

## JESSICA DUNNE

*School Session, 2015*  
Oil on linen, 56 x 77 in



COURTESY: THE ARTIST

# The Art of the Urban Landscape

Zack Rogow interviews Artist Jessica Dunne on the process of painting and printmaking

**J**essica Dunne (born 1952, Santa Monica, California) is a celebrated painter and graphic artist who lives in the Sunset District of San Francisco. In her art she often depicts West Coast scenes, ranging from freeways to the streets of her neighborhood to the tunnels connecting the bridges of the Bay Area. Often present in her work is the action of light at dusk, nighttime, and the poignancy of the urban landscape. Her work has been featured in solo exhibitions at the Fresno Art Museum, the Frye Art Museum in Seattle, and the Los Gatos Art Museum, among many others. Zack Rogow began the interview by asking Jessica Dunne about her family's involvement in the arts.

**Zack Rogow:** I've heard that you have a legacy in your family of people involved in the arts.

**Jessica Dunne:** My father was a screenwriter. My grandfather was encouraging him to go into banking, but my father dropped out of Harvard and headed for Hollywood. He didn't consider his work an art. He said, "We were making entertainment."

**ZR:** You grew up in Hollywood, then?

**JD:** Nearby.

**ZR:** What were the movies your father wrote scripts for?

**JD:** One of my favorites is *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*. He also wrote *How Green Was My Valley*, which won Best Picture; and a movie called *Pinky* about interracial marriage, directed by Elia Kazan, released in 1949.

**ZR:** He was ahead of his time in writing about interracial marriage. So, why didn't you go into film?

**JD:** Not to malign any great directors, but when we watched, say, *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*, certain little touches would just make my father cringe. For example, they had a sign turned so only people on a beach could see it instead of the ships that were supposed to read it. He also got tired of the critics crediting the director for writing the movie.

**ZR:** How did that influence your decision to become a painter?

**JD:** I felt like my drawings were in a place that nobody could touch. Painting was something I could do all by myself and not have to rely on anyone else. Of course, that's a myth, because everything is collaborative. You're relying on framers and photographers and people who hang the shows.

**ZR:** Your grandfather was also a writer?

**JD:** He was a political satirist and editor, a Colbert or Doonesbury of his time. He was, weirdly enough, the highest paid writer of his day.

**ZR:** What was his name?

**JD:** Finley Peter Dunne. His writing was syndicated in newspapers. I still see him quoted today, but his words are often attributed to someone else. I was furious when Ronald Reagan stole, "Trust everyone, but cut the cards." That was Finley Peter Dunne.

**ZR:** What topics did your grandfather write about?

**JD:** His work is very contemporary. He wrote about the

American presence in the Philippines and included a scary description of water boarding. He wrote about the meatpacking industry and about race relations. He loved to make fun of his buddy Teddy Roosevelt.

ZR: Can you give an example?

JD: My grandfather wrote a review of *Rough Riders*, Teddy Roosevelt's description of his assault on Cuba. He made the point that Teddy overstated his role, ending it by saying, "I don't understand why Teddy doesn't call it *Alone in Cubia*." People kept complimenting Teddy on his book *Alone in Cubia*. Teddy wrote my grandfather a letter and said, "I regret to inform you that my family and friends love your book review, so you owe me one. You need to come meet me when you're next in Washington." They became friends, but it didn't stop my grandfather from skewering Teddy when he felt the urge.

ZR: How did it happen that you lived in Florence as a young woman? Did that influence your choice to become an artist?

JD: I went to UC Santa Cruz, and I was miserable. I was there with millions of valedictorians and lots of big trees. I fled to Europe with a friend, who then met a boyfriend. I was alone in Florence, and I met someone on the street who said she was studying art, so I started studying drawing with a German artist who was living there. I found an apartment and various jobs, ones that had air conditioning in the summer and heat in the winter because my apartment didn't have any of that.

When you grow up in Southern California, you usually see artwork in slides with lights behind the images. My first thought when I started seeing all those great paintings that I knew so well was, "Where is the electric light?" Then I got used to the idea that the paint itself created a light, but I was under the misapprehension that serious paintings were dark and muddy. All those European paintings were filthy then. I'm still adjusting when I go back and see these same museums with bright, shiny paintings all cleaned up.

ZR: There have been criticisms of restorations that have overdone the color.

JD: They probably have, but they'll get dirty in time.

ZR: Do you think back on those Florentine painters of the Renaissance when you're painting?

JD: I probably do, although it's not in the front of my brain. Those paintings feel like old friends. I'm sure they've influenced me, but I haven't put any of those plump little babies in my paintings. It was more the idea that painting was a worthwhile way to spend your time.

ZR: What about the vanishing point in perspective? That's an invention of Italian painting.

