

## 'Success is temporal... I feel success only when I am making the work'

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Artist Genieve Figgis. Picture: Gerry Mooney

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Let's get fame and hoo-hah out of the way, first. It's what Genieve Figgis is least interested in. There's Skira Rizzoli's handsome 2017 publication, *Genieve Figgis*; the shows in Paris, London, Chicago, Brussels, Shanghai and Los Angeles, where her work is collected by celebrities. Her work features in the current show *Desire in locked-up IMMA*. There's a Roberto Devereux-themed Met short, and in 2016 she was invited to create a *Romeo and Juliet* exhibition at New York's Metropolitan Opera.

Last month, the Wicklow-based artist's painting *17th Century Family*, auctioned at Christie's in London, estimate €24,000-35,000, fetched a hammer price of €149,000. That's 399 per cent above mid-estimate, in auctioneer speak. Her *Birth of Venus (After Alexandre Cabanel)* was sold for €270,000 in Hong Kong, estimate €29,000-46,000, and a donated postcard-size painting, *Blue*. Far from all of that excitement, Genieve Figgis gets on with painting in Co Wicklow, somewhere in the 2,027 square kilometres of it, in her new old studio. Where exactly? She prefers not to announce those kinds of details. Privacy is very important. Her first studio was a small, crowded room on Harcourt Terrace. When I visited it, in 2013, every wall, even the floor, was covered with her work. Faces, strange and compelling, looked at me from every angle. Lyric FM was playing. Then for a few years she rented a huge warehouse in Co Wicklow and in 2016, "I found a beautiful ruin. The most magical place in the world. Familiar and yet unreal. The hoarding had fallen from around the exterior and it stood there like a movie set. The house was built in 1856. I was told that it had not been lived in for about 40 years. I felt goosebumps when I saw it and it was love at first sight. It had been waiting for me. I wanted to save it."

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17th Century Family - the work which went for £149,000 last month at Christie's

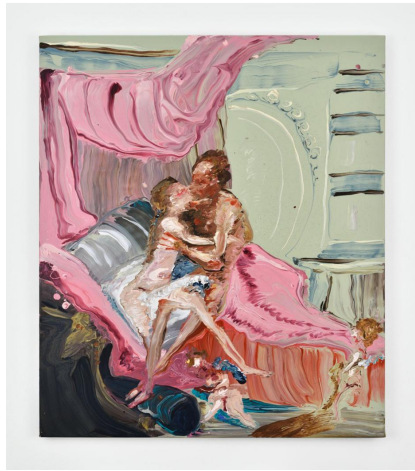
As for success? "The idea of success," says Figgis, "can be temporal for an artist. There is no taking it easy. I feel success only when I am making the work. When something I was aiming for is achieved. When the work is going well that gives me a feeling of success."

Figgis, 48, came to formal training late. Born in Dublin, the family lived in Churchtown, then Wexford. As a creative teenager she made her own clothes, drew on blank newspaper sheets which her father, who worked in the Irish Press, brought home for her, and she painted an Eddie the Head, Iron Maiden's mascot, on her bedroom wall. But, at 19, she was rejected by Dun Laoghaire Art College. In her 20s she worked in the jewellery trade, married and had two children; and then Gorey School of Art accepted her application; she got her BA in 2006, and a Masters from NCAD followed in 2012.

Did she benefit from starting late?

"Absolutely. Starting Art College at 30 was an extremely exciting time for me. The younger ones were partying - but I was so committed, every minute counted. I really loved every minute and getting a chance to create. I was extremely grateful for the opportunity to be doing something that I loved. I still feel this to this day, by doing what I was born to do."

When she first sent her paintings out into the world, she says she "used to feel unwell".



Hercules and Omphale (after Boucher), courtesy Almine Rech Gallery

Though media-shy, Figgis is indebted to social media. The American artist Richard Prince saw her work online in 2014 and he is now "the biggest collector of my work. I am truly grateful for his support. Social media has been very important to me as it has given me a vehicle to connect and engage with people across the world."

Figgis's memory of her childhood "was being told I had a strange imagination and that I was always day-dreaming". That strange imagination and day-dreaminess are still at work. Add a vibrantly macabre and unsettling quality, luscious, swirling brush-work, bright colours - especially blues, pinks, pistachio - and that's a Figgis.

And Twitter allows us a glimpse into Figgis's creative process. We might pass a building, diaphanous curtains escaping through its windows and blowing in the wind, but not Genieve Figgis. She posted a little video because "on one of my recent walks I discovered that the windows had been opened on a boarded-up old hotel and I thought it looked wonderful. The curtains were waving 'hello' out the window and trying to come alive again, to tell me their story."

Though her creative imagination soars, her head is on her shoulders. She'll tweet that "the sun is shining and I am so grateful" or post videos of her two dogs. Her chopping board with mushrooms, olives, courgettes, spinach "looks like a Giuseppe Arcimboldo portrait" or she'll post a picture of "an old giant nail and a bit of vintage tile" she found while digging in the garden. "Exciting stuff!"

wonderful artist. She really overcame a lot in her life. All that she had to endure and overcome. She is one character that I would admire and look up to for sure. She managed to keep going no matter what her hurdle was. She was a strong, inspiring woman."

