

# A TOUCH *of* GRACE

Half of a fine art power couple, **Charlotte Sorapure's** work combines an elegant touch with a disquieting atmosphere. On the eve of a major new show, the New English Art Club member reveals how she found her own artistic voice

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**O**ur first attempt to visit artist Charlotte Sorapure in her West Country home hit the buffers before we had even set off. The UK was in the midst of a huge blizzard and while we might have been able to make the initial trip, there was no way of telling when or by what means we could have left.

However, as we were to discover when we finally made the trip after the arctic conditions had mellowed, if one was to get stuck anywhere, Charlotte's home, which she shares with her husband and fellow artist Saied Dai, would be no hardship.

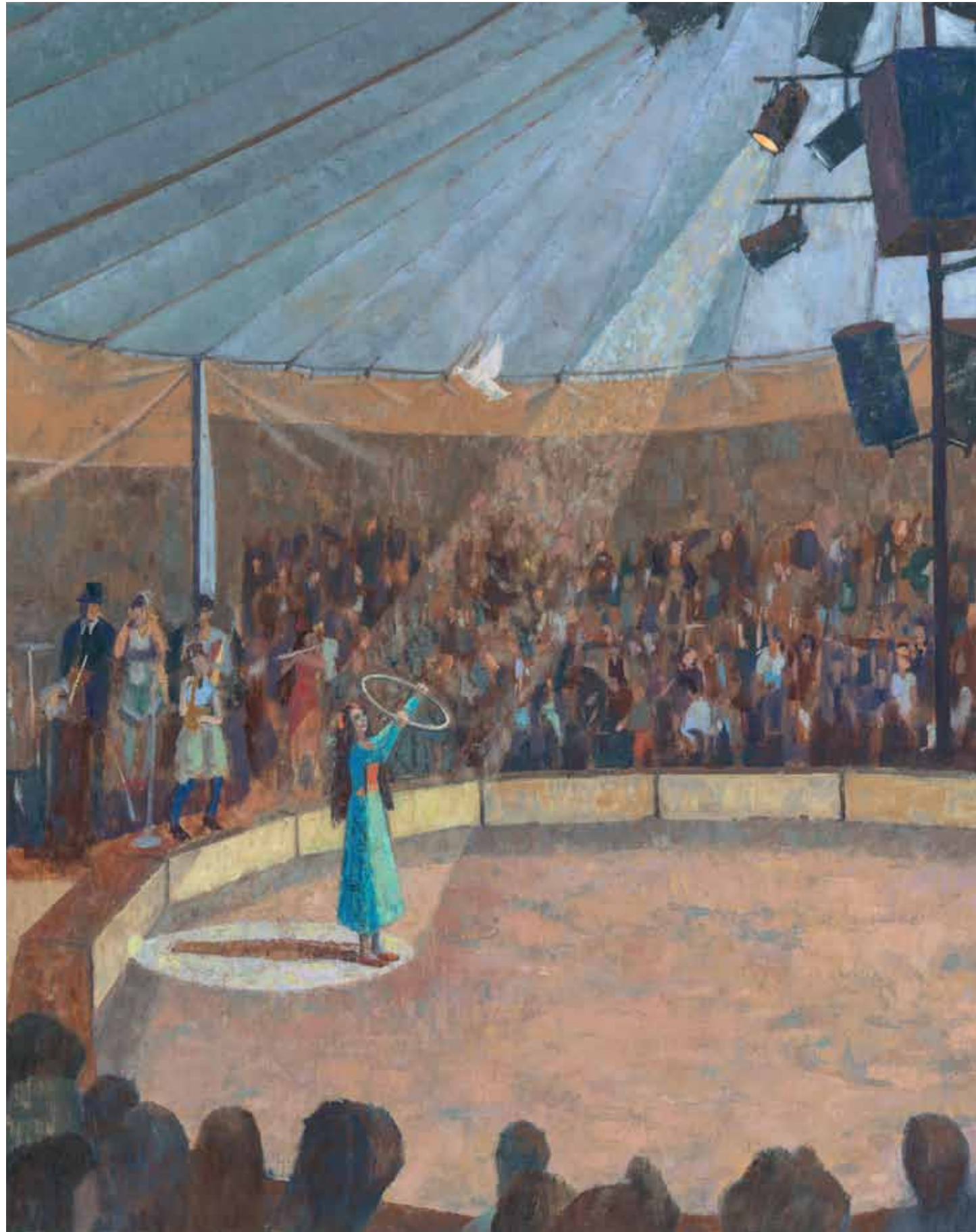
Charlotte's home and studio are both attractively designed and filled with so many wonderful objects – Saied's architectural origami, a "money tree", tiny figurines, small glass bottles – that it was easy to forget we were there to talk about the artist and her work.

Her environment is reflected in her paintings, however: elegant, original and stylish. Whether she is painting portraits, landscapes or her most recent figurative scenes from Giffords Circus that will be shown in her forthcoming exhibition at Victoria Art Gallery in Bath, Charlotte's paintings all contain a rare beauty and have something otherworldly about them – not quite mystical perhaps, but they hold a mysterious darkness, certainly.

