

IMAGE



IN STUDIO WITH

Genieve Figgis

Rejected by Dun Laoghaire's IADT as a student, Dublin artist Genieve Figgis has since gone on to bypass the Irish art scene and find acclaim and six-figure success internationally.

We visit the notoriously private artist in her studio in Wicklow.

photography Doreen Kilfeather words Niall MacMonagle

In bed one evening with her husband, whom she has known since they were both 17 years old, Genieve Figgis followed American artist Richard Prince on Twitter. "Prince followed me back. I turned and told my husband that, 'Wow! Richard Prince wants to buy one of my paintings.'" That was eight years ago. There and then, her life completely changed.

Dublin-born Figgis is now a sought-after and successful global artist. Prince, the biggest collector of her work, showed her in New York in 2013 and since then, bypassing the Irish art scene but indebted to social media, she's had solo shows in London, Shanghai, Long Island, and Paris. Her work directly inspired Marc Jacobs' SS19 collection and last year her "17th Century Family", auctioned at Christie's, estimate €24,000-€35,000, fetched €149,000. "Wedding Party", 2019, Figgis's painting of Harry and Meghan's wedding, sold last December in Hong Kong for €470,000, 540% more than its mid-estimate.

But Figgis says, "None of that stuff is interesting to me or has anything to do with my work." Her passion is painting. She doesn't follow the auction houses and when told about the Harry and Meghan painting sale, "I was shocked, drank a bottle of wine, had a bath."

Her husband ("I wouldn't be what I am without him") works in health, "and works very hard". Her advice? "Find a man who loves and supports you." Figgis – her married name – also works very hard, but her middle name is privacy. There's no over-sharing. She lives and works in Co Wicklow. A mother, a grandmother, 50 next year, she goes to her studio seven days a week. And the name Genieve, (pronounced like the Swiss capital, but without the "a" at the end), not Genevieve? "My mother just shortened it."

When she first met her husband, she told him, "I am an artist. And he got it. He understood." Not everyone did. Though she studied engineering, woodwork and art at secondary school, Dun Laoghaire Art College rejected her. And she doesn't bear a grudge.

Figgis married, had two children, and her creativity wasn't put on hold. She painted, made costumes for the school plays and at 30 was accepted at Gorey School of Art. Next came a BA and MFA at NCAD, graduating in 2012. During college, she worked part-time in retail and as a chef, and for six months a determined Figgis commuted daily from Wexford.

Her first studio was a small room on Harcourt Terrace, then a large rented industrial space and now, in Wicklow with a sea view,



A Genieve Figgis solo show opens in New York next November and her work is in many public collections: the Arts Council of Ireland; Smart Museum of Art, Chicago; X Museum, Beijing; Consortium Museum, Dijon; Sifang Art Museum, Nanjing.

Met Opera commissioned a film tie-in with their production of *Roberto Devereux* (2016) and a *Romeo and Juliet* exhibition (2017). *Genieve Figgis*, a lavishly illustrated book, was published by Skira Rizzoli in 2017. She is represented by Almine Rech.



Genieve Figgis
photographed
by **Doreen
Kilfeather**
in May 2021,
at her Wicklow
studio for **IMAGE**.



Stepping inside her studio space is to step into a Genieve Figgis painting. Many rooms, in this once derelict Victorian house, are arranged like theatrical sets – old-world visual feasts in her favourite colours: purple, orange, and pink. There are sofas, armchairs, elegant tables, a painted screen, gilded mirrors, vintage Bakelite phones, a cast-iron fireplace, and china ornaments.

is the one she created herself, the one she loves best. “Seeing this derelict house, built in 1856, with its roof open to the sky, pigeon shit everywhere, I knew I had to rescue it.” Saving, saving, saving, she bought the ruin and spent a year-and-a-half overseeing its restoration. “I saved the old house, and I hope it saves me in return.”

Stepping inside this studio space is to step into a Genieve Figgis painting. It’s “a three-dimensional studio, a sculpture” because “I love interior design and architecture”. Many rooms, arranged like theatrical sets, are wonderlands, old-world visual feasts in her favourite colours: purple, orange, and pink. There are sofas, armchairs, elegant tables, a painted screen, gilded mirrors, vintage Bakelite phones, a cast-iron fireplace, and china ornaments.

There’s a Victorian altar piece now painted pink and decorated with animals. She’s turned it into a doll’s house for her granddaughter. Her Tweets celebrate her love of animals, especially her two Chihuahuas, the Wicklow landscape, seascape, and art. “If I’ve nothing positive to say, I’ll say nothing.” The day of this interview, Figgis was up at 5am to watch the sunrise and Tweeted the image.

