

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.

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JESSICA DUNNE

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



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