

FLORAL FIREWORKS

Bursts of orange, splashes of scarlet and bolts of blue... Hepzibah Swinford's exuberant paintings of flowers in antique vases explode onto the canvas

Words – Kasia Delgado

THERE'S SOMETHING DISARMING ABOUT Hepzibah Swinford's work. Catch sight of her psychedelic floral explosions with their clashing colours and textures, and it's hard to look away. The self-taught 62-year-old artist paints flowers blooming and bursting out of a vase so vividly – cobalt blue delphiniums, yellow roses and orange lilies against a contrasting background – that her pictures give you an adrenalin shot stronger than any espresso.

Swinford, whose work is in high demand at the Rebecca Hossack galleries in London and New York, had painted at home all her life but never tried to sell a piece until 1984. When she did take the plunge at an exhibition in the Royal Festival Hall the dealer who bought it later told her he'd never had such a response to a painting. 'The reaction was immense,' Swinford says. 'I thought, oh I'm onto something here, I need to really do this.' Unfortunately an untimely divorce and a sick child meant that her plan to sell more paintings was put on hold. It took another 22 years for Swinford to approach galleries again, but nowadays she has achieved her ambition of becoming a full-time – and successful – artist.

For Swinford, flowers are the only subject worth painting. She has painted family portraits and a swimming pool, but flowers in vases 'hit the spot'. 'It's almost an abstract form; you're experimenting with the colours,' Swinford says. 'I'm reacting against the over-intellectualisation of art. I want it to be purely visual. I want to poke you in the eye with the colours, to stop you thinking.'

The blazing colours of Swinford's florals – one of her paintings is called *Flower Bomb* – are inspired by seasonal blooms in London parks. She has no garden at her block of flats in Notting Hill – and she didn't grow up with one either – so apart from climbing up the fire escape to the roof where there are a few colourful pots, she gets her floral fix from wandering around parks, looking at people's front gardens and scouring coffee table tomes. Ideas for the vases are sparked by visits to the Victoria and Albert Museum, the ceramics at the local Portobello Road market, and her childhood home in West London. Swinford grew up in Earls Court in a flat filled with art, antiques – and psychedelic drugs.

Her mother was the late Polish-Jewish artist Dora Holzhandler – a celebrated modern painter whose works were collected by Charlie Chaplin – and the family home was 'hippie central', Swinford says. 'I had a very interesting but strange upbringing. My parents took a lot of drugs and were into Tibetan Buddhism. Art was a normal thing to have all over our flat. My mother very much thought for herself and had her own ideas about everything.'

Swinford, who gained her unusual name after her mother attended a recital by the pianist-social activist Hephzibah Menuhin, points at a photo of herself as a small child with her parents. 'This was taken by

Trotsky's grandson – or maybe Molotov's; I'm can't remember. He was at our house a lot and they were all stoned out of their heads.' Swinford's adult life has been rather different to her mother's, but she has remained a Buddhist and her home is full of art and antiques, much of it adorned with ornate and intricate floral patterns. The dress she is wearing today is splashed with huge red roses, and her floral paintings lean against every wall. She has three grown-up children: a daughter who is a burlesque dancer, another who runs a vintage hair-curler company and her son, an engineer. 'A proper job, mum!' he tells her.

Given her late-coming to the professional art world, Swinford has produced an impressive body of work. She paints some 20 pieces a year and uses oils, working in her small, light-filled kitchen for several hours a day while listening to the radio. 'I learnt from my mother that you have to *do* your art every day to be a success, just like you have to brush your teeth every day,' she says. If this makes painting sound something mundane for Swinford, it's quite the opposite. 'I'm sitting there and feel I have this power, an electricity coming through me. I tune into the painting. Monks say the same thing about meditation. I feel like I'm not entirely myself, I'm in a different world.'

Swinford starts with the background colour and then creates her eruption of flowers from there, and then adds the vase. 'I like the painting to vibrate. I want a colour clash, I want it to confuse the mind. If the colours aren't doing that, then things are flat. The clash gives it depth, I want it to fizz.' Occasionally, she has become so engrossed in experimenting with colour that things have gone awry. 'There are so many bad taste clichés about flowers and they can look so unappealing if done wrong,' Swinford says. 'I painted a Chinese vase and red lilies, and realised it looked like a not especially classy Chinese restaurant in London. It took me a long time to dig my way out of that one; I painted over the oils and tried new colours until it felt right. For me, colours are like flavours – I need a bit of purple here, a bit of orange there. In a way, it's hardly a conscious act, but I'm also very aware because if I use the wrong green, I have to spend the next few weeks fixing it.'

The flowers are enthralling but, for Swinford, they also hold a lot of meaning. 'They're sexual and symbolic of life – the very basics of our being,' she explains. They also symbolise femininity, something Swinford feels is often derided and underestimated, and she wants to give flowers force and power in their bold colours and textures. For Swinford, flowers are as important as the ornate, valuable vases that hold them. 'You go to The Wallace Collection and you'll look at the most amazing vase and it'll say 'container for a hyacinth'. You realise that the most humble thing growing in the soil gets to stand in such a beautiful vase. You can't get away from flowers and how crucial they are.' •



Image courtesy of Rebecca Hossack gallery