JD: One of my favorite things about the early paintings is how they would get the vanishing point right some of the time but not all the time. With photography, we take it for granted. For them, it was this sort of gobsmack, "Wow, look at that!" I do get out the old straightedge and angle the lines down and try to get it just right. Then I undo it because sometimes it doesn't look right, even if it is.

ZR: It's easy to overstate the influence of influence, but you have some very interesting influences.

JD: Four UC Santa Cruz professors had an important influence on me. Jean Rose was a wonderful teacher and was very supportive of me. I doubt she's still alive, but I would love to thank her right now. I also studied with Hardy Hanson, Kay Metz, and Jack Zajac. Jack was a sculptor and a hell of a good painter. Hardy was a tyrant. He would make you work on a drawing for twenty hours.

ZR: How do you work on drawing for twenty hours?

JD: You just do! You set a timer and keep going. You keep discovering things. A lot of art teachers say, "Stay loose." But I got from Hardy the idea of going deeper and deeper. Later on I studied with Nathan Oliveira at Stanford. He said, "People will always tell you to stop what you're doing, it looks great. Maybe it does, but ignore them." Nathan Oliveira was in the second wave of Bay Area Figurative painters.

ZR: Which is very different from your work, so I'm curious: how did he influence you?

JD: He wasn't looking at my painting through the prism of his own work. He would encourage me to make everything really what it was.

ZR: Could you clarify?

JD: I was doing still lifes at the time. I tend to give everything the same texture if I don't watch myself. He would say, "Make it what it is. If you draw a telephone, make it a telephone. Make it really tangible." Of course, if you look at Nathan Oliveira's work, you think, "Huh?" But that's under it.

ZR: How do you feel about the fact that many of your teachers are no longer with us?

JD: James Doolin was my teacher at UCLA and my really good friend. For years, whenever I felt dried up with painting, I would go and look at his studio, and it always reminded me of how much meaning painting had for me. And I've had other people like that—William Theophilus Brown and Paul Wonner—and they're all gone now. It's a strange time in my life to be going forward without those elders. It's like not having your parents.

ZR: At UC Santa Cruz did you already have a sense that painting was your vocation?

JD: Not really. I was completely lost in that first year before I went to Italy. Then I came back and I had a lot of direction, and then I also transferred to UCLA. I think, in the end, you're also really influenced by your friends. Some of the people who I feel influenced me the most aren't even actively painting right now, but just being next to them working was really important.

ZR: That group of people that you cut your teeth with who are discovering the same work at the same time, that's such an amazing experience as a young artist.

JD: Absolutely. Exchanging paints, exchanging pencils. "Do you use a 6B?"

ZR: What about influence of North American artists?

JD: I love the work of Vija Celmins, who preceded me at UCLA. She was a myth there. She's just brilliant, even though I wouldn't say my work is anything like hers. James Doolin, my teacher at UCLA. I love Lee Bontecou and Phyllis McGibbon. Often with the influences, you say, "Huh? Why that person?" Martin Puryear, for instance, whose work has nothing to do with mine, you would suppose. I was thinking about him a lot when I was in Italy, and I was trying to do drawings that had one strong gesture instead of creating a whole scene. I was trying to draw one branch lying just right, or one light bulb, one vine.

ZR: You also are influenced, I believe, by the Ashcan School, the North American painters of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century who painted urban life.

JD: I can't get enough of George Bellows. I go to Washington, D.C., and I just stand there in the National Gallery drooling.

ZR: Bellows would also paint factories on the Hudson River. Also, John Sloan would paint scenes like the Third Avenue El in New York at dusk. They were the first generation of American painters who saw the beauty of urban life.

JD: I read somewhere that people didn't start painting landscape until the Industrial Revolution, when nature was disappearing. I don't know what inspired people to start painting urban landscapes. Maybe they just couldn't see the other kind.

ZR: If you live in an urban setting, you're in a position to capture the moments that the urban landscape affords.

JD: I hate to oversimplify it, but I pretty much paint wherever I am. If I'm in Wyoming, I paint Wyoming. I happen to live in the city. Of course, I choose to live in a city.

ZR: Some people might characterize the scenes you paint as almost desolate: a warehouse at the end of a street, a tunnel with cars, freeway overpasses, the space under a

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*Wet Pavement*, 1998  
Monotype, 20 x 30 in



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bridge. Not the kind of settings we often associate with beauty or art.

**JD:** It's a little bit of a defensive choice. When I first saw the Great Highway near Ocean Beach in San Francisco, where I've lived for thirty some years, I thought, "That's the most depressing place." When I first got here, I would go visit my parents in Southern California whenever I could. The summer fog just killed me. Then the urban planners planted streetlights everywhere so now you can read a book at night. It's important to be able to read a book on a street corner—I do it all the time. I'm just kidding. Still, the lights gave me something to look at because they were new and they weren't gray.

