

SINCE SHE graduated from art school in 2005, Aberdeenshire painter **Catriona Millar** has gone on to become one of Scotland's most in-demand artists. Advertising guru and art collector Charles Saatchi is a fan, and her distinctive paintings hang in galleries and homes across Europe, American and the Far East. Ahead of an exhibition of her latest work opening in Dundee today, Catriona told **Jack McKeown** about her unexpected success story.



Artist Catriona Millar.

WEEKEND

Portraits of REAL PEOPLE



Rose and Tiny.

WHEN SHE went to art school in her 40s, Catriona Millar thought she'd end up becoming a school teacher. The first inkling that she might be able to make a living as a professional artist came when all 400 of the works in her degree show sold in less than two hours.

"It was quite a surprise," she admits. "I'd planned to do teaching, but when the show sold out so quickly I realised that maybe I could make a living just from painting."

Working mainly in oils, Catriona's style is unashamedly bold and vibrant. Using a heavy, almost textured approach — she often paints using a knife rather than a brush — her paintings are full of energy.

Whether it's a rosy-cheeked girl glancing down at a bird perched on her shoulder, a loving mother hugging her son, or a young boy having a happy adventure with his pet cat, each picture has an emotional resonance, telling a story in a single snapshot.

"I've painted on and off all my life," she explains. "My mother painted as a hobby so I probably got into it through her. My dad was the manager of a roofing company and we moved around a lot when I was young. When I was at secondary school in Yorkshire I got a bursary to go to art school there.

"I did about 18 months then my dad's job took him up to Aberdeen — where I've since settled — so I left art school but continued to paint just for fun."

Catriona (54) was born in Milngavie, on the outskirts of Glasgow, and still draws inspiration from some of her memories of the area.

"I was always fascinated by the different colours of hair there. In Milngavie you had a lot of highlanders and they had that lovely, vivid auburn hair, which you don't see as often in Aberdeen.

"I loved to paint it. In fact, most of my paintings are full of brightness and colour.

"The weather in Scotland is usually so dim and gloomy that

everyone needs a bit of brightness in their lives."

She continued to paint as a hobby while bringing up her two children — now in their 30s — and finally realised her ambition of studying for an arts degree when she and her husband Roddy Phillips became empty nesters.

"I painted, and even sold a few, but when you're a full-time mum you're too busy with cleaning, washing, ironing and all the other things that go with it."

Catriona went to Gray's School of Art in Aberdeen, graduating in 2005. "I had planned to do teaching, but my degree show sold out and I realised I might be able to make a living as a painter."

Shortly after she graduated, her fledgling career was given a quite unexpected boost. "Charles Saatchi emailed Roddy and said he wanted to include my work on his website.

"Having that sort of approval gave my career a great boost and helped me establish credibility a lot quicker than might have been the case.

"I think I'm still up on his website now (she is — www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/yourgallery/artist_profile/Catriona+Millar/4783.html) which is very flattering."

Catriona and Roddy, a freelance journalist, live in Udney, a picturesque rural area a few miles north of Aberdeen. "I used to paint in a summerhouse in garden, but we moved to a bigger house about a year ago.

"Now I have a nice studio upstairs that I paint in, which is much nicer than making the walk to the bottom of the garden on a freezing winter morning."

Catriona maintains a workmanlike ethic to painting. "I've never stopped for the past five years. Because your work is selling, it makes you want to do more.

"Working from home does get a bit lonely at times. I'm a big radio listener, Radio 4 is always on while I work. Roddy has started up a writers' workshop so I've joined that.

"It makes a nice change from painting. I'm quite extroverted and being alone is difficult so I enjoy the company. The people that come to it are all really interesting."

Her husband is not the only one who teaches their chosen profession. "I run one painting workshop a week. I'd like to do more but I just can't if I'm painting full-time as well. I have a maximum capacity of 10, and I'm usually oversubscribed. We had one chap come all the way from Dundee every week."

An exhibition of 27 of Catriona's paintings goes on display at the Queen's Gallery in Dundee's Nethergate from today until September 27. As is generally the case with her works, many of them have been sold before they even go on display, though there will also be a number of limited edition prints — called the Queen's Collection — that will be slightly less exclusive but a good bit more affordable.

The exhibition kicked off last night with a private viewing where Catriona donated a large painting to Lady Fiona Fraser.

People-watching is one of the key's to Catriona's success.

"As a mature woman I think I've got a more mature take on life. I'm a good observer and I think I have an intuitiveness that lets me get to the bottom of people.

"When I'm painting I try to capture a certain mood or look on a person's face. The subjects of my paintings are normally real people, either friends or family, or people I remember from my past."

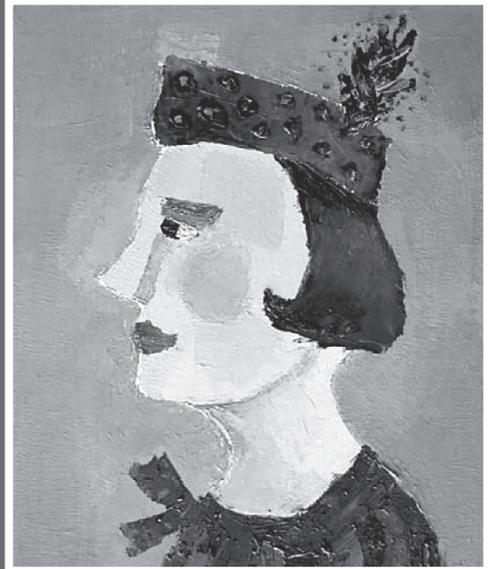
Some of this, she feels, stems from her childhood. "My dad moved so frequently that we were never in the same place for long. I went to so many schools and saw so many people.

"Even years later I can still remember many of these. I remember an expression or a look that I saw, and I paint it."

■ Catriona Millar: Solo Exhibition opens today at the Queen's Gallery in Dundee, and runs until September 27.



Dolores Love.



Simpson.



Marina and Lizzie.



Ivor and Duck Egg.



The Wrong Alice.



Briar.



Pebble.