

Ted Reed
Judge's Statement
2026 Online Members Exhibition

I wish to express my deep gratitude to the Potomac Valley Watercolorists for honoring me by permitting me to judge the PVW's magnificent 2026 Online Member Show. The artworks' sophistication, combined with both the charm and the heights of artistic vision the paintings present, exceeded all of my expectations. Evaluating this show was challenging but ultimately thoroughly uplifting and inspiring.

Criteria Used. I based my award choices on the traditional elements for artwork that most judges use: concept and artistic vision, originality, and the mastery of the technical skills employed with the medium chosen to achieve that vision. In the use of technical skills, composition is paramount, within which substantial rolls are played by the choice of shapes, color harmony, the chosen value and saturation spectrums, edgework, moments of detail vs. simplification, and use of abstraction. Whether emphasized or deemphasized, all should serve the artistic vision.

Subjective Elements. I also relied on the strength of my response to each piece of art, whether that response was emotional, intellectual, or spiritual. Which works stunned me the moment I first saw them? Which called me back to gaze upon them again and again. Which surprised me? Which made me laugh? Which linked me to traditions of art I love? Which make me yearn to talk about them, or lose track of time? While these responses depend on the successful use of criteria I list above, part of them is inherently subjective.

I believe that such personal and often visceral responses are fundamental to all artistic experience, and that differences of opinion about art only reveals art's great importance and richness. As objective as all judges strive to be, we are ourselves, and others can and should disagree with our choices.

Variety: I strove to make these awards reflect the show's diversity of subjects and techniques, so I made variety a criteria of my selection. There were enough fabulous floral paintings to gobble up a large portion of the awards, but I chose to pass by many in my effort to showcase the full scope of subject matter and talent that the exhibition displays. I wish to honor the show's still life, landscapes, and figures. Realism and abstraction. Opacity and transparencies. Eye-catching edges and dissolving forms. The charm of decorative flatness and the grandeur of depth of field. The power of a broad color spectrum and the poetic restraint of a tiny, cherished color gamut. Images that highlight a dazzling instant in time and those that are part of an ongoing story. My effort to reflect the breadth of the exhibition's diversity means I could not honor all paintings worthy of awards.

This Exhibition Is Much More than My 12 Choices. Competition for honors inspires creation, and awarding honors for individual works is good for attracting public attention to an exhibit. But awards can draw too much attention. The real power of an exhibition, I believe, lies in the totality of its diverse offerings to its viewers. Connections between viewers and art can and should be deeply personal. My choices, good or bad, cannot diminish the importance of any single painting I passed over to the viewers who will be inspired by that artwork or the patron who is meant to acquire and cherish it. Moments like that are, in combination, what this exhibition is all about, and why the exhibition is so much greater than my awards can be.

And the Rest. Below I make note of several other issues that relate to my judging, none of which are as important as what I expressed above.

Digital Review of an Art Exhibition. My review was entirely digital. I not only understand the necessity of purely online review but applaud its existence, because it makes exhibitions possible that might not otherwise exist. Digital exhibitions cost far less and are less time-consuming to assemble than physical exhibitions. And more people can “visit” a digital exhibition than a live one. But, as the judge, I want to share how the limitations of digital judging, so they are known.

Shooting Artwork for a Judged Show. Capturing the most “true” depiction of an artwork in a photograph is an art in itself that can require expensive equipment and a skill for photography that most of us lack. There is no level playing field, and I can offer no solutions. Accuracy is such a challenge that the greatest art museums around the world cannot agree on standard method for photographing, processing, and displaying their paintings’ images online. I tremble at the thought that my effort to honor the best artworks might instead give awards to the best photographers or photo-processors, or simply the artists with the newest iPhone.

