

‘Art just haemorrhages money. I haven’t worked out how you’re supposed to make a proper living from it’

Lucan-born artist Salvatore Fullam had his first solo show two years after graduating from art college, and was last year’s winner of the Zurich Portrait Prize exhibition. Now he’s preparing for an exhibition at the Kevin Kavanaugh Gallery. Interview: **Catherine Healy**

Growing up in Ireland, Salvatore Fullam was always being asked about his background. Here was a half-Irish, half-Bangladeshi kid with an Italian name: a conundrum for a lot of people meeting him for the first time. Now, as a 28-year-old, he goes by the tongue-in-cheek moniker Salvatore of Lucan – in part an answer to that persistent question of where he’s from.

It’s an appropriate title for an artist with a deep and nourishing connection to his family home in the west Dublin suburb. Fullam has spent much of the last decade painting domestic scenes from the house where he and his younger sister were raised by their single mother. But he says with a smile that the “grandeur” of the name appealed as well. Does he consider himself a grand person? “Not really, but I suppose I try to be when I paint.”

Fullam has been a confident painter since his teenage years. “It sounds pretentious, but I probably considered myself an artist as soon as I started painting,” he says. “We used to go to Laser [a specialist DVD store in Dublin] and take out interviews with all kinds of artists. I remember watching Melvyn Bragg’s documentary on Francis Bacon, where [Bacon] gets more and more drunk as the day goes on. I thought: ‘That’s exactly what I want to do.’”

The Lucan native readily admits to having been a “bad” student at the National College of Art and Design. “I would say I had some attitude problems. I wasn’t very good at dealing with tutors or doing essays.” He

initially failed to secure a place in the painting department, which accepts students on the completion of a core year. “I decided to train as an art teacher instead, but then the head of education was like, ‘We have to get you into painting.’ I was allowed to switch, but I still failed second year. I was only 17 when I started college, and I guess I was immature.”

Fullam got his first solo show at the Pallas Projects in the Liberties, a little under two years after graduating. He had one painting left to complete for the exhibition when he travelled to New York to meet his estranged father, who had settled in the United States. “I decided before I went that I wanted that last painting to be about meeting him. Usually my ideas come from what I’m thinking about the whole time anyway. If I’m already thinking about something, I’ll try to illustrate or narrate it in some way.”

The product of their encounter was *Me and My Dad in McDonald’s* (2018), which shows a distant-looking father and son on opposite sides of a table. The son bends down to tie his laces – something he had learned to do without his dad’s help.

Fullam says the painting reflected the strange experience of sitting down with his father for the first time as an adult. “It was quite awkward when we met. We went to Katz’s Deli – I wanted to be on neutral ground – but he hated the place. The whole experience was just incredibly stressful. I hadn’t fully digested it when I made the painting, but I suppose it was an attempt to illustrate how confusing that situation was for me.”

Has there been any feedback from his father? “No, I don’t know if he saw it. I doubt he’s seen it, actually.”

The coldness of that work is a world away from the paintings that feature Fullam’s family in Dublin: magical, surreal pieces that evoke the comfort and intimacy of home. In his Zurich Portrait Prize-winning double portrait, *Me Ma Healing Me* (2020), he is pictured lying down as his mother tends to him. On the wall behind them is an image of the Virgin Mary and child – a parallel to this affectionate modern-day family scene.





Salvatore Fullam: 'I probably considered myself an artist as soon as I started painting'

FERGAL PHILLIPS

The painting is currently on display at the National Gallery of Ireland as part of the Zurich Portrait Prize exhibition. "My mother practises sound healing and Reiki, and any time I'm at home and feeling unwell, she offers to practise on me," Fullam writes in a panel accompanying the piece. "I am a distant son and can be sceptical about some of the hippy stuff, but when her hands hover above me, I do feel my mother's love, and am aware that she is trying to heal me."

I ask how his mother feels about being featured in his work. "She never really talks about it. I've been doing paintings of her for over ten years now, so she's used to it. At the start, she was like: 'Would you not just paint flowers or something?'"

Fullam was thrilled when he was announced as the overall winner of the 2021 Zurich Portrait Prize – an award that came with a cash prize of €15,000 along with a commission to create a work for the Nation-

al Portrait Collection. But the achievement has not stopped him from joining in criticism of the National Gallery for doing business with a company that operates in direct provision centres. A recent public letter signed by Fullam and three other artists – Emma Roche, Brian Teeling and Jonathan Mayhew – said that the gallery's recent decision to award a catering contract to Aramark "undermines" the work it has done as an institution, describing direct provision as "the greatest failing of our government today".

(The National Gallery said in a statement that it had provided the contract following a tender process in which the US multinational scored highest on the prescribed assessment criteria. The statement said it was "bound by Irish and EU procurement law as to how external suppliers tender for, and are awarded, contracts".)

The precarity of being an artist means such criticism is not made lightly. Like a growing number of his peers, Fullam still lives at home. "Art just haemorrhages money," he says. "I haven't managed to work out how you're supposed to make a proper living from it." But he would rather do the work he does now than make big money.

"A lot of the artists that I see having success would be a lot more commercial than the artists whose work I would have respected in college. I think the system can break people down because of how hard it is to make money."

What sort of art would he deem commercial?

"I don't want to diss anyone, but what I mean is work that isn't very challenging. It would usually be work that's quickly constructed and churned out." His own paintings do sell, but he concedes they're "not for everyone".

I ask how he rates Dublin as a city for artists.

"I had an American tutor in college once describe Irish people as visually illiterate. It was a mean thing to say – and not completely true – but I do think the taste in Ireland is a little bit different to taste in continental Europe. I would say the average European knows a lot more about art."

He has no desire, though, to decamp to London or Paris. "I wouldn't romanticise living abroad. The cost of living here is obviously difficult, but I've never really had any interest in leaving Ireland."

Fullam's current focus is on a show at the Kevin Kavanagh Gallery in Dublin 8, which opens at the end of March. The exhibition, *Dead Present*, takes its name from a painting he has done of dead flowers – in a sense fulfilling what his mother wished for all those years ago. The title also refers to the fact that he himself will be "dead present" in the show. The art being displayed includes a self-portrait in which he reaches for a three-in-one takeaway as he lies in bed with a hangover, and a stained glass painting of himself getting sick.

Another large painting shows him standing in front of a tripod with a camera phone and ring light beaming in his direction – a parody of his tendency to depict himself in his work. He explains that he has modelled himself here on the Blemmyes, mythical primitive men who were believed to inhabit far-away lands in ancient and medieval times. "This is what they said people looked like outside Europe. There was this assumption that people were closer to animals."

Beside the painting in his Dublin studio is a large sculpture of a Blemmye. "I want to make it look really realistic so I'd have it as a starting point for the painting, but sculpture isn't my strong point. It took me eight months to make and would probably take another few to finish, so in the end I painted it from the sculpture and photographs together," he says.

He has been struggling with this particular piece for a while. "It looked terrible for ages, and there was a point a week ago that I would have binned it."

Would that be a common impulse?

"Oh yeah," he laughs. "There's another room here filled with things I want gone."

On the morning we meet, Fullam has just finished writing a short text for the upcoming exhibition. "Questions you may not ask me include: 'Why do you paint yourself all the time?' and 'Where are you from?'" reads the final line. He might still be figuring out that first question, but the answer to the second is clear: Salvatore of Lucan is from Lucan, and he wants everyone to know that fact. ■