

Free radical

Artist **Faye Dobinson** lives in West Cornwall, where she produces her eclectic, semi-abstract work: from sculpture to oil paintings, and from figurative to landscape. A self-confessed activist, she talks to *Fiona McGowan* about what drives her and why she won't be pigeonholed.

Faye Dobinson is expounding her theories of life, sitting amongst the clutter of her white-painted studio in a big, old, stone farm building. Every horizontal space is covered with paper, writing, images from magazines and the requisite paint splatters. Rough-hewn pieces of tree trunk serve as stools. The light pours in from the window and roof lights, but the room remains edgily cold on an autumn day; no doubt it is positively Baltic in midwinter. On the walls hang Faye's paintings – some part-finished, some apparently complete. In a back room, next to a white-painted fireplace, sculptures lean against the walls. Red party shoes adorn the mantelpiece, along with chunks of wood with words painted on them. The feminine form is omnipresent in larger-than-life humanoid sculptures and in the paintings throughout her rooms.

Faye is fascinated with the effect that our modern culture has on women. Her struggles with her own identity started, she says, when she was 14. She developed what became a life-long feeling of self-doubt: "I had crippling anxiety," she explains. "It prevented me from truly thinking I was good enough. It meant that I would often self-sabotage situations." For someone who has crippling anxiety, Faye has thrown herself at life with extraordinary verve. From when she enrolled in art college at Camberwell in London, she was on a mission to express herself and to help others along the way. More than 20 years later, she is still doing just that.

There have been recurring themes in Faye's work and exploration of life as an artist. Diversity runs through everything she does – cultural, gender, racial. She says a lot of this was thanks to growing up in a diverse environment. "I was born in 1976," she says. "In the background, there were race riots and things like that. I was from a white working-class family, but my abiding experience was being brought up in a predominantly West Indian community." Growing up,

she loved drawing and colouring, and when she became known as the talented artist at school, it helped build her confidence: "It made people like me. Simple as that."

It's Faye's rebellious nature that led away from a formulaic education. Having had a "weird, anti-everything explosion" when she hit puberty, she began to drift at school. Her parents found her a part-time job at a bookshop and she discovered an alternative world of literature and funk music. By the time she was 16, she had won a scholarship to attend sixth form at independent boys' school Eltham College, where the art teacher was a true inspiration (they remain friends to this day). A foundation year at Camberwell followed, but didn't inspire her to continue with education ("I just learned to skin up really well," she says, rolling her eyes).

Looking at Faye's work today, there is a wide-open consciousness about it – her skill at creating realistic forms constantly crashes against an invading force of abstract energy. Her works are somehow reminiscent of the way that dreams can stay with you, their archetypal messages and dark mysteries sometimes telling subconscious tales, pushing against the clarity of the everyday. It is no surprise, given her artistic style today, that her journey to this corner of Cornwall has been eclectic. She spent a year working as a croupier after leaving college, and "doing a bit of teaching" at Eltham College. Disillusioned with the croupier job, Faye started doing youth work: "I'd hang around the estates and wait to see who was doing all the [graffiti] tagging, and go, 'Orl roight?' I'd befriend the kids and then persuade them to learn a few more skills. Then they'd do murals where they'd been tagging. The ownership meant that they didn't tag the area anymore."

Faye's work is deeply imbued with cultural references. Many of her paintings depict women who have been inhibited in some way – whether it's the restrictive, sexualised, yet somehow infantilised femininity in the West (think coy models with knock knees and pointed-



PHOTO: EMMA GREEN/AT GRIFFIN PHOTOGRAPHY

Faye Dobinson in her studio



Dance Like You Mean It, oil on canvas

in toes), or the cultural repression in other parts of the world. One of her exhibitions of paintings was titled 'Unsung Heroes', dedicated to female musicians who have struggled against oppression, or who have never made it into mainstream public consciousness. A picture of Malian singer Rokia Traoré is a spare image of a head in profile with a big stripe of grey paint right in front of her mouth – symbolising the way that her culture represses musicians, particularly women.

