



# No Holds Barred

Cheshire-born Gillian Holding tells JLife all about life as a contemporary visual artist.



## Hi Gillian. Tell us about your recent exhibitions.

Interfaith and dialogue work is important to me, so the St Edmund's church show [in Leeds], World Turned Upside Down, is a nice one to be involved with. The invitation from Sinai Synagogue to exhibit in the shul's wonderful white cube space was coincidental, but serendipitous, timing. My work is conceptually linked and is part of a new series exploring my response to the post-Brexit, post-Trump world of the Anthropocene, a proposed epoch defined by the current human-influenced world we are living in.

## Do you have any future projects planned in the North West?

I do have some projects in the near future, so watch this space. I will be exhibiting within the Manchester community in particular because it's an art scene responding in an exciting way to national and international trends. I'm represented by Elastic Space, a contemporary art consultancy based in the North West, so that's going to be an important additional resource for me in these future projects.

I was born and brought up in Cheshire and my family are still there. I've spent a lot of time over the years travelling back and forth over the Pennines. Funnily enough though, while I've had solo shows in the UK and internationally, I've not yet exhibited in Manchester. When I graduated in 2009, I was intent on looking at London and further afield. Now, having expended so much energy in exhibiting much farther afield, I'm really appreciating the exciting possibilities closer to home in the north of England.

## What do you enjoy about the Manchester arts scene?

There is a strong growing ecosystem of artists in the North West, and in Manchester in particular. Its art fair, The Manchester Contemporary sums it up well. I've been struck by the remarkable growth

of small dynamic galleries alongside more established contemporary art galleries in and around the city and wider region, showcasing genuinely exciting work. It's a pretty amazing platform for emerging artists. And there's always something of interest to see in the more established institutional spaces such as Whitworth Art Gallery. I really do love the range and diversity of the visual arts infrastructure in Manchester.

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## Your work often focuses on suburban spaces and the everyday. What is it that fascinates you?

I think 'the ordinary' is what most of us encounter and live, day in, day out. We don't appreciate our own doorsteps enough. The ordinary every day is full of absurdity, paradox, humour and irony. I admire French Jewish writer Georges Perec, who sat in a Paris square and noted everything he saw as it happened, in the minutest detail. Noticing, observing; the everyday is compulsive viewing.

## How do you develop an idea or theme for your exhibitions?

That's an interesting question for me at the mo-

ment. My process used to be about constructing imagery based on research, sketches, photographs and other sources to explore these absurdities catching my imagination. Since the global upheavals of the last 18 months, I've completely changed my processes and way of working. Now, I don't use any sources at all. I start with a big blank surface, and I paint or draw everything from my imagination. It's been liberating and exciting, starting a large piece with no idea of where it might go.

## What's inspiring you at the moment?

During a recent artist's residency, I spent five weeks thinking about what I was doing and why I was doing it in this particular way, without reference or source materials. It became apparent that my process is in some way allegorical of this confusing, scary, uncertain and incomprehensible world I feel we are now in.

What's interesting for me is that I didn't try to consciously work out my responses through painting; I just painted and then made sense of my responses. So it has been a very unconscious intuitive and instinctive process, and very rewarding when other people looking at the paintings describe their feelings, which mirror my own.

## Which is your favourite arts space at the moment?

Impossible to answer! There is so much exciting work on in so many different spaces these days. Even traditional galleries and museums have brilliant contemporary interventions among their permanent collections, and there are always new gems to discover. I do love quirky one-off shows in odd locations, such as the Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature in Paris, or the Sir John Soane's Museum in London.

For more information about Gillian's work, visit [GillianHolding.com](http://GillianHolding.com).