Charlotte doesn't shy away from the idea that her work is unsettling. "I want to bring people's attention to something that might to all intents and purposes seem initially mundane," she says. "I am attracted to the quirky and the odd as well, and I aim to bring a heightened sense of atmosphere." >



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*Enchanted Garden*, for example, depicts a vista as seen through a narrow opening. There is something unnerving about the composition, not least because there seem to be eyes and faces everywhere. “There is a subliminal hint of the anthropomorphic,” confirms Charlotte, who works on four or five paintings at any one time and says that the composition of her paintings is often arrived at intuitively. “The colour scheme is limited to intensify the image. It’s about seeing possibilities and finding things.”

In many of her paintings, Charlotte likes to include a person of some description. “I have to be careful not to repeat myself too much – you don’t want to start cannibalising your own work – but I do notice there is often a little figure. For psychological focus, you sometimes need a human presence in a painting. People identify with a child, particularly because they are vulnerable by nature. I try not to be too self-conscious about it though. You can glean and learn so much from all kinds of unlikely sources.”

Charlotte has a wide variety of inspirations, including the painters of the early Renaissance, such as Sandro Botticelli and Vittore Carpaccio. She especially admires Stanley Spencer, too, citing his *The Resurrection of the Soldiers* at the Sandham Memorial Chapel in Burghclere, Hampshire, as a modern masterpiece.

Charlotte’s mother was a painter, which meant that she was always aware of drawing and watercolour

throughout her childhood. However, it wasn’t until her teens that she began to develop an interest of her own in painting. “It opened up the world for me in a way that no other subject did,” she recalls. “Painting spans so many subjects: history, psychology, philosophy, anatomy and chemistry... It was a revelation to me.”

Charlotte started going to life drawing classes with her mother when she was 16. Artist Sam Rabin, a former Olympic boxer whose work had a profound effect on her, taught the classes. “He was big and burly, with hands the size of shovels, and yet, he did the most delicate beautiful drawings and paintings of boxers in the ring,” she recalls. “He was very kind to me, probably because I was so young. I found him very inspiring.”

(Drawing is still very much the lifeblood of Charlotte’s practice today. She teaches classes in it at Bath Artists Studios and her own drawings will feature in the new show at The Victoria Art Gallery.)

After the success of those early classes, Charlotte studied in Bournemouth and Cheltenham for her foundation and BA courses respectively, before setting her sights on the Royal Academy Schools in London for her post-graduate studies.

“The atmosphere felt right,” she says of her first visit to the Academy. “It was one of the few places left that really valued drawing. That was fundamentally important to me because it’s a means of working out >

**TOP** *Hide and Seek*,  
oil on linen, 61x76cm  
**OPPOSITE PAGE** *Spotlight*,  
oil on linen, 76x60cm



**ABOVE** *Golden City*, oil on gesso panel, 78.5x61cm



**TOP RIGHT** *Enchanted Garden*, oil on linen panel, 57x37cm

**OPPOSITE PAGE** *Saied*, oil on gesso panel, 70x50cm

ideas. At the time it wasn't a very pretentious place, you could just get on with learning. I liked the fact that it was a three-year course: more time to explore who you are and what you want to do without the complications of the outside world. I think the RA felt like a homecoming to me at that time."

Interestingly, Charlotte's husband had also previously studied at the RA, and this shared education led to them sharing their approach to painting, too. Both artists believe that great art has its foundations in excellent drawing. Yet despite sharing a philosophy they very much stand alone as artists.

Each has a studio at the opposite ends of their house, and although they both understand the need at times to be left alone to get on with a painting, they do help one another where possible. "It's not competitive," says Charlotte. "On the whole we are very sympathetic to one another. It's difficult because of other people's perception of us: people tend to compare us all the time, which is natural. It's happening less so, but it can be irritating. People are always looking for similarities or trying to find friction."

In fact, Charlotte and her husband are both represented by Messum's – a big cheese in the world of private art galleries, even by the lofty standards of Mayfair's iconic Cork Street. Her first solo show with the gallery last year was, she says, the highlight of her career to date. "Artists are notoriously insecure and it takes a while to find your voice and have your own insights," says Charlotte, who was also elected to the New English Art Club in 2007 and won last year's Holburne Portrait Prize. "I feel personally that it was good to not have too much success early on as I'd

## ARTIST'S BIO



**Name**  
Charlotte Sorapure  
**Born**  
Bournemouth, 1968  
**Education**  
Bournemouth and Poole College of Art and Design; Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Art and Technology; Royal Academy Schools, London  
**Next Exhibition**  
13 April – 23 June, Victoria Art Gallery, Bath  
**More info**  
[www.charlottesorapure.co.uk](http://www.charlottesorapure.co.uk)

probably have blown it. So many artists get picked up too early and they are over exposed and burn themselves out too soon. Art comes out of life, out of your experiences. Painting is not about what other people think. I have carried on regardless of whether my pictures sell or not."

