

# GERARD BYRNE:

## MODERN IRISH IMPRESSIONIST

*In conversation with Edel Cassidy, Gerard discusses how he made a career change from electrician to artist, his exhibition this year in Singapore and his hopes for the future.*

WORDS EDEL CASSIDY

**A**n avid plein-air painter, Gerard Byrne can often be found setting up his easel to capture urban landscapes in his native Dublin City. When the weather is not favourable to outdoor painting, he works from his elegant gallery in the heart of Ranelagh Village, Dublin, which he established in 2017. Here, visitors get a unique opportunity to experience a contemporary gallery space and to see close up the artist's creative process and work.

**I believe you have some exciting news to share with our readers about an exhibition in Singapore this year.**

Last summer I staged an exhibition of my botanical work, *Inside Outside and Beyond*, in the National Botanic Gardens, Dublin, in conjunction with the Office of Public Works. It was a great success, with over 3,500 visitors over three weeks, and one of those visitors happened to be the newly appointed Irish Ambassador to Singapore, Pat Bourne. He immediately took a great

interest in my work and, as a result, one of my paintings now hangs proudly in the Irish Embassy in Singapore.

The ambassador, along with Dr Nigel Taylor, the director of Singapore Botanic Gardens, invited me to take up residence this year for one month as part of the commemorative celebration of the Gardens' 160th anniversary.

My residency culminates in an exhibition, *Botanical Fusion*, which will include my botanical paintings from Ireland, Kew Gardens, and my new Singaporean collection. It will run for ten weeks at the People's Gallery, Singapore Botanic Gardens, from 1st September to 10th November 2019.

**As your work is generally quite large scale, is it a major operation to have the paintings transported?**

It's not easy to transport large-scale paintings. Special shipping crates complying with Singapore import regulations had to be manufactured. It's a logistic nightmare, hoping all the artwork will arrive on time and in one piece. It's especially tricky with paintings that are framed behind glass. Due to size restrictions, even the initial selection of paintings for the exhibition was not easy. ➤



ABOVE: Gerard Byrne at work in his studio. Photo Andrew Roach.  
OPPOSITE: *It's not You. It's Me.*  
Oil on canvas, 79 x 119cm



**You have developed a very recognisable style. Did you go through many changes before finding this style?**

My style developed naturally over time. I'm a self-taught artist and my motto in life is 'practice makes perfect', therefore I keep practising painting every day if I can. I don't think my style has changed much, but it has improved and I feel it continues to develop. I do like a challenge and would get bored painting the same subjects repeatedly. So my subject varies from street scenes, to still life, to figurative and industrial pieces. I like to think 'I have many strings to my bow'.

**You have produced some very beautiful botanical works. Do you like working 'en plein air'? Is there any particular location where you prefer to work?**

I love getting out of my studio and braving the elements. When I paint outdoors I capture not only what I see but also the energy of my surroundings. This 'hidden ingredient' is something that can't be achieved when working from photographs. It also gives me an opportunity to meet people – working in a studio can be very isolating.

I grew up near the Botanic Gardens in Glasnevin, and it became an obvious location for me to paint 'en plein air' as it offers

'A warm climate provides a different quality of light, strong shadows and deep colours that can be quite surreal'

colour, structure and ever-changing compositions. Our Irish weather is not very conducive to working outdoors, but the Palm House and the glasshouses offer shelter and warmth even on breezy, wet days. Surrounded by lush greenery and exotic flora I still feel like I'm painting in the open air.

Other favourite local spots are Sandymount Strand and Sandycove. Then there's Dalkey, where I lived for many years. There's a view there that I return to again and again – Vico Road, where I can capture the spectacular view of Sorrento Terrace with Dalkey Island in the background. From an artist's perspective, Vico Road on a sunny day can be as picturesque as any Mediterranean coastal view.

I like to travel abroad to where there is more sun and heat. A warm climate provides a different quality of light, strong shadows and deep colours that can be quite surreal. These elements help massively to create a painting with depth – a third dimension. Without the sun there are no shadows; everything can appear quite flat and I find it difficult to paint in those conditions. I love to travel to Provence, the Amalfi Coast, the French Riviera and coastal Croatia.

When a picture is executed at ease, without me having to endure too much hardship and when I'm fully enjoying the process, my joy and happiness seem to radiate through to viewers. Quite often a client will comment, 'I don't know what it is about this picture but it makes me feel happy.'

**Can you tell me about your process and the materials you use?**

I paint both from reality and imagination. I use only professional quality art materials.

*Life is A Dream.*  
Oil on canvas, 100 x 150cm



Gerard Byrne in his studio.  
Photo Ruth Maria.



