

IN FOCUS:

Artist celebrating the lifetime of stories built up by older people

Artist Alana James wants to change the narrative on ageing — one person and one portrait at a time. And she's issuing a call to people over 75 to get in touch



Dr E Alana James.

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HELEN O'CALLAGHAN

“Age isn’t well portrayed in modern culture,” Alana says from her Kinsale home where she moved in 2006 from Colorado. “People see a person with white hair, over 75, and they think ‘that’s an old person’.” Advertising often links older people with disability, she points out. “Watch TV and you see lots of ads for chairs that get you around, people with walkers and



canes, in order to portray an older person.

“I say ‘let’s change the narrative,’” says the 69-year-old who’s doing a series of portraits where everybody’s aged at least 75. “Already, I’ve lined up people in their 70s, 80s and 90s. And when I’ll show them their portraits, the people will be two-and-a-half metres tall — they’ll be bigger than life-size. It’ll be them, right now as they are, as older people. But behind them, and on the floor around them, will be bubbles depicting moments from their lives.”

When we speak, Alana’s just back from Kerry, where she collected images for a portrait of a woman with a “fairly typical rural Irish story”: early marriage, moving into a marital home that included her mother-in-law, her husband becoming disabled young and rearing a family in the midst of all.

“If you know this woman’s story, you see this amazingly strong woman. And layered on top, all that rural kindness,” says Alana.

When she completes the life-sized portrait of this woman, representations of her husband and children will be caught in the bubbles — because they informed important moments of the woman’s life. And there will be ‘in-the-bubble’ representations of other significant life moments too.

“In the background, I’ll collage landscapes near where she lives. Land is important. Where we live has to be in the portrait too.”

Envisaging what her suite on ageing will look like — when staged in a big space like a public hall — and what its impact will be, Alana says: “On the wall will be picture after picture of older people – and around their feet bubbles to do with their story and the places they lived.

“And when you leave that hall and meet an older person, you might be more inclined to enquire about their story, where they lived, about their life. Because this is what makes them who they are — not their age.”

Alana has spent much of her working life in academia, having shelved her dream of being a fulltime artist in her 30s. The decision — made in Denver, Colorado — was one of her “moments in time”, changing the direction of her life.

“I’d done a very large quilt for rock-star Frank Zappa, made out of ladies’ underwear he’d collected during a tour. It looked like the Queen of Spades. It took a year to do and I presented it at a one-woman show — it was every artist’s dream.”

But it was a conversation post-exhibition that irrevocably shifted Alana’s trajectory. “Someone said ‘oh it’s you — you who did this’. I left the conversation feeling very hollow. Because it was as though they weren’t looking at me — but over my shoulder at something behind me.

“And I realised this is fame — not looking at the person, but looking at what they’ve done. It changed my direction. I asked: ‘was this what I wanted my life to be?’ And I knew it wasn’t to be a famous artist.”

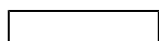
Alana feels lucky to be rekindling her passion for art at this life-stage: “At 30, what I’d have said would have been nothing to what I would say now, as an older person with a life, a voice.”

And she feels fortunate technology provides opportunities, impossible with older ways of doing art. “My passion’s in digital art, which involves taking and curating photos, collaging them using digital re-sizing and reformatting techniques, ending up with 20 or more layers to manipulate.” It’s all done using her iPad and graphics App Procreate. “I’d rather use Procreate than draw or paint. I do it with so much more precision than I ever could have got. It can go as fast as my mind, whereas a painting used to take six months.” It is, she says, the “most perfect thing that my art went underground” while technology developed massively during her lifetime.

Her project series on ageing is “the most fun possible”. She gets to meet people, to have really intimate conversations with them. “In that process of hearing their stories, and pulling out the most important parts, I make a visual dialogue.” At last year’s Biennale International Art Exhibition in Venice, Alana was struck by the big issues artists are now exploring, e.g. climate change. Venice taught her to think big, to embrace ageing. Her portrait series is a project that’ll keep her going for years, she says, and she wants to show it in big spaces.

And she agrees it’s a big undertaking for potential subjects. But for those who participate, she says it’ll be a reflective process for them. “By the time they’ve gone through collecting what I will need, they’ll have reflected on their lives. They’ll have a platform for feeling stronger about their lives — that ‘being an older person means I’ve done all this stuff. I am strong. I did live this life. It’s a good life’.”

- View Alana’s digital art at <https://ealanajames.com/>
- Enquire about participating in the project:
alana@ealanajames.com



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