In other rooms, things are thoroughly modern: white walls, a treadmill, a computer, art books shelved floor-to-ceiling, a well-equipped kitchen. Over the hob is a framed copy of Pauline Bewick’s “Asleep with Moon and Fruit” that Figgis painted when she was 16.

A stained-glass window on the landing contains a crown “because I loved *Game of Thrones*”, and the words “Pray for the Soul”. Beside it, a framed red-and-gold, intricately hand-embroidered chasuble. “Just look at that beautiful workmanship. You wouldn’t see it today.”

Inspiration is found online, in books, magazines, the costume drama *Catherine the Great*. Alexi Lubomirski’s photograph of Harry and Meghan’s wedding party was transformed into a unique Figgis. In what she calls her “cover versions”, classic paintings by Boucher, Fragonard, Manet, Velázquez, Holbein, Gainsborough are re-imagined in lush, swirling brushstrokes. An older, privileged world is rendered afresh. It is never fuddy-duddy. Distorted faces, sometimes grotesque, sometimes macabre, become more identifiably human. “I love faces and costumes staring back from another time and place.” Out and about, she is a people watcher: “people in cafés, their faces sometimes end up in my paintings. It’s an ‘arty party’.”

“I’m obsessed with the royals, it’s as if they are family. I know more about Harry and Meghan than about my own mother.” She loves pomp and ceremony. “It’s great entertainment, like a night out at the theatre, and reminds me of when I was a girl attending drama class, putting on plays and dressing up and attending Sunday Mass.”

For Figgis, her work “is about inclusivity. The bright, happy figures are always about survival. I always attempt to make them beautiful. Women have a strong presence and everyone in the painting is important.” She encourages all women to “go and chase their dreams”. Does she see herself as an Irish artist? “The world I attempt to reflect is Irish, an Irish world far away in some parallel universe.”

Self-contained (“my happy place is to be working in solitude”), instinctive, intuitive, down-to-earth, she sees herself as “a little crazy” but she’s also grounded and extremely warm.

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Though not religious, Figgis is drawn to Catholicism’s “dramatic and cinematic” qualities. “Just forget the brainwashing,” she says. “Growing up in the 1980s, I didn’t always feel I had choices or that I was valued. Women were not valued enough because of what was being taught by the Church and the narrative of the state. Strict rules, high taxes, inequality. A dark place for working-class families. I would like to see separation of church and state.”

The stairs is carpeted in muted-orange, chosen because “we had an orange stair carpet in our house in Churchtown growing up” and upstairs, more stylish rooms. There’s an ornate, elaborately-dressed, four-poster bed, not slept in, and vibrant, colourful, distinctive Genieve Figgis paintings are everywhere. She likes to see her works in small rooms before they head out into the world. Her exuberant, energetic handling of colour, especially pinks and pistachio, is dazzling. Preferring acrylics to oils, “because they just need water”, she enjoys “the challenge of something that I need to work out, step by step, like a giant liquid puzzle”.

In a corner, I spy her original painting “Adam and Eve, after Joachim Wtewael”, which had a sell-out IMMA print edition. A large Will and Kate wedding portrait leans against a wall. There’s an elegant portrait of Queen Elizabeth, and one of Princess Grace with her family.

Would she paint Irish “royalty”, celebrities? During lockdown, watching an online event in aid of the Rape Crisis Centre, she saw a comedian who cheered everyone up: “I am a woman and I support women. I thought her the cutest lady in the world. She was all dressed up with a fan. And I did a little portrait on paper.” She shows it to me. It’s Alison Spittle.

Positive and generous, Figgis also supports younger artists. She’s bought works by Austin Hearne, Kathy Tynan, Gemma Browne, Mairead O’hEocha, Margaret Corcoran, and Peter Burns. A harsh critic of her own work, she does “a heavy edit”. I spot a gorgeous, lyrical work in greens and blues. “Oh I’m destroying that. It isn’t good enough.”

In three different rooms in her studio, she paints on low tables or on the floor. “I’ve put my back out a few times, but I can’t stop what I do. It is my pleasure.” A Mexican collector commissioned a painting of “The Last Supper”, a huge work, but she enjoyed the challenge. “I don’t make pretty paintings to sell, but I’m delighted when people want to buy them. I think I’m going to be better. I keep trying. I only make for myself.”

And why paint flat? “I hate drips. It’s a male thing. I find them corny and offensive.” Genieve Figgis is none of those things. And she’s no drip either.