



# Byrning bright

When artist Gerard Byrne and his wife Agata decided to return to Ireland after a long stint in London, they opted to combine their working and living spaces by renovating an old store. The result is intriguing

Edited by **Mary O'Sullivan** | Photography by **Tony Gavin**

The lighting in an art gallery is always very important — it can make or break a painting — and most gallery owners are pretty finicky when it comes to that aspect of putting a gallery together.

Few more so, however, than painter Gerard Byrne. And his attention to detail pays off in his studio/gallery on Chelmsford Road in Ranelagh, where his large, broody, atmospheric works can be seen to great advantage, thanks to the extensive network of lighting Gerard installed.

His works have caught the imagination of the art-loving public; Gerard has had a successful career as a painter since the early 1990s, but the superb lighting in the gallery is actually a clue to his very first career — that of electrician.

Though Gerard had served a full apprenticeship as an electrician and had had an interesting job going all over the country, his heart was set on becoming an

artist from an early age. He had been introduced to art by his step-grandfather, himself a frustrated artist, and he loved it from the get-go.

“I couldn't pinpoint what it was about art that made me think it was special. I just knew that it was important that he could paint, and I felt a reverence for his work,” says Gerard, adding, “I used to make sheds in our back garden when I was a kid, and my great-grandmother gave me an old chair for the shed. It fell apart and I could see that the seat, which was wrapped in canvas, had been one of his paintings. It was magical to me — I felt as if I had found the Mona Lisa.”

Like his step-grandfather, Gerard, who is originally from Finglas, dabbled from a young age, and even had his first exhibition when he was still an electrician — a career he had embarked on immediately after leaving school — but he didn't feel like a proper artist until he left the electrical job and went to Germany.



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“What happened was I had an electric shock, and I thought I was going to die. It was a wake-up call. After it, I thought I should do what I want to do. At the time — the late 1980s — the Berlin Wall was coming down, and I wanted to see Checkpoint Charlie, and live there for a while and paint it. I thought it was a great opportunity for an artist, because once it was down, it was gone,” says Gerard.

“I asked my boss for a leave of absence. He refused me, saying, ‘You're an electrician, not a painter’. I said, ‘I'll quit’, and he said, ‘You won't quit, you're too well paid, and you've too cushy a

number’. He was right on both counts.”

However, Gerard's desire to paint won out, and he did actually quit. He initially regretted his hastiness, as he didn't like Berlin — he felt lonely and isolated. He felt bad that his art career seemed over before it got underway.

Then the night before he was to come home, he had a fortuitous encounter with a German guy in a bar in East Berlin. A Russian artist was due to take up a residency in an underground movement there, he hadn't arrived, and when Gerard told the guy that he was an artist — the first time he ever called himself such a

**LEFT:** The mustard sofa in the large, open-plan space above Gerard Byrne's studio/gallery is by B&B Italia. The rug was designed by Agata, when she was a landscape design student at the Inchbald School of Design in London. She won a competition run by Veeton Fleece, a bespoke rug company, for her design, and as her prize, the design was made up in Nepal

**ABOVE:** Gerard Byrne and Agata in a part of the studio/gallery which they can turn into a living area by pulling down the blinds. The paintings are all by Gerard

**TOP RIGHT:** The couple's bedroom is also part of the open-plan space upstairs. The paintings throughout are no older than five years old. “I couldn't have old paintings around; you need the new to spark off,” says Gerard

**RIGHT:** Agata designed the shower room which was harder to do than it looks, as no two walls are at right angles to each other. The geometric tiles are from Tilestyle

thing — the German offered Gerard the residency instead.

“The guy said, ‘This is bizarre. I don't drink — the only reason I came into the bar is because I needed to think about my dilemma, which is where am I going to find an artist. And here you are’,” Gerard recalls.

Many surreal things happened to Gerard in Berlin, including an encounter with then US President Ronald Reagan when Gerard was painting a remote part of the Berlin Wall. Friends warned him not to go there, as the Stasi — the secret police — were always on the prowl. It was early morning, he had set up his easel and suddenly guys talking up their sleeves started to swarm. Then they started poking at his paints. Gerard's heart started to thump, but finally they left him alone.

