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NOV 2019 berkshire-life.co.uk

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Katie's candle collection



And her recent study of birds



Zebra print features heavily...



...as does blue and white China



Sarah Rodi visited celebrated artist Katie O'Sullivan at her studio and maximalist home in Upper Lambourn while she was preparing for her exhibition in Belgravia this month

PHOTOS: Peter Johnston

# ARTIST AT HOME Master of maximalism



**RIGHT:**  
The colourful  
rosette room

**ABOVE:**  
A picture-perfect  
house



The most celebrated equine artist in the UK today, Katie O'Sullivan lives and works in the middle of the racing scene in The Old Malthouse of Upper Lambourn. She is married to ex-jockey Jamie Osborne, who is now a trainer, and together they have three sons, aged 27, 26 and 19, and a 17-year-old daughter, and six different breeds of dogs.

Katie herself was one of seven children, brought up around horses in rural Ireland. She moved to England and studied contemporary art at Chelsea School of Art, and although her surgeon father doubted she would ever be able to make a living from her work, after graduating with an MA, he agreed to pay for a studio in Wapping where she could practise her skills, as long as she went out and earned a living. "Despite my qualifications, I was turned down for a sandwich-making job," Katie laughs. "So my first paid-for job was as a porcelain restorer painter."

Her success as a painter slowly began to take off, and she has been exhibiting her work since 1981, most often at The Osborne Studio Gallery in Belgravia, but also in New York, Tokyo and Hong Kong. She has another exhibition coming up this month at The Osborne Studio Gallery, which she is busy preparing for.

Her studio is in her manicured back garden, next to the outdoor swimming pool, at her sprawling country house, and it's where I find her painting when I arrive. Katie describes her art as: "Traditional but with a contemporary twist. I love Degas – his positioning of the subject in the space. I like to think I follow in the same vein as him. I've always loved animals."

I can tell, as she has dogs curled up at her feet while she works, and incredible paintings she's created of horses, birds and dogs on the walls.

Her November exhibition is taking a different direction from her usual



Katie at work

concentration on thoroughbred racehorses – despite the fact they keep at least 70 horses in their stables at any one time. The exhibition of 35 paintings is dedicated to the natural world, including dogs, some racehorses, African wildlife and endangered species of birds, 'raptors' and songbirds. "It is about the natural world and the balance of nature. This time, I have been drawn to the beauty and brilliance of birds," she says.

One of the pieces she is working on is a composite painting of birds of prey and songbirds, in which she has used gold and silver leaf and it is a large, stunning, swirling vortex. It's striking.

There's also another collage-like piece that is a work in progress, which will be finished for the exhibition. "It's a legacy of a great horse," she says. It's a celebration of the 'Sire of Sires' thoroughbred Canadian stallion Northern Dancer. Apparently he was one of the most famous stallions of the 20th century, and his descendants include racing champions Nijinsky and Galileo.

It's clear she has a thorough knowledge of wildlife anatomy, as she shows me a painting of a horse she is about to rework because she feels "his head is too big." There's no doubt about it, Katie is a perfectionist.

Her works will be exhibited in beautiful hand-made frames by Philip Elletson in Wiltshire.

Despite her obvious talent and experience, Katie admits she still gets nervous before an exhibition. "It's as if you're hanging yourself on the wall to be judged," she says. "But it's also very exciting. I feel tremendously lucky to be able to earn a living doing something I love. I'm also honoured my friend and



The Old Malthouse



One of Katie's recent works



One of Katie's six dogs



The red front room



Katie's bespoke kitchen

*“Exhibiting is like hanging yourself on the wall to be judged. But it’s exciting”*



A conure bird takes centre stage in the family room



famous author, Jilly Cooper, also a lover of horses, has written the foreword for my exhibition.”

Admired by the racing fraternity, a long list of distinguished collectors of her work is headed by the Duke of Edinburgh, continues with the Duke and Duchess of Roxburgh, Lord and Lady Lloyd Webber, Earl and Countess of Derby and Lord and Lady Bamford. Katie is often commissioned to paint portraits of winning mounts for owners and breeders.

Brimming with personality, Katie loves to chat. She says her day starts at 5am, when get gets up and has a coffee and then heads to her garden studio where she paints all day. “We built this studio last year,” she says. “We made sure it had lots of windows to let in the light and I love having my own space to be creative.”

The family have lived in the house for 20 years. “My friend used to live here and it was the first house I ever stepped inside in Lambourn. When I heard it was coming up for sale, I knew we had to have it.

“We enjoy being not too far from London, but also surrounded by countryside. The Downs are stunning.”

The Old Malthouse is a beautiful Grade II-listed building and I can’t wait for Katie to give me the tour of what she describes as her “maximalist home”. This means she fills her home with things she loves, and her dedication to collecting is obvious.

In the high-ceiling oak (?) beamed dining room, which they built when they moved in for entertaining purposes, there is blue and white porcelain beautifully positioned the mantelpiece, on the traditional dresser and on the dining table.

“When I was exhibiting in China, I wanted to go and see the museum-quality blue and white China factories. I loved it so much I had pieces shipped home,” she says.

There is more of it in the white and blue kitchen, which was built by a local carpenter, along with a collection of



Chinese silk paintings and silver ornaments



Katie owns 70 horses

empty Cire Trudon candle jars and a run of jockey prints.

In the living area next to the kitchen, taking centre stage is a real conure bird in a gorgeous green cage. The rest of the space is filled with French chairs and Chinese paintings. The hand-made footstools were created from real-life zebra skins, and some of the other pieces, such as the huge vases, are from an OKA private sale, and in them are huge leafy plants.

Katie admits she is friends with all the dealers and owners of the antique shops in Hungerford, and when she sells one of her paintings, she treats herself to a new piece for her home. She also likes making a trip to Indigo Asian Antiques & Interiors in Wiltshire. “I am a big lover of Eastern items,” she says.

As Katie leads me through the entrance hall we pass through the “rosette room”, decorated with her daughter’s horse racing awards. It’s a vibrant multicoloured sight to behold. There’s also a collection of silver on a table, from tiny plates to bigger pieces. And I also admire her collection of glass. The house really is full of all manner of things, for example, there’s a bowl full of bones??, there’s a library of racing calendar books and Spy cartoons.

In the formal sitting room, I find more eclectic antique furniture, and in the red front room, I admire the watercolours on silk. There are treasures in every corner, a feast for the eyes.

From these inspirational surroundings, Katie will continue to work on her imaginative compositions and prestigious commissions. And I can’t wait to see what she creates next. ♦

**Katie’s exhibition will be at the Osborne Studio Gallery in Belgravia from 6–28 November; [osg.uk.com](http://osg.uk.com). Free entry**