*Endless Summer.*  
Oil on canvas, 60 x 120cm

I started painting with oils and then moved to acrylics for a number of years because they dry quicker than oils, which made travelling and transporting the work a little easier. However, I switched back to oils again because they provide richer, warmer, more vivid colours than matt acrylics. Oils also offer a rich texture and ease of blending, resulting in a more 'buttery effect', as I call it. I've tried different brands over the years and eventually found my favourite: Old Holland. I've been using them for years. They have a fantastic range of colours and I love the density and texture of the paints. The superb quality justifies the higher price.

For many years I also searched for 'the perfect canvas'. Only recently, while in London, I came across the one for me: Claessens Belgian Linen. Again, its quality is reflected in the price.

Using top-of-the-range art materials also increases the longevity of my paintings, which is important to art collectors.

**Before your career as an artist you trained as an electrician. Deep down, did you always have aspirations to become an artist?**

From a very young age I had an interest in art and wanted to become an artist. My parents were very encouraging and did their best to help me follow my passion. I remember them buying me my first easel and set of oil paints, which I know was a great financial sacrifice for them at the time. My mother also attempted to get me into art college. But I didn't have sufficient qualifications and I was refused. Coming from a working-class family, my parents advised me to get a 'real job' and I started an apprenticeship as an electrician.

‘Coming from a working-class family, my parents advised me to get a ‘real job’ and I started an apprenticeship as an electrician’

**What prompted you to eventually give up your job as an electrician and pursue a career in art?**

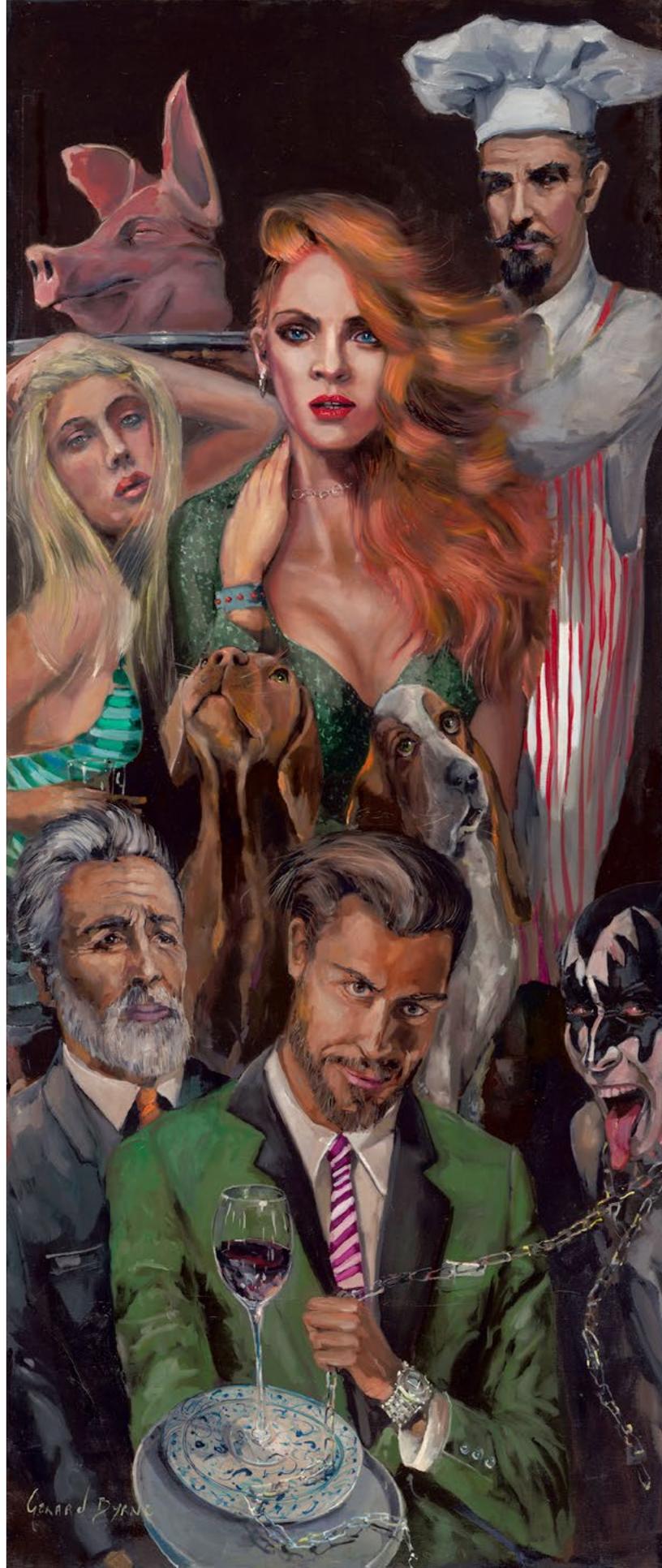
I had this feeling that I hadn't accomplished what I wanted to do in life. I had a longing to become a painter and thought that if I could have one solo exhibition, my dream would be fulfilled. I had worked in New York as an electrician for two years and saved enough money to buy a small house in the Liberties in Dublin. This enabled me to focus on drawing and painting, and I spent a lot of time in the local market, painting the people and the local scenes.

