

Charlotte Sorapure

Life Drawing

Ahead of a new show, this gifted figurative painter reflects on her career and influences, from Stanley Spencer to an Olympic wrestler



Self-portraits often signify a turning point in one's life. Although studying oneself in the present, it is always with an awareness of the past, as well as a tentative look into the future. Because of this I think self-portraits are often imbued with a fragrance of melancholy.

This portrait was begun as I turned 40, and also a time of personal sadness. It took some time to complete. The simplest images are often the most demanding and exacting, as there are so few elements to play with.

My mother is a modest but gifted painter. Although my interest in art did not really peak until my teens, I think being surrounded by her paintings, and her dedication to the subject, must have influenced me.

I took my first life drawing class aged 18. The tutor was an artist called Sam Rabin. Intimidating and larger than life, he had also been a wrestler, winning a bronze medal in the 1928 Olympics. In stark contrast to this, his drawings and paintings were beautifully

delicate and subtle. Although the experience was brief, both the man and his teaching made an indelible impression.

The liferoom has always been a significant place for me. None more so than that of the Royal Academy Schools. The atmosphere was one of quiet intensity, helped no doubt by the awareness of the Academy's heritage, as well as the presence of Norman Blamey RA. To this day, I appreciate his profound understanding of form and structure, which proved so helpful.

My husband Saied Dai and I both studied at the Royal Academy. This has meant that we both have a similar approach to working, as well as common interests and experiences. We try to be of practical and objective help to one another if needed. However, we have learned that knowing when not to say something is just as important!

Stanley Spencer is an artist that has always resonated with me. A visit to Sandham Memorial Chapel in Burghclere last summer left me moved and inspired. Based on his war experiences and observations, Spencer manages to make an event that is both pictorial and poignant out of a pile of satchels or figures swathed in mosquito nets.

When I paint, I seek out the extraordinary or significant in the ordinary. For this reason, inspiration can come from such diverse sources as Assyrian reliefs, 'Kitchen Sink' painters and Magnum photographers – I am constantly alert to possibilities for ideas.

Painting is always difficult. A good fine art training can equip you with the technical understanding needed to resolve problems, but working out what it is one wants to say is another matter. That is where 'life' comes in.

Going forward, I just want to be able to continue painting and developing. There is always so much to do and learn. Life is short... and art is long!

Charlotte's new show runs from 14-31 March at Messum's, London W1 www.messums.com

