16 | THE IRISH WORLD | 17 AUGUST 2019 17 AUGUST 2019 | THE IRISH WORLD | 17







Gerard Byrne found refuge as a fledgling painter at the Botanical Gardens in Dublin. The works he created there and in Kew Gardens in London have earned him the artist in residence role at Botanical Gardens in Singapore. He spoke to Colin Gannon about his journey from working as an electrician to where he is today.

is anything but garden water



The artist, born and raised in

As he had no Leaving Cert, hanging in our homes."

ents' advice to get a 'real job', he dens. He perched himself inconelectrical worker.

love, but it was forced to the side-

Over the course of a colourful and varied career, living across continents and state borders, he in aboriginal settlements in the

Australian outback. Fast forward to 2019 and he is readying himself for an artist-inresidency at Singapore's Botanical Gardens after years impressing people with his paintings of Kew Gardens and Dublin's National

Botanic Gardens in Glasnevin.

ondon-based Irish painting, really. I used to paint all artist Gerard Byrne the time," he tells the Irish World. always dreamt of be- In fact, he failed art in school.

coming a famous On the day of his Leaving Cert, he painter. Before the learned watercolours were the acclaim and the exhibitions, only option for use — a type of though, it wasn't always a sure paint he was unaccustomed with and had not yet mastered.

"I failed miserably," he says. Finglas in North Dublin, started "But they had a re-check beoff life after school as an electricause [teachers] were saying, we have Gerry Byrne's pictures

Byrne's hopes of entering an art When he was young, Byrne actually lived within walking [Brexit] as (saying) Eventually, following his pardistance of the Botanical Garthat you're began an apprenticeship as an spicuously in corners, painting not everything he saw: the glass He remained zealous about houses, exteriors, interiors. The his art, keeping up his labour of plush, intoxicatingly green expanse of the Botanical Gardens was a refuge for him, particu-

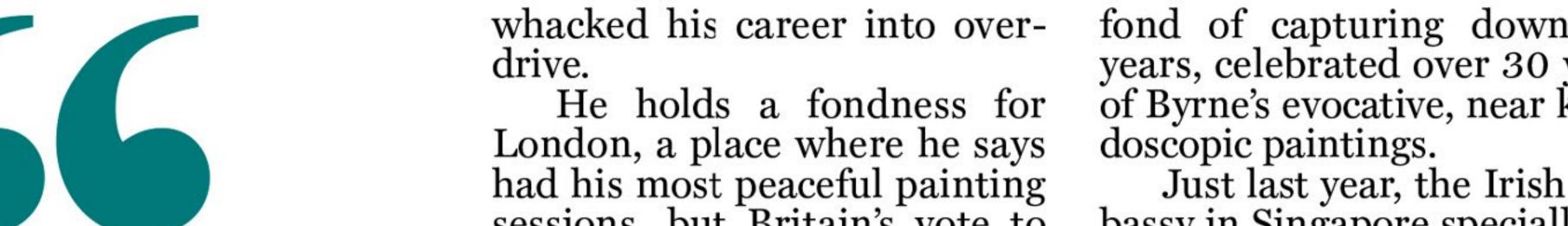
larly on bad days. "You'd find the Palm House, which was warm; there were worked most notably as a light- good lights; and the staff got to house technician and a flying know me and allowed me to do electrician installing generators what I wanted to do," he recalls.

Over time, he became known for being a Botanical painter, despite such a tag usually associated with artists dedicated to capturing flora on

Byrne has since eked out a successful career in painting.

His time here in the UK — "At school, I wasn't much five years in total, spent between good at anything else except London and Brighton

time to go home, 'I personally took



had his most peaceful painting the ensuing toxic political atmosphere that emerged, made it impossible for him to stay. "Brexit kicked in, so I

home," Byrne says. "I personally took [Brexit] as (saying) that you're not wel-

gallery in Ranelagh, in South over a million visitors every year sonal flare and his artistic DNA Dublin, and lives in an apart- — but it had never been flows across all of his work, no ment above his workplace.

Ireland's financial crisis and the death of the Celtic Tiger,

await him with this life-altering to do so.

inspirations, he keeps it simple: tention and gratification, he "Basically, painting what I see: daydreamed about having his street scenes. I copied the mas- own solo show. tion titled In- ters at the time, like Van Gogh Beyond, held last young kid," he says.

dens he grew so table or a bowl of fruit and paint know," he laughs.

whacked his career into over- fond of capturing down the it."

Unlike many artists of his years, celebrated over 30 years He holds a fondness for of Byrne's evocative, near kalei- kind, he paints with oil wet the whole way through — in a form Just last year, the Irish Em- known as Wet on Wet — ensursessions, but Britain's vote to bassy in Singapore specially ac- ing there is no time for parts of leave the EU changed that and quired one of Byrne's paintings. a painting to dry.

Usually, he completes a The Ambassador there, Pat Bourne, asked him for more painting in one sitting, starting work to fill his bare walls. He and finishing on the same day.

thought: maybe it's time to go in Dublin, who told Byrne he Byrne's work into a specific had organised a residency in genre, you'd almost certainly Singapore's main Botanic Gar- classify it as modern impres-

"The gardens had been pho-Yet, like most gifted stylists, Last year, he opened his own tographed so much — it receives he imbues his works with a perpainted," Byrne recalls being matter the style, object depicted, or location.

Due to the high levels of hu-That said, he is drifting into Byrne believes, came midity, likely to tarnish the other forms of painting close to killing the paintings, photographs of his seascapes in Ireland, more abart business in Ire- original paintings will greet vis- stract work for Singaporean exitors each of its three entrances. hibition — to stave off boredom He tells the Irish World he is and inertia. He's thankful he's in excited for the challenges that a position of comfort to be able

Back when he was a wide-When it comes to his artistic eyed young artist, pining for at-

To be really famous or one of side Outside & and Gaugin and Matisse, as a art's 'immortals', is his ultimate

year in the Na- "At the same time, I'd just "Will the fame come? Probtional Botanic Gar- put a bunch of flowers on the ably after my demise, I don't



