

ART



## FRIENDS REUNITED

She might paint in the rural isolation of Aberdeenshire, but Catriona Millar staves off loneliness by surrounding herself with portraits of relatives, teachers and neighbours – and collectors of her work recognise themselves in these much sought-after canvases

Text by **Catherine Coyle**





### Catriona Millar never uses a paintbrush.

Instead, the Aberdeenshire artist opts for a knife, knowing that this will allow her to slather paint thickly, producing the textured effect that has become her trademark. Up close, the viewer is tempted to reach out and touch the canvas, so packed is it with paint. While this might be seen as simply a preferred painting technique, the depth of character and subtle nuances of narrative that she achieves using this method is what sets her figurative work apart from anything else you'll see in Scotland.

If you were eavesdropping on our conversation, you'd be forgiven for thinking we were discussing a story idea or new novel. The subject of Catriona's paintings is almost exclusively people. Her fascination with the human condition, the face, the sensuality of

flesh dictate her muse, while her intensely layered application tells chapters of a tale that unfold with each stroke.

From her solitary studio at the bottom of the garden deep in the Aberdeenshire countryside, Catriona creates company in her canvases; each new work a friend to keep her entertained. It is perhaps this profound connection with her subject matter that art aficionados and collectors have latched on to, hurtling the 53-year-old to the fore. Even more surprising is that this artist graduated just four years ago.

"When I went back to art school, the first thing I noticed was how polite the other students were," explains Catriona. "They were holding doors open for me – and then I realised they thought I was one of the tutors!" she laughs. Her status as a 'mature ▶





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student' at Aberdeen's Gray's School of Art is singularly significant, though, and she admits that had she gone to art school in her 20s, she might not have enjoyed the same success.

"I won a scholarship in the early 1970s in Harrogate but we moved back to Aberdeen so I didn't complete it," says Catriona. She continued to paint but, with two children to raise, family responsibilities came first and art had to take a back seat. It wasn't until the late 1990s when, dropping her now grown-up son off at Gray's where he was a life model, Catriona was intrigued by the art studio where first-year students were busily working away. That glimpse of budding artists learning their craft spurred her to apply, and by the time she was hanging her degree show in 2005 word had spread about her paintings – and even the lecturers were queuing up to buy her work. "That was the ultimate seal of approval," she admits.

Galleries were scouting the exhibition, looking to pick up new talent and, with her degree show a sell-out, the excitement surrounding this unassuming artist was building. "We were all painting work to sell but this was our final assessment too, so it was a strange dual

process of commercial and creative activity," she recalls. It was, however, a clear watershed; in just four years, Catriona has seamlessly made the transition from student to fully fledged professional artist, exhibited publicly throughout the UK and collected privately worldwide.

Full of wit and whimsy, the paintings possess a naïve intensity, where colour, texture and scale are as bold as they can be. Subjects have a candid quality; rosy cheeks, pretty patterned clothing and animals feature heavily, but tentative stares and uneasy whispers intimate more than simple childlike colourful characters.

In her own home, Catriona has paintings by Ruth O'Dell, Jennifer Macrae and David Greenall, among many others (though none of her own works), which she believes influence her own painting, albeit subconsciously. The characters she paints often morph into people she has encountered in the past; a look or gesture reminding her of a teacher, neighbour or relative and, in turn, injecting a new dimension to the canvas. That level of intimacy she feels with each of her works leaves the artist exposed, allowing a deeper insight and, as demonstrated by many of her ►





followers, a desire to collect more of her paintings. "It's something of a rebirth for me, turning me inside out and urging me to question past beliefs," she says. One fan is planning to remodel her extension to properly house her collection. "She's calling back her architect," laughs Catriona, wide-eyed with disbelief. They do, however, have an addictive quality and, like a family of animated siblings, there is humour, affection, warmth and intangible peculiarities present in each work. Much of their appeal is the personal resonance that viewers of Catriona's work so clearly identify.

Indeed, her recent solo show at Aberdeen's Rendezvous Gallery is testament to the appetite for Catriona's work: "When we arrived at the gallery before it opened, there was a queue down the street!" The show had virtually sold out within 20 minutes of the doors opening (only four of the 40 paintings remained) and Catriona's work was dubbed recession-proof by local newspapers. Rendezvous owner Duane Mead had spotted Catriona's work at her degree show; so convinced was he that she would succeed, he purchased the artist's first publicly exhibited piece.

Reaction to Catriona's meteoric rise is warm and affectionately held, particularly in her local area. In a homecoming of sorts, she will exhibit at the Tolquhon Gallery, where, prior to that sell-out degree show, her work was first shown. A collection of new, smaller works (a departure for this large-scale artist) will go on show at the Rendezvous Gallery in September, and there are plans to exhibit at art fairs throughout the year.



[Above] *Ozzie and Memphis*; [left] Catriona Millar graduated as recently as 2005, having attended Gray's School of Art as a mature student; [previous pages] *Class and Palaver*

Without denigrating her work, Catriona's husband likens the paintings and their commercial success to a hit pop song that captivates the nation. Just like a chart hit, Catriona's work possesses a multi-faceted accessibility that broadens its appeal and captures the public imagination, while her exhibitions are a chance for admirers to interact physically with the canvases. Far from being a one-hit wonder, though, the artist and her work continue to evolve: she terms herself a "practitioner" and explains that she feels compelled to paint, each canvas adding another acquaintance to her ever-growing circle of friends. ■

Intimate Encounters, Tolquhon Gallery, Tolquhon, Tarves, Ellon, from June 7 to July 7. 01651 842 343, [www.tolquhon-gallery.co.uk](http://www.tolquhon-gallery.co.uk)

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