

# ILLUMINATING LONDON

Artist *Leo Villareal* explains the inspiration behind his design of the *Illuminated River* project – set to be unveiled later this summer



Critical to my work for *Illuminated River* is the inspiration that comes directly from nature. This project is rooted in classic artistic practices, as I decided to use colours and light treatments inspired by the palettes of Impressionist masters and English Romantics who repeatedly painted the Thames. Like these artists, I work *en plein air* – in this case by using the bridges as a canvas; there is of course a lot of preparation that happens in the studio, but the crucial final adjustments happen as I sit by the riverbank with my laptop, sequencing different patterns of colour combinations and painterly washes to the exact desired effect. This is not something that I'd be able to do just by programming in

the studio without being exposed to the contextual information that comes from each bridge's unique surrounding environment.

My aim is to mimic the ever-changing movement of the river, using shifting hues that are drawn from the London sky during sunset, in moonlight, and at sunrise. These expressive light compositions carry on the traditions of artists such as Monet, Turner and Whistler, who were inspired by the Thames and interested in the blending of art and science, excelling in rendering light through the mixing of colour.

Other artists I've been inspired by include Frank Brangwyn, John Atkinson Grimshaw and Norman Wilkinson – I'm excited

to say that their historic Thames paintings are featured in a new exhibition at Guildhall Art Gallery (on until 1 September), as part of its 'Architecture of London' programme, alongside architectural drawings and animations of the project. I've selected these paintings from the collection of Guildhall Art Gallery to complement my vision for the Thames bridges as they represent the atmospheric shifts of the river environment at different hours of the day and through the seasons.

By interpreting the unique environment of each bridge, my inspiration never resolves into a single image but is ever-changing, subtly unfolding through light and colour.

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This is made possible through custom software that I have developed that enables me to 'paint with light' using the latest LED technology – adjusting the brightness and colour to produce sequenced patterns that will play across the bridge structures. These patterns – abstract, organic and gently kinetic – are inspired by the natural and social activity of the river. Each sequence engages with the character of the bridge it relates to, highlighting key structural definitions and heritage features, while the integrated motion across the bridges will create a unified artwork that references the river as a continuous living system. ●

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Norman Wilkinson's *Towing Past the City*, c. 1962