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Artistic License: Gerard Byrne

by THE GLOSS
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GERARD BYRNE'S latest exhibition, Inside Outside & Beyond, celebrates 30 years of painting the NATIONAL BOTANIC GARDENS in Dublin ...

Gerard Byrne painting *en plein air* at the Kew Royal Botanic Gardens in London, May 2018. Photograph by Agata Byrne.

How did you begin this ongoing project?

I began painting the Botanic Gardens almost by chance. I lived locally and was a regular visitor, and when I started teaching myself to paint, the glasshouses provided an opportunity to paint somewhere warm, sheltered from the wind and rain. However, they also presented a challenge when painting, balancing the shade, light and greenery. The staff were friendly, no permission was needed to paint, the place presented itself. I was familiar with the gardens since my childhood and I simply went about my business. I felt at ease there. For many years I worked as an electrician, primarily in lighthouses in Ireland and spent time travelling – I have worked in the United States, Australia and Libya. Every time I returned to Dublin I would make my way to the Botanic Gardens and paint. Later on, when I became a full-time artist I would always return there to capture the lushness of the flora and the architecture of the glass houses. I simply cannot resist its beauty.

The Palm House

You recently painted Kew Gardens, London and of course the link is that both Kew and Dublin's Botanic Garden glasshouses were constructed by Irish ironmaster Richard Turner. What inspires you most about these landmarks?

The landmarks are from the Victorian era and its architecture is very much about balance, form, ornation and charm. I try to capture all these things in my work. I am not educated in the field of architecture but on a subconscious level I have always appreciated the beauty and romance in them, and over time I realised they were designed that way. These constructions are not made anymore. The glasshouses are about structure, but also about chaos of the plants they control. I am fascinated by that contrast. I'm also inspired by the harmony, light and balance of the glasshouses. Reflections are cast on the floor, you see the shadows of the leaves. Trying to capture that in a painting is a challenge but when I finally succeed, there is a magic to it.

Tropical Reflections

Your style has been described as "modern impressionism" as well as being very versatile in subject matter. What inspires you most – flora, architecture or people?

I have been described as a modern impressionist because of my way of working. I try to capture the moment and I paint directly from nature, the way the impressionists used to do. I believe in what Paul Cezanne said, "Right now the moment of time is fleeting by! Capture its reality in paint ... We must become that moment, make ourselves a sensitive recording plate ...". The subjects I choose are all equal, it just happens that in the winter I am in my studio doing the figurative work and floral pieces while in the summer I am outdoors, painting *en plein air*. I don't favour one subject over the other, it keeps me interested and allows me capture different themes, and adopt a different approach to working. I like working outdoors because I am exposed to my audience, I get a chance to talk to people, they express their acknowledgement and appreciation. Working in a studio can sometimes make you feel isolated but I enjoy that time too.

Palms Eden

How and where do you work?

I'm very driven and I work fast. I work *en plein air* if the weather is good and if not, I stay in my studio. I have a strong desire to paint everything I notice. I see everything as a picture, which can be frustrating because I can't paint everything! If I capture something on a beautiful day I feel it's a day well spent, it gives me a sense of achievement. I travel to places with quality light like France, Italy and Croatia. I scout, I go out looking for a subject matter, such as a building with nice colours and shadow fall. I can see them in my mind eye as a picture. Once I have the subject, I return a few days later on a nice day hoping to capture the image I saw in my mind. It doesn't always work out because in the meantime a scaffolding might have been put up, there could be roadworks, the place might get crowded, the view obstructed by cars etc. In that case I use my imagination and artistic licence to complete the painting.

In the winter or when the weather doesn't allow me to go outside I stay in my studio. I often have some music in the background and get into the zone. People often ask me how long it takes me to paint a picture. My answer is: a day and a lifetime of experience.

Need to Know: Inside Outside & Beyond is on at the National Botanic Gardens in Glasnevin, Dublin and is open daily until Sunday July 15 in the Gallery Space, Visitor Centre. www.gerardbyrnearttist.com.

Penny McCormick