Mission Street, Pondicherry
oil on board, 11¼ x 11¼ ins, 30 x 30 cm



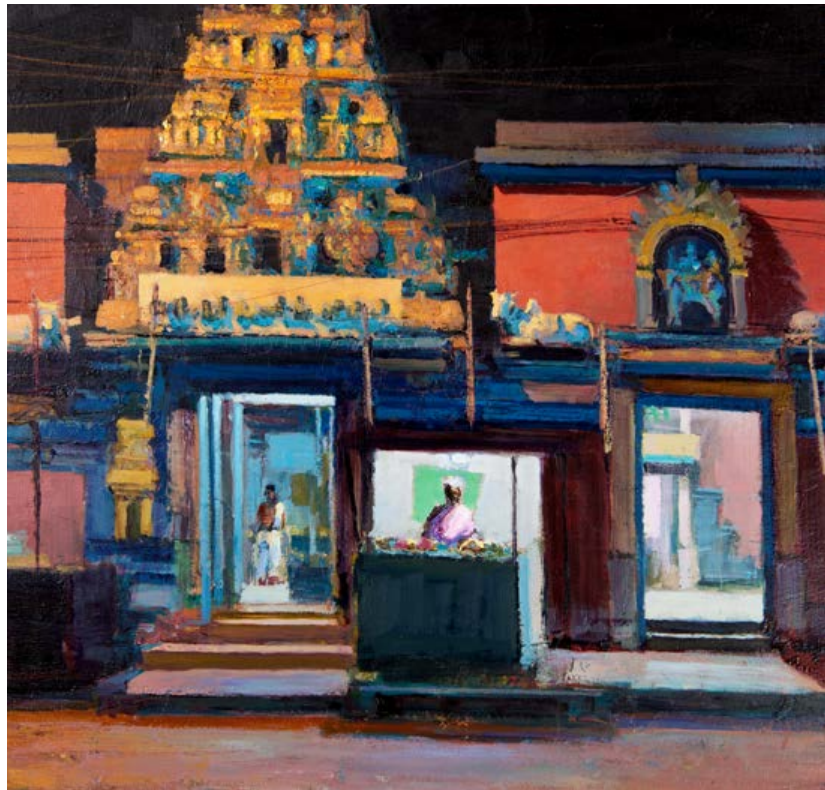
Shop at last light, Pondicherry
oil on board, 9¾ x 10 ins, 24 x 24.5 cm



Shop on Willingon Island, Kochi
oil on board, 11¾ x 12½ ins, 30 x 32 cm



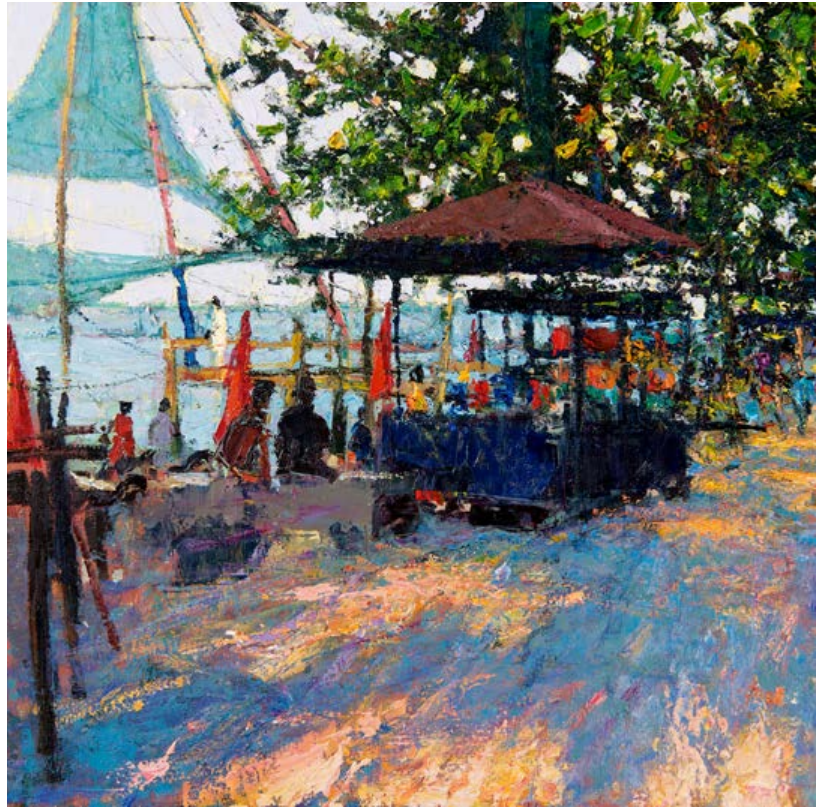
Hills above tea plantations
oil on board, 11¼ x 11¼ ins, 30 x 30 cm



