



James Murray searches for inspiration in his home studio, converted from a double garage

While the acting world is on shut down Alresford's James Murray can be found painting in his home studio

WORDS: Duncan Hall ♦ PHOTOS: Artfinder

ABSTRACT

When James Murray speaks to a self-isolating *Hampshire Life* on the phone, it's not long after receiving a call from his agent.

"There isn't a television or film set or theatre in the world that is working at the moment," says the actor, who was last seen playing chief superintendent John Houseman in ITV police drama *McDonald and Dodds*. "I was told I'd got some time to figure out what I want to do next."

Luckily for Jim he has something to fill the void – a love of painting, which was rekindled ten years ago. "I started painting at school," he says from his home near Alresford. "It was something I enjoyed as a teenager – but at school it was frowned upon and considered a secondary subject."

After studying scriptwriting and directing at university, Manchester-born Jim went to drama school and became a professional actor. His most memorable screen roles include his breakthrough as Vera Duckworth's eye-candy cellarman Sandy Hunter in *Coronation Street*, the psychopathic Daniel in Russell T Davies' Channel Four series *Cucumber* and lead roles in BBC dramas *Age Before Beauty* and the fourth series of *Cutting It*, alongside future wife Sarah Parish.

But it was talking to fellow actor Connor McIntyre which inspired Jim, now 45, to return to his canvas. "He was extolling its virtues as a great way to use your time, both when you're between jobs and on a job," says Jim, who started painting again at home as a hobby.

As a teenager he was always drawn to the non-figurative or abstract: "If I do a bowl of fruit or a still life I'm useless and I don't get much pleasure from them," he admits. Instead he takes inspiration from other artists – taking the time to visit galleries and museums while he's working. "If there's a particular artist I like, or I'm drawn to, I will buy a book about them or go online and research them," he says. "I will try their technique myself and see where it takes me. I'm shamelessly stealing – seeing what I can and can't do! There are more failures than successes, every painting has six or 12 variations underneath that I wasn't happy with." ▶

'You can express yourself without the fear of being told you're wrong'

TEENKING



One of his earliest inspirations was the German abstract artist Gerhard Richter. “He dragged layers of paint across layers of paint and carved into it,” recalls Jim. “I was so into him I was almost obsessed. I use very little of that style now. I change so quickly. It’s like when I look at my old performances – I remember how I used to act back then. Now I might take a bit of Willem de Kooning’s charcoals and put in the bold colours of Clyfford Still. The trick is to stop and walk away and go ‘that’s enough’.

“A lot of it is about colour and shape and how you get that out on the canvas. I’ve always assumed that everyone else in the world, when they think of a word they have a colour for that word, or they think of a number there’s a colour for that number. Developing characters is exactly the same – when I think of a person in real life, or on the page, colours come to me. When I’m painting I might not be getting a person down on the canvas, but putting certain colours next to each other on the canvas means different things to me.”

He can see a link between his art and his early interest in script-writing and directing. “It comes from the same place,” he says. “Script-writing, acting, directing, lighting a stage or soundscaping a film can be put in the same camp



Good to know

Find out more about Jim’s art at artfinder.com/james-murray

To donate to the Murray Parish Trust and find out more about its work visit themurrayparishtrust.com

RIGHT:
Manganate by James Murray, who gets ideas from researching abstract artists and visiting galleries while working on location



‘I’m shamelessly stealing – seeing what I can and can’t do!’

BELOW:
Greenland by James Murray, who took early inspiration from the work of German abstract artist Gerhard Richter

as drawing something with a pencil or sculpting something out of clay. You can express yourself without the fear of being told you’re wrong.”

His painting was a hobby, until an auction for his charity the Murray Parish Trust was short of lots. The charity was founded in 2014 to support emergency paediatric care in the south of England, in memory of Jim and Sarah’s daughter Ella-Jayne who died in 2009 from a congenital heart defect. “I submitted a couple of paintings of mine that I’d recently done, thinking they would probably be left over and not be bought,” says Jim. “I put them at a low price, but they were snapped up. I started putting paintings out to independent shows and on Artfinder and they started selling – regardless of whether it was a Murray Parish Trust event or not. Maybe you always doubt yourself at the beginning. It’s only recently that I’ve stopped questioning it. I love to put a piece of work in an art exhibition and watch people enjoy it. When someone else appreciates it, it’s an ego scratch.”

Jim currently has 16 pieces on the online art site Artfinder, with 30 per cent of sales going to the Murray Parish Trust. Prices range from £450 to £2,000 for the works, which are generally quite big at

2m by 1m. “I have a studio of sorts that I’ve converted from a double garage,” says Jim. “It’s quite crammed – Sarah says I should have an exhibition, but I wouldn’t know how to put one on.”

Following the coronavirus outbreak it was decided the focus of the Murray Parish Trust should move from fundraising for a £5.5m iMRI scanner for Southampton Children’s Hospital to supporting the heroes on the frontline fighting to keep people alive. Speaking only hours before Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced that the country was to go into lockdown, Jim said he believes we’re likely to come out of this collective experience with a very different set of values. “There might be more positivity from this dramatic negative experience,” he says. “It will change our values as to what is important to us. We might appreciate what is in front of us, as oppose to what we’re aspiring to. Whether it’s something as small as people sitting down and having time to watch a long-form TV drama on Netflix, or looking at paintings online, or going outside and appreciating the spring, I think it will change people’s perceptions – they will slow down and start to appreciate the beauty of life.”

It might also have a positive effect on culture too: “The world is full of content. Maybe this will teach us about being more selective about what we make. Perhaps it will be less about green men in capes – Hollywood will tell more valuable stories.” 🐼

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