

NICK ALM

# Light Chaser



In 1901, Swedish engineer Gustaf Dalén began an intense period of invention that would eventually cement his name in the history books and get him the Nobel Prize in physics. His inventions included a storage method for acetylene, a mixer that would provide the correct balance of gas and air for an incandescent mantle, and also the sun-valve, a device that could automatically light a beacon during the day and extinguish it at night. These inventions, and others he pioneered, found new uses in lighthouses around the world.

Fast forward more than a century and you'll find an unexpected visitor in one of the century-old buildings designed by Dalén in the years after his tremendous success. It's there, in a studio with four large windows and high ceilings, where you'll find the work of painter Nick Alm. Though it would seem the two men are a century apart and working in divergent professions,

they are bound by a common purpose—light.

And make no mistake, artists are maestros of light, as clearly seen in Alm's delicately painted figure paintings, each one full of the little nuances that make light such a fascinating subject—shadows that dance across facial features, overpowering natural light that glows through windows onto tranquil interior scenes and outdoor scenes that suggest diffused light passing through gloomy clouds. His new works will be unveiled at a show March 7 at Arcadia Contemporary in Pasadena, California. It will be his third solo show at the gallery. While the Stockholm-based artist has largely focused on oil paintings, for this new show he will be adding watercolor works, which he has been exploring for around 14 years.

"Besides a surgeon's hand and nerves of steel, planning, timing and speed are also crucial aspects of watercolor. The medium is very unforgivable due

- 1 *Subway*, oil on canvas, 14½ x 21"
- 2 *Cornelia's Winter*, watercolor, 12 x 16"
- 3 *Birds*, watercolor, 20 x 28"



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to its transparency, which forces you to plan and make quick decisions," Alm says. "To foresee the behavior of the paint, you have to know how wet the paper and the brush are, and when to put the brush to the paper. The water also evaporates quickly, leaving you little time to manipulate the layer. It can be stressful, but worth it when it succeeds."

Works in the show include *Birds*, a watercolor showing a single female figure in profile. Behind her is a flock of birds that seem to merge into and out of the fabric of her coat, which possesses the same dark qualities as the birds' feathers. What will strike viewers first, though, is the detail in the subject's face and the quality of the light and shadow that falls upon her. And there is detail that is quite exquisite; from the eyelashes that seem to indicate a mournful glance





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that is only barely seen by the viewer to the careful shape of the ear, the painting has a wealth of small features that show Alm's hand meticulously at work and busy.

In the watercolor *Cornelia's Winter*, Alm again has found a wonderful balance between mood and detail. It has the feel of a work by Andrew Wyeth, but finds its own footing amid the softness of snow and the sharp features of the subject's face.

In Alm's oil works, he paints his figures as if their lives are being silently, and only barely, interrupted by the painter's ever-watchful eye. The subjects seem to register their acknowledgment of the omniscient presence that rests upon them, but don't draw attention to it and instead focus on the path in front of them. In *Subway*, his figures look out or down slightly, except for one figure, who gazes right at the viewer from behind the orange glow of an overhead subway light.

"With a clear composition in mind I loosely indicated the figures with charcoal," he says. "Around two years later, when I finally found the right model for the

main character, I painted her from life in the studio alla prima, and then expanded from the focal point in the same manner with new models. The background was done from photo references. Though every part was painted quickly, the total time from idea to the finished product exceeded three years."

*Subway* could be the beginning or end of a story, and the one that precedes it could also be *In the Tube*, which shows a different grouping of figures within the crowded subway car. Again, many of the figures seem to be busy ignoring the viewer, save for one, a woman in a blue button-up that glares from the canvas as she locks with your eyes and refuses to let go. The detail in her face, and the shadows that fall ever so slightly against her cheeks and jawline, is all so mesmerizing.

When asked what his goals are as an artist, Alm had a simple answer: "I hope to surpass my own expectations. The drive is just a creative need from within, totally egoistic, like having an urge for a drink." ●

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*Stairwell*, oil,  
10½ x 8"

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*In the Tube*,  
oil on canvas,  
13¼ x 16½"

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