

In the studio with CHARLIE BARTON

WORDS: TERRI EATON PHOTOS: GARETH IWAN JONES



THE ARTIST

Looking above and beyond the everyday, Charlie Barton produces powerful oil paintings that are motivated by our evolving universe and the forces within it.

Tackling vast, extraordinary subjects, such as the cosmos and the cycle of life, it's little wonder that she was somewhat unfulfilled in her previous career working in the film industry. "I always had a strong creative drive and had ideas of being an art director, but it wasn't for me. I spent a year getting my portfolio together and then presented it to Kingston University in 1998 to apply for a place on their Fine Art course."

Charlie is currently preparing a new body of work for a solo exhibition at London's Osborne Studio Gallery. "It is more abstract than my previous paintings and centred around nebulae, stellar collisions and dark matter."

THE STUDIO

For the past five years, Charlie's studio has been based in a converted coach house within the grounds of a remarkable countryside estate in Berkshire that belongs to her brother-in-law, the famous British composer Andrew Lloyd Webber.

With acres of woodland close to where Richard Adams' *Watership Down* was set and a beautiful lake just moments away, this peaceful domain is conducive to creativity. "It's a beautiful, peaceful and contemplative environment," she says. "I have these wonderful double doors that flood the studio with light and are ideal for when I need to transport my larger works out of the studio."



THE INSPIRATION

Charlie has looked at plenty of astronomical images to influence her work but prefers to be propelled by her own imagination when it comes to putting paint to canvas. "The most important thing for me to capture is energy and I'm driven by ideas of death and regeneration. If I'm too concerned about the scientific accuracy then I end up doing a rather bad reproduction."

Back here on Earth, she applauds German artist Joseph Beuys for his ability to think big, as well as the abstract works of Gerhard Richter, but she is especially moved by Francis Bacon. "I mostly admire the way he spoke about art. I don't feel comfortable talking about a painting until it's absolutely complete. It's quite personal and I want to be certain of the direction in which it's headed. If further explanation is necessary, I'll take a few tips from Bacon."

THE MATERIALS

Being someone who uses colour very spontaneously, it stands to reason that Charlie's studio is overflowing with Old Holland and Michael Harding Artists Oil Colours, as well as every shade of Kremer pigment that you could possibly imagine.

She calls upon a range of sturdy palette knives to help her move the lashings of paint across the canvas boldly and confidently, finding brushwork sometimes too contrived.

However, she would not be without her large bristle brush, which she finds most effective for working on her larger paintings. "I love thick, soft brushes because they give a deeper effect when layering colours and medium, without the paint being applied too thick. It's quite therapeutic watching the way they glide across the surface."



THE PROCESS

To create the sheer energy that emits from Charlie's paintings, much of the process has to be instinctive, otherwise the work risks looking dull. Though there's little planning involved, she enjoys working on a fixed area within a solid edge. "My *Cosmos* paintings are all within a circle, which gives me focus and helps to organise the colours."

Within that defined area, she allows her imagination to run wild, creating texture using Daler-Rowney Alkyd Flow Medium to push the paint around the surface. She also experiments by pouring water and turpentine into the mixture to see what affect this has on the energy of her paintings. "If it doesn't work in one instance, I repeat the process until I'm happy with the direction in which the painting is going," she says. "There may be several failed attempts under the surface of the final piece but that this allows the history of the painting to come through."

Charlie's next exhibition runs from 23 October to 8 November at the Osborne Studio Gallery, London SW1. www.charliebarton.com