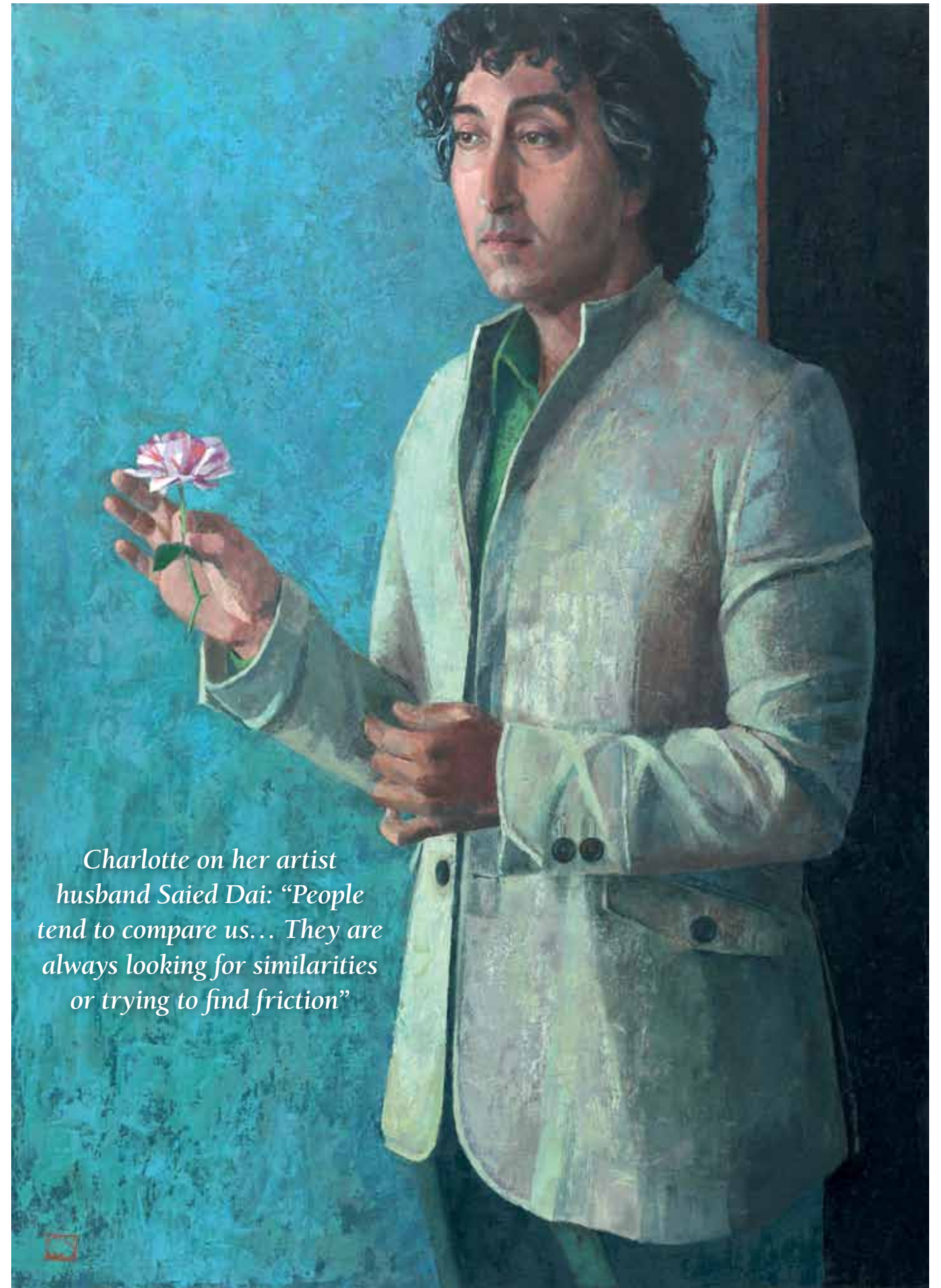
In person, Charlotte is quiet and softly spoken. Her studio is neat, tidy, well ordered and as serene as a place of creativity could possibly be. However, she is quick to point out that creating work isn't an easy process.

"It always amuses me when people say it must be relaxing to be an artist, as if you are just sitting here with a glass of wine," she says, with a wry smile. "They think it's a gift and you have inspiration like a lightning bolt from the sky, but it's not like that – it's demanding."

She admits that living without financial security is tough, but painting is the only path for her; a pursuit that extends far beyond paints, brushes and filling a blank canvas. "It's an intellectual business," she says, explaining how books, films and travel all inform her work. "Painting is fundamentally about living and it all filters in. I want to deal with the poetry of painting, not just the mechanics, and that is why it is so hard to articulate."

Charlotte's aunt once told her "sometimes you just have to trust life" and this seems to be a motto she works by. She also recalls the words of Roderic Barrett, a tutor at the RA who once told the girl who worked next to her that "if you are painting something, you are asking the world to look at it, so I need you to show me that you love it".

This idea has clearly resonated with Charlotte. "You need to invest your painting with everything you have. You can't be indifferent."



*Charlotte on her artist husband Saied Dai: "People tend to compare us... They are always looking for similarities or trying to find friction"*