Presentation and Scale. A digital show hides the impact of scale. The size chosen is an essential part of any artwork. As artists, many of us strive to pick the size for each painting that best conveys its content, message, and power. As a digital reviewer, I am shown, in writing, the inches of each work’s dimensions, and I try to imagine it at that scale. That is not the same as experiencing an artwork’s physical size live. As an extreme example, I find Géricault’s masterpiece *Raft of the Medusa* stunning on my laptop screen, but that experience is a pale shadow of what it’s like to stand before its 16-foot and 1-inch high by 23-foot and 6-inch wide magnificence. I can only hope that the award choices I have made would have been the same if I’d seen the artwork at actual scale in person.

Titles. Many of the paintings in the show have fabulous titles! I put very little weight on titles when judging artworks for exhibition awards. We’re painters, not novelists or ad execs. But a great title never hurts, and many viewers consider them part of the artwork itself. A poetic, smart, mysterious, funny, rhyming, or otherwise charming title invites viewers into a painting.

Decades ago, I painted a model who posed in the motorcycle leathers she wore riding to the painting session. She posed standing, and, because of the wind while riding, wore her bright red hair in two long braids. I gave the painting a title no one remembers. But my wife said she looks like an adult-biker version of Pippi Longstocking after a few bad knocks. She started calling it “*Pippi Takes a Ride*,” and everyone else followed suit. Over 25 years later, people bring up that painting *by name* more than anything else I’ve ever painted. I’m pretty darned sure most only remember the painting *because* of my wife’s title. I raised this topic with Leigh Fulton while discussing jurying this show. She laughed and told me she’s convinced she only had an exhibition accepted a painting of hers because she titled it, *It’s Him or Me, Henrietta!*

Here, in no particular order, is a celebration of some of the great titles from this exhibition:

Divine It Twines (rhymical and rhyming); *Birches in Azure* (so lovely to say aloud!); *Aurum Autumn*; *Unfinished Business*; *Parked in Amsterdam*; *Up the Street We Go*; *4 Down, 2 to Go*; *Furtive Fish*; *Full of Beans*; *Interlock Hollyhock*; *Mysterious Mileto*; *Preying vs. Praying*; *Gone Astray*; *Roman Holiday*; *Upward and Onward*; *Aunt Mary’s Marbles*; and *Grandpa’s Chair*.

My three favorites are *Upward and Onward*, *Unfinished Business*, and *Aunt Mary’s Marbles*.

For the first, the usual expression is onward and upward, not the reverse. But these are dandelions. “Upward and Onward” isn’t just the aspirational mission statement of the tiny troop of flowers shown in the painting. It’s the war cry of *all* dandelions world-wide.

I have a battery of troublesome paintings that I finished . . . but then went back into again. And again. You know the ones. *Unfinished Business*. (I bet there are innumerable artists who would be delighted to use that title for the biopic of their entire *careers*.) There are more narrative and layered meanings to Ms. Levy’s use of this iconic title. But I sure wish I’d thought of it first.

Finally, the title *Aunt Mary’s Marbles* is a wonderful double-entendre. The title seems to promise a charming anecdote about (or perhaps a darker reflection on) Aunt Mary’s idiosyncrasies. Instead, the painting is a literal depiction of Mary’s merry marble collection. I laughed out loud. This dash of charm welcomed me into the painting. Never overlook the power of a thoughtful title!

One Last Callout to Abstraction. *Parked in Amsterdam* is, in my view, the painting that best presents both literal depiction and abstraction, and that plays with the line between both to best effect. The painting is full of contradictions: motion vs. stasis, opaque vs. transparent, literal vs. abstract. Machines that exist only to move are locked down in such an immobile stack that it devolves into a block of transparent colors and lines that blurs at the top into the colors of road – which could be freedom, but for the red curb blocking the way. Abstraction invites imagination, potentially opening doors to emotional, spiritual, and often subconscious ideas beyond what is overtly depicted. And the painting’s title is fantastic.

But Ms. Fisher dazzles me more with her painting *Daffodils*, in which her transparencies once again invite the literal to dance with the abstract. And, under this exhibition’s rules for granting awards, there can be only one.

Thank You for inviting me into an event so wonderful. It has been my privilege to be a part of it. I am enthralled by your paintings and cannot wait to see much more dazzling work in the future!