



## Scotland's rising star

Catriona Millar was in her forties when she decided to take the plunge and enrol at Gray's School of Art in Aberdeen, and it's perhaps because of this that she seems to truly appreciate her newfound success. She's achieved what most art school graduates only dream of — her shows sell out within days of opening and last year her work was bought by Charles Saatchi. There's an appealing innocence to her paintings and enthusiasm as she chats to me from her Aberdeenshire studio across a thin crackling line. What inspired her to go back to college? "I'd always painted, but art school put an official stamp on it. When my boys were young I used to paint, and sell the odd one or two, but when they grew

up, I saw an opportunity to become more disciplined." The discipline has paid off — she will be one of the artists on show when Saatchi's new Chelsea gallery opens in November, she has a series of cards selling at the Tate and V&A and her first show at the Riverside Gallery completely sold out. She's taken it all in her stride however and is earnest about how much she gained from art school, although she admits it was hard at first. "There was some conflict. I'm a grown-up lady in my forties, with a grown-up family. You think you've formed by that age but, after living for many years by your own rules, you have to compromise with the structure of college again."

Millar cites as her influences a mixture

of painters, but tellingly has a great affection for Outsider Art. "I love looking at composition and colour in Outsider Art and how different it is to formal painting." East London artist Madge Gill is one of her favourites. A visionary, her works are seen as mediumistic. She spoke of being guided by a spirit called Myrnerest, and the figure of a young woman in intricate dress often appears in her drawings. Millar's current work also features mostly children, at play, at parties, staring directly at the viewer. She seems surprised when I mention this to her, "I'd never thought of it before. I suppose I love the simplicity of children, their unadulterated expressions — they don't hide things like adults, they have a natural face and pose and a compact form. Also they can wear quite flamboyant clothes that adults wouldn't wear, so kids are a good vehicle as a subject for me to express myself through colour."





Image: Catriona Millar and her painting The Party.



Image: Little Chef.



Image: The Queen.



Image: The Mill Girls.

Colour, pattern and texture are Millar's man preoccupations. Other favourite artists include the extraordinary Sam Doyle, who refused formal training, and the far more traditional Vuillard, "With Vuillard, it's the design and pattern. He's an interior painter and I admire his work very much because of the texture and pattern. It's almost any excuse for pattern with him, he puts the human form in context." It's any of excuse for pattern with Millar as well: "I toyed with the idea of studying textiles, and I love the feel of fabrics in general. I was watching a DVD of *A Family at War* recently and I spent half the time looking at the patterns and the dresses. When I was a wee girl in the 1950s we had lovely patterns, beautiful full-blown roses. I feel comforted by patterns. I love the 1960s too. I'd love to do a big painting of the Jackson Five, for example, that would be incredible."

About Saatchi she is more reticent,

refusing to talk about what she feels his influence as a collector has been on Britain's art scene. One gets the impressions that she is repeating an oft spoken line when she explains how he got in contact with her by email. "I was delighted when I got the email. I think he's definitely boosted my credibility – he's given it exposure. My local gallery is very good at taking my work to art fairs but to be honest Saatchi I think gave it the ultimate seal of approval. I get commissions now from people in London who have seen my work on the Saatchi website. I never dreamed when I was at art school that this would happen – I thought I would come out and make a career out of teaching."

Commissions seem to be the bread and butter of Millar's work at the moment but she often has a hard time letting paintings go, "50% of me wants to keep them. Sometimes my husband will see one and say 'don't sell it, I want it'. It takes a lot of yourself to a create

**"Painting is like giving birth — creating another person. Sometimes I don't want to give them away."**

a painting, and each one is really original!" But when I try to push further about what Saatchi has bought, there's a silence on the end of the line. "I don't know exactly which ones he's bought yet and I can't really talk about it, as it's all still going through." So, after everything that's happened in the last year is she happy? She seems so, with only one complaint. "The downside of painting," she tells me, "is the loneliness – I listen to a lot of Money Box on Radio 4 — endowment policies while I paint ... I am quite isolated. My studio is in the heart of Aberdeenshire, so there are just 20 sheep and a field next door."

Gráinne Lyons