Next, they got out a hammer and chisel



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**Cushion**  
€12, Woodies



**Sofa**  
€749, EZ Living Furniture



**Painting**  
Price on request, gerardbyrneartist.com



**Skovby table**  
€1,999, Arnotts



**Lamp**  
€45, Ikea



**ABOVE:** Gerard at work. His work is usually large, dramatic and figurative, but he's also recently started to paint seascapes, which is a new departure



**ABOVE RIGHT:** The dining area upstairs is decorated with more of Gerard's paintings and furnished with a vintage Ercol dining table from a shop in Brighton. The red chairs are also vintage. The couple like to upcycle as much as possible

**BELOW RIGHT:** The compact kitchen is by a friend of the couple. Per Ploug of Pemara Design

**FAR RIGHT:** Agata would love a garden eventually, but this tiny space has to suffice for the moment. The sculpture called 'Scootering' is by a Hungarian artist called Baldi



and knocked a lump out of the wall, then put it back, and marked it with an X. "Suddenly a helicopter lands beside me — the noise and the dust; I had to hold on to the canvas — and Ronald Reagan and his wife, Nancy, get out. Ronald comes up to me and says, 'How's it going? Where are you from?' I said, 'Ireland'. 'So am I,' he says," Gerard explains. "He goes over to the wall. All of a sudden, there are photographers everywhere, and microphones. It all happened in seconds. He picks up the chisel and hammer and says, 'They said it couldn't be done, but we're going to take this wall down', and he knocks out the X-marked lump. Everyone's clapping. Then he got back on the helicopter," Gerard recalls with a laugh.

After seven months, Gerard had enough work and he mounted an exhibition and returned home. Looking back, he says the whole experience — the

kindness of the Germans he met, the encounters with the many different people living there — made him the artist he is now.

On his return to Ireland, his work flourished, and he had many exhibitions over the years. He had some romantic relationships — he has two children, Clara (22) and James (11) — and he lived in several different parts of Dublin, including Dalkey.

It was in Dalkey 11 years ago that he met his wife Agata, a Polish landscape designer who had come to Ireland to learn English, but loved it so much she stayed. They married six years ago.

When the crash happened here, the couple decided to try their luck in Britain, and they stayed there five years in total — Gerard, as always, painted and Agata first studied at the Inchbald School of Design, London, then worked as a landscape designer for top designer

Andy Sturgeon, who won Best Show Garden at this year's Chelsea Flower Show.

"Life in London was fascinating; inspirational," says Gerard. "It was a big influence on my art, as we were living very close to the Barbican and frequented the Tate Modern, but at the same time, life was isolated there. We were working long hours, and we felt we were living separate lives." Agata adds that she was doing mainly computer work, designing gardens she never saw.

Initially, they decided to buy a place back in Dublin purely as an investment, and Gerard saw a property for sale and they bought it — it turned out it had been the photographic studio where Gerard had got the film of his first ever exhibition developed. An omen, he felt. In any case, they liked the building and bought it.

"We had only got it when I started fantasising," Gerard says. "I got carried

*"We like to create things together, we want to be the Charles and Ray Eames of the art world"*

away and said to Agata, 'Let's go back and start a gallery.' The upshot was they decided to come home and restore the building they had bought and both live and work in it; it turned out to be a good move. They have a steady stream of visitors to the gallery — which the couple prefer to call a studio, as they feel the word gallery can be off-putting.

"People associate the word 'gallery' with being posh and intimidating," says Agata. Gerard adds: "We want to welcome everyone — buggies, old ladies jogging. We want them all to experience the art, not necessarily to buy; we want to become part of the Ranelagh community."

He has had some fascinating commissions, including one from the

British ambassador to Ireland, which involved him painting an event in front of 7,000 people in the Titanic Museum last September. "I only had an hour-and-a-half to execute the piece," Gerard says. The Ranelagh property was quite a bare, austere building when they bought it — little more than a storeroom — but combining their talents, they've created a fabulous exhibition space on the ground floor, with a tiny kitchen and a minuscule bathroom off it.

They installed a stairs — there had been none — and on the upper floor, they created a large open-plan dining, living and sleeping space. When they have friends around, there is a part of the gallery they can turn into an interesting living room,

just by pulling down some blinds and adding some extra chairs.

Colour is their forte, and they've used dramatic tones to great effect throughout.

They're also hugely into upcycling market and auction finds. Their vintage pieces include a lamp by Eileen Gray and chairs by Charles and Ray Eames.

Agata also has a great eye for fabric and has created some lovely pieces. She also designed a rug for Veedon Fleece, a bespoke rug company, which is now on the floor of their open-plan space, and she won a prize for its design.

"We like to create things together," Agata says, and adds, only half-jokingly, "We want to be the Charles and Ray Eames of the art world."

Given their marvellous ideas and the way they execute them, it's not so outlandish a thought. ■

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