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Artistic License: Gerard Byrne

by PENNY MCCORMICK

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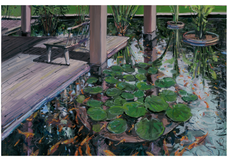
The Irish Impressionist's latest exhibition is his first collection of lush tropical paintings from Asia. Gerard Byrne explains the background to "Botanical Fusion: Singapore to Dublin"...

Tell us about your trip to Singapore – how did it come about and why were you there?

In the summer of 2018 the "Inside Outside & Beyond" solo exhibition of my *en plein air* botanical paintings was staged in the National Botanic Gardens of Ireland in Glasnevin. The newly-appointed Irish Ambassador to Singapore, Patrick Bourne, visited my exhibition and took a particular liking to one of the pieces "Springtime in Glasnevin", which now hangs proudly in his Residence in Singapore. This piece was a starting point of engagement with the Singapore Botanic Gardens resulting in its Director, Dr Nigel Taylor, offering me one month as an artist-in-residence. I welcomed the opportunity with excitement – as an artist I would not often get a chance to actually live in the botanic gardens and paint.



Did you paint *en plein air*

"Botanical Fusion: Singapore to Dublin" showcases artworks painted *en plein air* during my residency in the Singapore Botanic Gardens as well as a selection of work from the National Botanic Gardens in Dublin and Kew Gardens in London. On display there will be some large-scale paintings all painted outdoors, under the heat of the midday sun and very high humidity. Three of them: "The Rhapsody in Green", "Firecracker Heliconia" and "Lobster-claw" are depicting the Heliconia plant, while "Window to Wilderness" and the largest piece "Green is the New Black" feature architectural leaves of Monstera deliciosa. I am really pleased with these works. Among the pieces there will also be charcoal sketches and fine art prints on canvas which formed part of the Botanical Fusion exhibition in Singapore in 2019 and have made their way to Dublin.

How are these paintings different from your previous works?

My previous botanical works were painted in the National Botanic Gardens in Dublin and Kew Gardens in London. Those gardens have a focal point of Richard Turner's glasshouses and I expected some sort of an architectural framework in the Singapore Botanical Gardens too. However, to my surprise there wasn't any, obviously in the south Asian climate the plants do not need to be sheltered. The lack of the architectural focal point lead me to look for a structure in plants resulting in the close-ups of plant life as opposed to depicting the gardens as such. It forced me to look deeper into the plants, to catch the shadow and the light rather than a specimen. I was quite astonished by the lack of vivid colours which I imagined would surround me. Instead, I could see many shades of green and a splash of colour here and there, which I had to search for. The difference was also in the light, I love painting warm light, especially in the south European countries and I envisaged the same in Asia but I was surprised by the haze and grey skies which had a cooling effect on my paintings. The air pollution caused by the burning of the Malaysian forest had interfered with the painting process. Painting in Singapore was a new experience on many levels.

This has been an exciting anniversary year for you ...

Indeed, it has been an exciting and busy time. The residency in the Singapore Botanic Gardens culminated in the Botanical Fusion exhibition, viewed by over 50,000 people over ten weeks from September until November 2019. My artwork got exposed to a completely new audience, who found a traditional European *en plein air* painting method a novelty too. When working in the gardens I was constantly enveloped by groups of visitors who would take pictures of me painting or were even happier to take selfies with me. I think I was regarded as a tourist attraction – I wasn't prepared for the intensity of attention I was getting as I normally work in my studio and spend lots of time on my own. For a little while I felt like a celebrity and interestingly it happened in the year when I celebrated 30 years since my first solo exhibition. It was like a dream come true. Three decades ago I could never imagine I would reach that point in my life. On my return to Dublin in November 2019 I had an exhibition in The Gerard Byrne Studio marking the 30 years as a full time artist.

I still feel I haven't painted my best picture yet. The plan is to keep painting and I am most fulfilled if I can do it every single day. Having my own studio/gallery makes it easy to share my work instantaneously with the visitors to The Gerard Byrne Studio. I enjoy the interactions with the art enthusiast and collectors and like to witness their first reactions to my work. Many people seem to be amazed by the gallery space. Its unassuming entrance does not prepare visitors for the size and layout of the interior. My plan is to go even further and expand it into a state-of-the art gallery.

Any more trips on the horizon?

There are always new trips on the horizon! This year marks another 30th anniversary, this time of my exhibition in Berlin in the autumn 1990. I am thinking of returning to places I painted in the German capital as a young man and maybe staging a small exhibition there. One of the dreams I have had for a long time is to travel to Japan to paint cherry blossoms. Nothing is planned yet but the desire to go is getting stronger and stronger and I hope to make it happen sooner rather than later. In the meantime I wish to go back to the familiar locations in Ireland – to revisit the west coast with a focus on using the palette knife technique. As much as I love travelling it doesn't take much for me to find a subject to paint. Based in Ranelagh I find great themes on my doorstep and I am equally happy to be a local Dublin artist.

Need to Know: "Botanical Fusion: Singapore to Dublin" opens on Friday February 28 – March 29 at The Gerard Byrne Studio, 15 Chelmsford Road, Ranelagh, Dublin 6; www.gerardbyrneartist.com

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