Temple, Pondicherry
oil on board, 15 x 15¼ ins, 38 x 40 cm



Church, shrine and shop, Kerala
oil on board, 15 x 15¼ ins, 38 x 40 cm



Fishing nets, Fort Kochi
oil on board, 13 x 13½ ins, 33 x 34cm

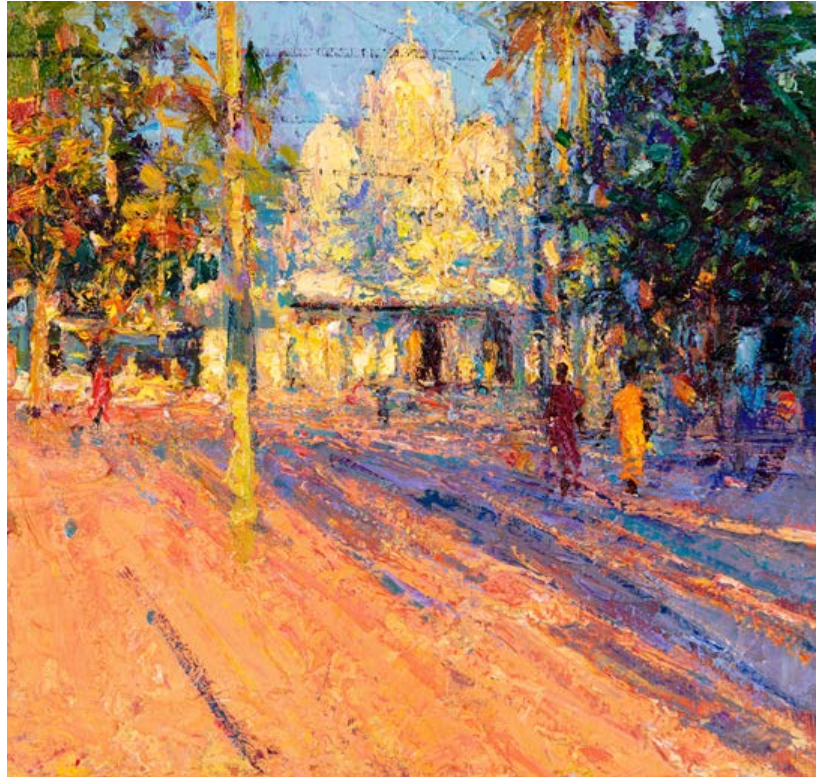




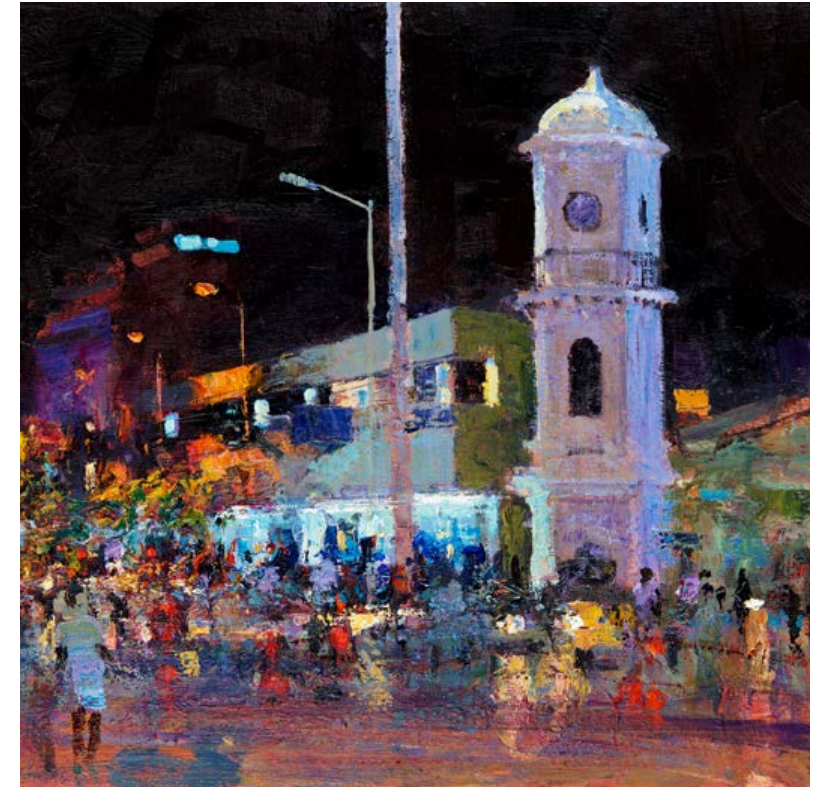
St Joseph's Church, Kerala
oil on board, 8½ x 9 ins, 21.5 x 23 cm



Clock Tower, Evening Light, Pondicherry
oil on board, 10 x 10¼ ins, 25.5 x 27 cm



St Augustine's Church, Kerala
oil on board, 8½ x 9 ins, 21.5 x 23 cm



Clock Tower, night, Pondicherry
oil on board, 11½ x 11¼ ins, 29 x 30 cm

