



Poetry in paint

Whimsical, lush and ornate images adorn the walls of Faye Wei Wei's studio in south London. We visited the painter to talk about her work, inspired by art history, love and the stories that surround her

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It's the middle of a heatwave inside Faye Wei Wei's studio, which feels like a floral-scented sauna. "I mix lavender oil in with my paint," she says. "It does smell lovely but it makes me sleepy." Walking into Faye's world does feel something like a midsummer night's dream. Sketches are stacked upon a huge grand piano, pages from poetry books are taped to the white walls and smudges of oil paint adorn everything. We sip bottles of icy cold water as we chat on a kimono-strewn sofa. "It's so hot in this summer heat, I have been practically naked while I've been working - and getting covered with the same colours as the painting," she says as she makes sure my white dress doesn't end up like one of her canvases.

I have loved Faye's work since I saw her first show in London's Cob Gallery last year. Her work feels sensitive, personal and with a hint of magic. After graduating from the

Slade School of Fine Art, Faye set up her studio in a room in her south London home. "The best thing that art school teaches you is how to be self-motivated, to work hard, to have a studio and have that studio practice. I'm really lucky to have this space - as you can see, I'm a total hoarder."

"Have you always been like this?" I ask. I am entranced by her manner of speaking. It's not just her work that has a dreamlike magic, it exudes from the artist, too. "I wanted to do everything. I would joke about wanting to be a dancer or an actor as well, or a cook, or just live in the wild, but I think painting was just always something I wanted to do. I have a memory from when I was younger of feeling really satisfied with a painting that I'd done. I painted a vase of flowers when I was in year three at school, and I remember finding it so amazing that you could look at a flower or a leaf and →



Lashings of oil paint beautifully cover everything in the studio.

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follow it with your eye and trace that again with your hand. That kind of working, with your hands and your eyes, and creating something from what you are looking at is such an amazing feeling. That’s what’s really absorbing for me, it is the process of painting and creating something.”

Faye tells us she is in an intensely creative period now, as she is working on an upcoming show in Los Angeles that explores florals and femininity. “I read something that Georgia O’Keeffe said about the language of words not being enough to express what she wanted, how it was a world dominated by men and the language that we have is borne out of patriarchy. I really love symmetry within painting and duality, and within a lot of my painting there are couples of things, or a

duet of things, or a sort of reflection or echo of two things. I’m so inspired by O’Keeffe, and with my new collection of paintings, I’m interested in the cross-section of a flower – they are sort of like the sexual organs of a flower. There is that sort of intimacy.” And you can really feel this sensuality in Faye’s work, much of which has to do with the scale in which she creates.

Most of her canvases are taller than her, and the colours and figures in them command your attention. “I like my paintings to be immediate – I think a lot of painters work really fast. It just works with the span of my body when I am making them. It’s the same with the paint I work with. There’s just a natural sensuality or seduction in the pigment within oil painting itself, and when you’re painting, you have to think about →



Faye’s space is a mélange of wonderful objects, including a grand piano on which she stacks her sketches





Faye's work explores the sensual connection between florals and femininity

how you relate to it in art history and in a timeline. I think oil paint connects you to that history. It's just beautiful." We talk for an age about our favourite colours. Faye's is green because "it feels more like human flesh than the colour of flesh itself". The poems that inspire her? "The 'Green' part of Virginia Woolf's 'Blue & Green', Sylvia Plath's 'Cut' and 'The Tomato Salad' by Emily Berry". We also discuss her love of keeping a sketchbook, like a diary. "I write about things people have told me that I thought were really sweet."

Like all art, into it bleeds the life of the artist, and almost all of Faye's work features haunting figures. "Are they people you know?" I ask. "I think the things you choose to paint are always really personal. The sexuality, the sensuality or the seduction

of the images, I think, come not from the composition of the image itself, but the surface of the paint and the materiality of paintings. It is beautiful, rich and delicate, it's something that you can manipulate. I actually get told off a bit for just painting boys. But then I'm just like, men paint the things they lust after - like Picasso pretty much just painted women and no one gave him shit for it. But I get shit for it because it looks like I'm not a feminist, which is such bullshit... I paint the things and people that I love and that's all I want to do." ♦

Faye's next exhibition is xxxxxxxx. Find out more about the incredibly mesmerising artist at fayeweiwei.com and make sure to follow her on Instagram @fayeweiwei