And Figgis's own mantra? "Stay strong, stay committed, keep going, never give up."

Generously, artists whom Figgis herself admires also get a look-in when she tweets and, best of all, she posts her own recent work, often before the paint has dried.

Acrylic, "less toxic than oil and turps", on canvas or wood panel, is her preferred medium. The soundtrack she works to includes Wojciech Kilar, Hans Zimmer, John Barry, Brian Eno, Dario Marianelli, Enya. "I love everything: thrash metal, rap". She believes individual paintings contain the rhythm of the music they were made to.

Before the blank canvas, how does she go about it? "I love working out each step as I go. There is nothing pre-planned or orchestrated. I want to try something out, like an experiment. I want to keep on learning. There is no formula. Paint should always look fresh and alive, balancing the real and the unreal, natural and unnatural. You just have to trust yourself and believe something wonderful can happen.

"The most exciting part of making the work is when I arrive at the part that helps me forget that I am actually painting, I get completely lost in my work. I never notice time going by or get distracted. It's a wonderful escape."

Has she ever regretted a painting?

"Every painting is an experience for me. It's how I evolve and learn. I have no regrets. I can look back and say I could have done something different or added something extra. When I have moved on, it is easier to judge the work. That is how I learn.

"The large paintings are a huge commitment. I understand when I begin that it will need a lot of energy. It's exciting and frightening at the same time. I use a lot of paint and sometimes it's a little risky and dangerous on a flat surface. You need a lot of focus and determination. Trust in yourself."

She's painted the Virgin Mary, Queen Elizabeth, family groups - weddings, meals, picnics, carriages, animals - and many of her paintings echo classic, traditional artists' work. And her titles - Drinking in Bed, Dracula Kiss, Heavy Metal Picnic, Ladies in the Grass, Tipple Time, Chocolate Bed, Darcy's Reflection - are wonderfully memorable. Her interiors are lush and elegant, her figurative images sometimes sexual and transgressive.

Familiar images from "some of my favourites", Goya, Velazquez, Fragonard, Gainsborough, become brilliantly energetic and exuberantly humorous works. She looks at the powerful and the privileged, as in Gainsborough's Mr and Mrs Andrews, from c1750, Figgis's 'cover version' is from 2015, and bringing them together, the viewer instinctively thinks not only of all that has happened in between but of the dynamics of painting, its techniques, its changing styles.

Speaking of these earlier artists, Figgis says: "I was attracted to the theatrical aspect in their paintings. The costumes and drama. Velazquez and Goya were official court painters. I'd like to think of myself as an unofficial court painter.

Goya by Evan S Connell. It was my first visit to the city and the Prado museum to see the works in reality. I was not disappointed. It was a dream come true.

"The imagery that I am attracted to is a personal choice." Whether sourced online or based on another artwork, "it's used as a starting point of reference, and then the outcome is completely different. It can be a little unnerving. You can learn a lot about yourself when you try to analyse the meaning or any story behind the work. I'm not sure of the meaning in most cases and it's better left for others to decide. I don't like to persuade or control anyone in what they see or feel. The viewer completes the work."

Figgis is a people watcher. "I am interested in them but at the studio everything happens in my imagination. I spend a lot of time in my studio. Long hours and most days. My studio has to feel right as it is such an important aspect of my working environment. I am never lonely when I'm working. I love creating and get totally absorbed in the process."

Living near the sea has a magical energy but Figgis has no interest in painting what she sees outside her window, or the sea, or an Irish landscape. And she rarely paints people she knows. Her daughter, a make-up artist, doesn't feature; her son a musician and songwriter who, says Figgis, could be a talented artist, hasn't sat for her. "I haven't been able to persuade him to join me in the studio to paint." She did, however, paint her grandmother, whom "I loved very much". Called Eileen's Song, it shows her grandmother, who was in a nursing home, in a beautiful, elegant room playing a grand piano. "I wanted to bring her back to life."

Figgis paints through the pandemic. "Every morning I wake up and think, is this real? It's a bizarre feeling. I like to keep busy. I work in total isolation. When the sun is shining, you can miss seeing people, out and about walking their dogs. The world is going through a very difficult time and hopefully we will get through this as soon as possible.

"Keeping busy is happiness to me. I am always making something. I was out digging and tidying the garden on the weekend. It's an old garden, part of the studio, and I was looking to see what kind of things I could find in a garden that old."

Gerhard Richter believes "art is the highest form of hope"; Hockney says "the source of art is love". What's Figgis's take? "The idea of making something involves being very optimistic. You have to be a little naïve I guess and to believe that you can make something work. You have to have faith that it will work out. You must believe something will happen and want to share it with others. It feels good, and yes it feels like love."

In Genieve Figgis's case something certainly happened.

Asked about what she hopes viewers might see in her work, Figgis says: "I hope my work brings some happiness to people. It would be nice for people to feel that the work is something they can relate to, that the work is for them. I am truly grateful when I see people get pleasure from my work. This is what all artists want to achieve. I am always trying to make something beautiful."

She's only recently moved in to her new studio. "The building is old and has a lot of history. I really like that. I imagine all the people who were here before me and who will be here after. Working in this wonderful space and keeping busy is a good feeling. I love what I do."