Today, the female form is still present in many of Faye's paintings. But rather than nudes – which for a period were the mainstay of her work – the focus is now on the

heads, the faces, and the messages of restraint or oppression depicted in the clothing and poses of her women. Dance as representation of freedom is a frequent theme – she has become intrigued by voodoo and its intrinsic connection of spirituality and dancing: "they dance to find God," she says. She frequently breaks from painting the human form, too, allowing herself to be a conduit for whatever creative force appears in her mind: whether it's a painted quote on a piece of paper or a bit of tree, or a sculpture made from a pair of denier tights and bits of old rags. She has explored performance art, created a series of semi-abstract seascapes layered with OS maps, and made semi-sculptural

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Loving yourself in this culture, in this society, is a radical act. And if you tell me something's radical, I want to do it.

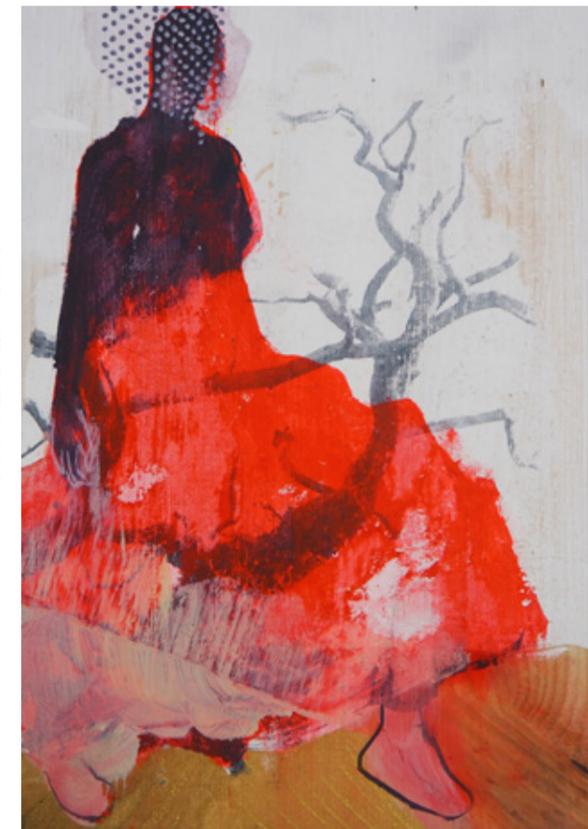
Faye working in her studio, wearing shoes created for her 2016 video work *The Red Shoes*

works out of the spaces between things. She is embedded in the culture of Cornwall – working with fishermen in Newlyn on her map project, performing in James Turrell's *Skyspace* sculpture in Tremeneheere Sculpture Gardens, and renting a studio in Trewidden Gardens just outside of Penzance.

With her vibrant personality and love of mentoring, it's no surprise that she has been asked to teach at the respected Newlyn School of Art. She also continues to do care work in the community, looking after those in need of social interaction as much as physical help. Her quotes and sayings, written in a wide, cursive script, have been popularised on social media, to the point that she has set up a website to sell the words on t-shirts, posters and pieces of wood. The website, of course, is no ordinary online shop. Everything that Faye does has some kind of activism about it. "The Fayedid site is art and the word as activism," she explains. "I'm using it as a means to spread alternatives to prevalent culture values. I love the idea that it's a diffusion of my art. It's 'Fayedid' – or 'faded. Geddit?'"

Faye's laugh, like most of what she says, is raucous and honest. Her conversation is richly littered with laughter and swearing. She worries that her passions and philosophies could be seen as self-righteous: "I am committed to performing an act of resistance rooted in kindness every day," she writes on her blog. But Faye is as unpretentious and genuine an artist as you are likely to find – driven by a deep need to face her fears. "Since doing CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy) earlier this year, I'm reorganising my life to live fully from the heart. Which can be absolutely terrifying..." To look at the untethered and prolific nature of Faye's work and her path through life, it seems incredible that she could have fought anxiety and low self-esteem. She is, as she says, a woman who runs at her fears. ■

fayedobinson.com



Make Shift, mixed media on wood panel



The Weight of Experience, oil on canvas