

# STATE OF THE ART

## DESMOND BUSTEED meets self-taught painter Derek Culley to talk about his new digital works of art and the contemporary appeal of artists such as Damien Hirst

**“Y**OU'RE not painting with what you squirt out of a tube; you're painting with a digital palette. There is a colour revolution going on... people don't realise, colours are changing,” explains veteran Irish artist Derek Culley, as he begins to describe how he developed his new digital-only art for the tablet and smart phone age.

Culley's latest work is being sold through Sedition, a concept website where limited edition digital paintings by some of the world's greatest contemporary artists - such as Damien Hirst, Yoko Ono and Tracy Emin - can also be seen hawking their wares.

Once paid for, the designs can then be accessed through the website on any digital device.

In Culley's *Fields of Hope*, colours created through finger strokes on an iPad boldly emerge, planting and weaving themselves into multi-layered patterns. The abundance the artist creates could represent a crop of plants or an accumulation of debris. The disordered tapestry of colour and form is obliterated by a heavy, emphatic mass of colour, a soothing blanket of sky.

It's the kind of art one might expect someone with a background in graphic design who specialises in the development of computer games to be describing, yet Culley, 63, a self-taught artist who moved Britain in 1976, sees the medium as an extension of his life's work, which up until now had been created the old-fashioned way, using the brush and easel.

Inspired by David Hockney, who used the painting app, *Brushes*, to create some recent

designs, and spurred on by the onset of Charcot-Marie-Tooth (CMT), a hereditary and incurable condition characterised by a progressive loss of touch sensation across the body, including the hands and feet, Culley dismisses a purists' view that his latest offerings aren't staying true to painting in the traditional sense.

“With reduced mobility I find it harder and harder to do big paintings, now I just finished a big painting, but it takes me longer. With the iPad, I've got so much freedom. I'm moving away from a traditional way of painting in one sense but it's everything that I've done and learned over perhaps 50 years that lets me do those images on digital, the iPad,” he says.

In another Sedition piece, Derek Culley's *Homage To Tesla No. 1*, the artist paints a network of black dots and dashes which punctuate an otherwise ticker-tape parade styled scene in which red, yellow, blue and black forms all vie for our attention.

As the animation progresses, we can see the steps the artist took to bring to life, blur and cover up combinations of forms of varying degrees of irregularity.

Born in Dublin to an Irish father who was Catholic and an English mother, Culley says he was branded a “backward” child due to hearing problems he experienced from an early age, which he now maintains was the catalyst behind his ability to observe, an attribute he believes has been critical to his development as a painter over the years.

The father-of-five, who has not seen his

Dublin lilt diminish in the 40 years he has been living outside Ireland, has also managed to keep what he describes as a version of his Christian faith since childhood.

Culley also remains influenced by the Baha'i faith, which he practiced for a time some years ago, but would not describe himself as a practising Catholic.

Although, he does allude to the years of mistakes made by the Church throughout the time of the abuse scandals that rocked Ireland, he also suggests Christianity has been a force of good in many communities.

Educated at Pearse College in Crumlin, his first foray into art began as a teenager when at 16 he hired an empty garage from behind the wall of his back garden. Culley says he was surrounded by creative influences at this time, renting the space from Agnes Kinsella, the mother of poet Thomas, with the international ceramic artist Deirdre McLoughlin.

With a patronage from members of the Kinsella family as a teenager, decades later Culley now shares a platform on the Sedition website with the once infant ferribe of the British art scene, Damien Hirst.

But many years before, as curator of the Windsor Art Centre, Culley was an early patron of the budding Hirst, who he hand-picked to appear at an exhibition at the gallery.

“I used to be a volunteer at Windsor Art Centre, where I was curator. I used to do lots of art exhibitions. I've always been immersed in art. One of the first people I exhibited at Windsor Art

Centre was Damien Hirst, it's actually on record, I selected him and exhibited him.”

While Culley has embraced the world of digital art, he is clearly conflicted by the ubiquity of change technology has brought us.

“I really couldn't care if I never had an iPhone again in my life, I really couldn't care if I never got on a computer again in my life, but they are tools that let you do things. I love the computer for research. There's so much art you can see on a computer, I think it's lost its value on the newer generation because they don't understand books,” he says.

Culley also believes that Ireland is going through something of a renaissance, as it moves on from the post-Celtic Tiger recession days into what he describes as a period of renewal, particularly his artistic contemporaries.

In *Four Tribes*, a homage to Ireland, Culley's digital canvas unfolds procedurally as the artist creates the works on an iPad, building up through jubilant mark making to a final image whose simplicity could not have been achieved without complexity and chaos.

“A few years ago it was that people wanted to be international and not Irish and now they want to be Irish, taking the full swing back,” he says.

**■ Derek Culley's solo exhibition is currently running at The Landing Gallery in The Atkinson complex in Southport until May 15. The Landing is a new gallery showcasing affordable art work from leading regional artists**



**ELECTRONIC CANVAS:** Derek Culley and his digitally-produced works (clockwise from far right), *Homage to Tesla No. 1*; *Murder on the Dance Floor*; *Hidden Centric Force*; *Fields of Hope*; and *Momma Told Me Not to Come*

