

# The Telegraph

## Rachel Howard: in the studio



British artist Rachel Howard in her studio in Gloucestershire CREDIT: CARLA BOREL

**Rachel Howard**, who graduated from Goldsmiths in 1991, was once employed as an assistant for Damien Hirst, working on his early spot paintings. Hirst described her as "the best person who has ever painted spots". Now 46, Howard has emerged as one of the finest abstract painters of her generation and was last year the subject of **a major show** at the Jerwood Gallery in Hastings. She uses a variety of techniques, including gravity, to pull paint across a canvas. She has now brought together work by 10 artists, including Mat Collishaw, Mark Wallinger and Bob and Roberta Smith, to sell as part of a fundraiser for the charity **Liberty**, which campaigns to save the Human Rights Act. These works can be seen from June 2-4 at London's **Paul Stolper gallery**.

**My alarm goes off at 6.50am.** But I don't feel fully with the world until I put my glasses on. Then the blur pings to clarity, which is when my day actually starts.

**At 7am, the house stirs to life.** I take the kids to school, before walking the dog and having a cup of tea and a slice of toast with marmalade. My dog is a working Cocker Spaniel called Scout and he's my fifth child. If you've read Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child*, you'll understand why I stopped at four and got a dog instead.

**I live on a farm and my studio is just near the house, so it's not far to walk at all.** I usually start painting at 8.30am. We are tucked away down a dirt track and apparently the house can't be found on a sat nav. Mobile signal is dodgy and the internet access is also crap – perfect, really. I always thought I'd end up living in the north of England, as that's where I'm from, but I planted roots in the South West instead.

**My studio is big, bright and airy with incredible light.** This is where I spend most of my time. I usually don't see or speak to anyone all day, which is ideal – no distractions, just isolation.



Ali Shallal al-Qaisi, Rachel Howard, 2016 – Ali Shallal al-Qaisi is the man in the most famous image from the 2003 torture and prisoner abuse scandal at the notorious Abu Ghraib Prison



**I'm very untidy but very organised.** I sometimes wish I was more tidy but the very idea of any domesticity in my studio infuriates me.

**If it's a nice day, the sun casts a sunlit shadow on the wall of my studio from a side window.** I see it travel round the walls as time passes, which is always a quiet pleasure. When it rains, the place sounds so much more dramatic than it really is and when the sun comes out, the building creaks and stretches, like it's talking to me, which I love. It's like being Jonah in the belly of a whale.

**My studio is like a portal to another world inside my head.** The way I paint is often very experimental, almost alchemic. I see making art as being very close to nature, in the way things evolve and grow. I never have a plan of exactly what I'm going to do on any given day – unless it's priming canvases.

**Upstairs in my studio is the room where I draw and do woodcuts.** It is a sort of "non-painty" space, where I do all my works on paper. In there, I have a wall of my framed print editions. I pin up drawings, photocopies and photographs, too, but often take all that stuff down to wipe my brain clean and to prevent myself clinging to imagery unnecessarily. Sometimes I just don't want any reference to anything.



Euphoric Recall, Rachel Howard, 2015 CREDIT: BLAIN SOUTHERN

**I don't really use paint in a conventional way.** I use gravity as a sort of latent paint brush. I often pour varnish and paint down the canvas, spray oil paint, sand the surfaces and of course paint with brushes in the usual way too, if I must. Recently I've been attaching brushes and feathers to hazel sticks to paint with. There's an increasingly performative element to my work, but I always like to stick to the tradition of paint and canvas.

**Recently, I've been working in silence.** But there have been bodies of work that I look at now and can still hear the music blaring out from when I painted them in the studio. I painted a series of huge canvases titled Sin Paintings for a show at the Bohen Foundation in New York 2003, and the soundtrack was Nirvana's Nevermind. They were big canvases, the show was very important to me, and the music was on full blast. But silence is preferable at the moment, as I need to hear myself think.

**Hunger drags me out the studio for elevenses.** I like to have a strong cup of coffee, poached egg on toast and avocado, fresh chilli and lime, and then I'll work through until everyone gets home in the evening.

**I don't use any assistants.** I'm always solo when I work, which is just how I like it. Any other physical presence would be a distraction, though I do have my dog with me always but he just sits and watches me or sleeps.



Rachel Howard, *Interior* (square), 2013 CREDIT: BLAIN SOUTHERN



**Sometimes, I'll be working on up to seven pieces at a time.** Some pieces will rest for months before I attack them again, while others I can complete in a few weeks. I like to work on very large canvases and small ones simultaneously. Right now, I have four 9x9ft paintings on the go alongside a few 20"x24". This difference in scale keeps me on my toes.

**Everything can inspire my art.** I read a lot and I'm learning Japanese at the moment, which is so difficult and mind-blowing, I'm learning how to write it first though, which I'm told is the wrong way round, but it works for me.

**I went to the Kuniyoshi exhibition at the Royal Academy in 2009.** This show was amazing to see in the flesh: the line, the pattern, so violent and beautiful, powerful and contemporary, each piece so delicate.

**I'm certainly not the first artist to be influenced and inspired by the great Japanese print masters.** But Kuniyoshi inspired me to go back to the line, then re-explore pattern, which I'd been trying to do for over a decade but not quite getting right. Through looking at his work, I revisited this idea of the pattern and got it. I'm going to Japan in the autumn, which will be my first trip.

**I also like whittling hazel sticks.** I use them to paint with, as an elongated paint brush. It's sort of like learning Japanese – bloody difficult.



North, Rachel Howard, 2013 CREDIT: BLAIN SOUTHERN

**I like to live with a piece for weeks before I'm ready for it to leave the studio.** When I think a painting is finished, I hang it on the wall, directly in front of the front door, so when I walk in, it's the first thing I see. In that moment, having had a night away from it, I then know if it's finished but I will do this for several days just to be sure.

**I don't suffer from artists' block; it's more about confidence.** If I'm unsure or nervous about working on a canvas I will draw, rather than paint. I draw with Indian ink and a brush, which is close to painting but without the pressure.

**I scrawl ideas and titles on scraps of paper.** But recently I discovered that I can draw on my phone and now spend train journeys sketching the other passengers, without any intrusion or suspicion from them, or jot abstract ideas down as visual memories. These may look like complete nonsense but I know exactly what I wanted to remember.

**I never finish working at a set time.** It depends what I'm working on and how well it's going. But we all have dinner together every evening. That's very important to me.

**I can function quite happily on six hours sleep.** Anything more is a bonus.



Rachel Howard with her Cocker Spaniel, Scout CREDIT: HUGH ALLAN