**ZR:** When was this?

**JD:** The early nineties. I felt that if I could get interested in something visual, the cold wind and the fog wouldn't annoy me. I grew up in Los Angeles, and I've always been a night owl. My idea of fun used to be to drive over one of the big freeway interchanges. I remember when my father was dying in the hospital, we had an argument about word usage. I said something about "careening," and he corrected me and said the proper word was "careering." After the argument I drove home. I looked up and I thought, "Oh, my God, that looks just like the painting I'm working on of San Francisco." This was in Los Angeles, so I realized that you're always painting the past. I turned around and drove back to the hospital. We made up, and my father died a few weeks later.

**ZR:** You have a monotype called *Wet Pavement* where you portray the Great Highway in a rainstorm. Can you talk a little bit about that particular work?

**JD:** That was an El Niño year, 1998. My partner and I always kept a camera in the car. We were out late at night, and there was a fantastic reflection from all these crazy sodium vapor lights on the ridges in the wet pavement. We were out there photographing it in the middle of the night. Then I used some of the photographs for ideas for monotypes.

**ZR:** Did anyone notice that you were taking the photos?

**JD:** Yes, a policeman tried to give us a ticket for standing there. We said, "Please, can we just get this one shot?" It was 12:30 at night, pouring rain. We had our camera with tarps hanging over our heads. It was completely miserable, and the policeman said, "I don't want this to become a trend."

**ZR:** Any other unusual places where you've set up your easel or taken a photo?

**JD:** This is about as safe as texting while you're driving, but I used to balance my camera on my dashboard as I came home from printmaking in Berkeley. I would leave my lens wide open, then as I would drive over the Bay Bridge, I would just reach out and hit the button and take these weird pictures that I would turn into paintings. Going at sixty miles an hour, you have very little time to study details. Sometimes I would arrange to get stuck in a traffic jam so I could spend longer looking at the details.

**ZR:** In addition to painting, you do quite a lot of graphic art. Can you talk about some of the techniques you use?

**JD:** Some of my prints are monotypes.

**ZR:** What is a monotype?

**JD:** A monotype is the stupidest thing in the world. It's a one-of-a-kind print so you get none of the advantages of printmaking—no multiple copies. It's just a printed painting. I developed this technique in my own way to make monotypes in multiple layers. The thing that makes it interesting is that the very white paper creates all the light, so everything is transparent. You get a kind of glow coming off the paper.

**ZR:** It's like those slides you were talking about.

**JD:** Exactly. I'm always trying to get back to those slides. Also, the color is sort of inside the paper instead of on top of the paper, so it's different from a painting. I make monotypes with my fingertips and with Q-tips. I use gloves always.

**ZR:** What do you mean you make them with your fingertips?

**JD:** I finger-paint. I apply the ink with a brush, then I pat it down with my fingers.

**ZR:** Why would you do that as opposed to painting?

**JD:** That's a good question. I have no answer to that question. I like the effects in monotypes. There's no way to hurry them; they take forever.

**ZR:** How many different applications do you do?

**JD:** I tried counting them, then I lost track. There's something about watching it build up like that.

**ZR:** Are you working directly on the paper, or are you working on a substance that prints onto the paper?

**JD:** I work on a sheet of clear Mylar. I do a line drawing on paper that I place underneath the Mylar. On the line drawing I write notes to myself like "dark" or "watch this line." I have to always remember when something is white to leave that area white so I have big "WHITE! WHITE! WHITE!" notations.

**ZR:** So, when you're actually working on the surface of the Mylar, are you looking at a photograph as well as looking at the drawing?

**JD:** Yes. And the drawing is just linear; it has no shading, because shading distracts when you're trying to put on color. I make monotypes at Kala Art Institute in Berkeley, where there are huge presses. I sit there dabbling away, and it always makes people laugh because it's like watching paint dry or grass grow.

**ZR:** You print multiple times?

**JD:** I run it through the press multiple times. So I get a little upper-body workout.

**ZR:** And how big are most of these monotypes?

**JD:** About twenty-four by thirty inches. With the borders of the paper and the frame, they're all pretty large.

**ZR:** Do you work in any other graphic media?

**JD:** I also do tiny, tiny spit bite aquatints.

**ZR:** What is a spit bite aquatint?

**JD:** It's a different way to work with etching, which is often a rigid-looking medium with a mechanical aspect. But spit bite is a way of just painting where you aquatint a plate. You coat a copper plate with a layer of rosin, and then you paint on that with a mixture of acid and saliva, or acid and gum arabic.