My best friend, Fran, had seen artists exhibiting their work on St Stephen's Green railings and thought it would be a good idea for me to display my art there. I was reluctant because I wasn't very confident that my work would be good enough. Fran, however, persuaded me to go, and it was there that a gallery owner noticed my work and offered me a solo exhibition in his gallery. That was a dream come true, and six months later, on 28th November 1989, I launched my first solo exhibition in the George Gallery on South Frederick Street.

Despite this achievement, I found it hard to support myself as a full-time artist and went back to working as an electrician. Shortly afterwards, I suffered a severe electric shock at work that nearly killed me. That was the wake-up call which finally made me realise I needed to change my focus and follow my true ambition of being an artist.

*Another Me.*

Oil on canvas, 95 x 225cm



**How did you get started?**

I decided to leave Ireland. This was 1989, and having seen a documentary on the changes taking place in East Berlin, I felt a strong urge to be there. So I packed my paints and canvas into an old camper van and left for Germany.

When I arrived, I got to know members of an underground movement who offered to make me their artist in residence. I spent seven months working in the streets of East Berlin, painting the local scenes and architecture, which resulted in a solo show

of my works. An exhibition was organised undercover in the People's Gallery, a dilapidated old supermarket that was transformed into an impressive space for the event. The theme of the works was not politically charged, but the event itself was an act of freedom, a statement of the love of art and an assertion against the state interfering in the freedom of expression.

When I returned to Ireland, I continued to work as a full-time artist. To date I have had over thirty solo exhibitions and participated in many group shows. I have had the



*Sorrento Dreams.*

Oil on canvas, 70 x 100cm



*Lever Crane.*

Oil on canvas, 100 x 100cm

privilege of exhibiting my work in some of the best art galleries in Ireland, such as the Gorry Gallery in Dublin, the Greenlane Gallery in Dingle, and the Guinness Hop Store.

I still love to travel in search of new experiences and sources of inspiration.

**Have you been influenced by other artists? Which artists do you admire?**

I have always been influenced by the great masters of Impressionism like Monet, Van Gogh, Cezanne and Sargent. I also admire the work of the Irish artists Orpen, Lavery and Leech.

Before opening my gallery in Ranelagh I lived in London for four years, and I found it very inspirational to have the opportunity to visit some great art exhibitions there. These included exhibitions at The National Gallery such as *Inventing Impressionism* (2015), *Australia's Impressionists* (2017) and *Monet & Architecture* (2018).

At Tate Britain, I visited *David Hockney: 60 Years of Work* (2017), *The EY Exhibition: Impressionists in London* (2018) and *All Too Human: Bacon, Freud and a Century of Painting Life* (2018).



**What achievements are you particularly proud of?**

The first art competition I entered was Pintar Rapido in London, 2016. This is the UK's biggest plein-air painting competition and exhibition, and I was delighted to be awarded second place. While living in the UK, I was also chosen to participate in Sky Arts Landscape Artist of the Year 2017.

Of course, I am very honoured by my latest invitation to Singapore. It was a great privilege to recently welcome Felix Loh, CEO of Gardens by the Bay, Singapore, and his colleagues Gary Chua and Justin Wu, along with Ambassador Pat Bourne to my gallery in Dublin.

**Are there any places you would like to visit in the future?**

Someday I would love to have the opportunity to paint cherry blossoms in Japan and Monet's garden in Giverny, and to visit South America. I'm a colourist and I love bold colours. I think places like Mexico, Peru, Tibet, Africa, Australia – the list goes on – could be amazing sources of inspiration for me. I feel my best painting has yet to come. **A**

**Gerard Byrne's work can be viewed at his gallery, 15 Chelmsford Road, Ranelagh, Dublin, or at [www.gerardbyrneartist.com](http://www.gerardbyrneartist.com)**

*The Temperate House in the Afternoon Sun.*  
Kew Gardens. Oil on canvas, 80 x 70cm