

ARTISTS & ILLUSTRATORS (2012)

My Studio..... Andrea Byrne
Steve Pill

It's a bright late autumn morning outside and there's an uneasy calm hanging over Andrea Byrne's south London studio. A stack of bound portfolios, filled with photographic records of her recent installation work, sits neatly on her desk. Books, brushes and reference materials are all filed away tidily and a lone artwork hangs on an otherwise bare white wall. In fact the dramatic splatters of paint on the floorboards are the only real evidence that any artistic activity has ever taken place in the room recently. However the artist hasn't tidied up especially for our visit. Instead we have caught her taking stock, as her organised and contemplative studio is a physical reflection of a period of mental spring-cleaning. "I do realise how lucky I am to have this time to stop and examine things before I carry on but it's so frustrating," she says. "I've hated every single second of it. It's been a real confrontation with my own inherent quality of utter business: busy, busy, busy! Work, work, work! Get something out, see if it works and dismiss it." Instead after a busy few years in which her painting career has really taken off, Andrea is forcing herself to take the time to work out what's next. "When you are thinking about changing direction, it's a bit like being in a car," she explains. "You have to slow down to change direction, otherwise you crash." The paintings have proved immensely popular with both collectors and fellow artists keen to copy her style. As a result, she is reluctant to divulge too many details on how exactly they are created, apart from the fact that she works with the canvas laid flat on the floor and she surrounds herself with real bunches of flowers for inspiration: "I'm lucky enough that I can charge them to my accountant as tax deductible!" She also relies on reference books but stops short of aiming for botanical accuracy. "They are supposed to look like pages from a Victorian diary, when ladies used to do little watercolour botanical sketches, but I think mine are slightly more crazed versions of that," she says. "I'm not trying to capture any flower in particular. It's more about mortality: I'm really interested in the beauty of that flower but it only has that beauty for a certain amount of time and then it dies."

The other side of Andrea's artistic practice is her installation work. At first glance, these conceptual pieces might seem a world a world away from her painting, not to mention her previous career as an award-winning fashion illustrator, yet on closer inspection each aspect shares the same concerns, such as femininity, mortality and personal identity. Her Catholic upbringing has also resulted in an interest in religious iconography and hagiography – the stories of saints. In the corner of her studio, Andrea has a vintage cinema ticket booth that resembles a church confessional booth: she hopes to incorporate it into a future installation. The studio itself is situated in Erlang House , Borough - a former 1960s office block that houses 120 individual workspaces. Andrea moved in 18 months ago when the block was first opened by the Artist Studio Company. It is close enough to cycle from her Kennington home and being surrounded by fellow artists is proving beneficial. "It's one thing I've realised in this solitary administrative phase: I don't have to have an audience but I do need engagement with other people." After an open studio event last month, Andrea is now busy organising her portfolios and stretching a selection of blank canvases in readiness for starting afresh. "I feel really excited about what's coming up and quite liberated, too. Just by getting the portfolios together and having a look at everything, I feel to a certain extent that I've done the work justice and I can now leave it. It's been an interesting time and I'm sure I'll come to appreciate it," she adds. "But getting it all together to move on is just so time consuming. I know it's good for me but I prefer to just keep working."

Andrea Byrne was born in London and trained at Central St. Martins School of Art and Goldsmiths, both London

MY STUDIO
Andrea Byrne

ARTIST'S BIO
Andrea Byrne is a London-based artist and fashion illustrator. She has exhibited her work in various galleries and museums. Her studio is located in Erlang House, Borough, London. She is currently working on a new series of paintings and installations.