**ZR:** So when you say "spit bite," it really uses spit?

**JD:** The saliva gives the acid a nice viscosity. If you just paint with the acid, it beads up and bites deep holes into the plate.

**ZR:** What kind of acid do you use?

**JD:** I used to use nitric acid, which is really dangerous. You need supplied air, meaning a spacesuit and a tube going to a tank. At some printmaking workshops, they have big fans that suck the acid away. I decided that wasn't for me, that it's just too dangerous, so now I use ferric chloride. It's much easier to work with but much slower, so it takes a lot longer. It doesn't give off many fumes.

**ZR:** But you still have to wear gloves?

**JD:** Gloves and goggles. Because I don't want to get it in my eyes. It's a salt, attracted to moisture. So sometimes I'll cover my face if I'm working for a long time.

**ZR:** And what is it about a spit bite image that you find interesting and unique?

**JD:** I've always had a difficult time using just a hard line or a border; I'm very indecisive. It allows me to make a print that really feels like a painting.

ZR: How long does it take to make a spit bite print? To actually create the copper plate?

JD: Well, against conventional wisdom, I do spit bites faster than monotypes, whereas usually it's the reverse. I usually do a few layers. I wash everything off and I print it and it just looks terrible. So I usually have to do a couple layers, but sometimes I do it all in one take. That takes basically a day, and then there's the process of making additional prints.

In printmaking, everything you do is reversed, so you have to learn to think in reverse. If you have any writing in your print like a STOP sign on the street, you have to draw it in reverse.

ZR: It seems like a disadvantage.

JD: It trains your eye to see things in a more whole way. An image looks completely different reversed. When a painting isn't working, one of the ways you can diagnose the problem is by holding it up to a mirror. I'm always trying to train my mind to reverse everything or to balance everything so that it works coming and going. It's like learning another language.

ZR: Certain painters love dazzling sunlight, but you seem to be drawn to dusk, nighttime, foggy skies.

JD: One little secret is that I've done quite a few dazzling sunlight paintings. But I tend to sell them very quickly, so that will tell you something about my business sense, that I prefer darker paintings. I'm actually much more chipper at night than I am during the day. It's getting on to 4 P.M. right now, and I'm starting to wake up. I actually wake up early, but some part of me wakes up at night. For years I had jobs at night.

ZR: Like what?

JD: I used to work for a party planning company and at a hospital, and I'd come home at two or three in the morning. I used to paint until three in the morning. I don't much anymore, but I usually do paint until about 10:30 at night, and I will often stop and go look at what I'm working on.

ZR: The actual landscape?

JD: Yes. The light is always changing really fast, so sometimes I choose a place that is lit up whenever they have an athletic event at night, so I can go and really study the light since it stays constant for a long time. But I don't think of night or dusk as gloomy. I like being alone.

ZR: I think a lot of people might not realize seeing a reproduction of a painting of yours how large many of your works are and how long they take.

JD: They do; they take months.

ZR: There is a narrative quality to some of your landscapes, where it seems you depict a moment in a story. Your artwork also has a very painterly quality, not the air-brush effect of photorealism.

JD: A photograph is a great tool, but it also needs to be discarded. I can't just go somewhere and take a picture and then paint that. I have to know the place pretty well. I did one painting closely from a photograph, but I would go back. It was when they were doing construction late at night on the Golden Gate Bridge, and I'd drive down and look at that, until my boyfriend discovered what I was doing, which was rather dangerous, and he was pretty upset. So then we would go there together. I think photographs are really useful, but I always look and draw from real life too.

ZR: There's a poignancy to your images where it's just the viewer and the landscape. For example, traffic headed west at sunset on Sloat Boulevard in San Francisco. Those landscapes capture a particular flavor of the California experience that not many people have tried to depict.

JD: It's kind of the end of the line out here. Not to get too heavy, but where I grew up, my parents had one of those houses with huge windows. It was built on the premise that we weren't afraid of anyone. It was a great place and I loved it, but it was also kind of lonely and scary. I could see a few lights across the peninsula. On the other side was Palos Verdes in Los Angeles, where I could also see a

few lights. I always found those lights off in the distance a little comforting.

Out here in the Sunset District of San Francisco, I'm surrounded by those lights and they are just lights; they don't hold a lot of promise. But I still look in people's windows and wonder what it feels like to live in that house.

**Jessica Dunne** earned a BA in Fine Arts from San Francisco State University. You can view more of her work at [www.jessicadunne.com](http://www.jessicadunne.com)

**Zack Rogow** is a poet, playwright, editor, and translator. He has written eight collections of poetry. He has an MA in English from City College, City University of New York, and a BA in English from Yale University.

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*Tunnel, Marin, 1998*  
Spit-bite aquatint, 20 x 20 in



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