

She is both determined and a perfectionist. If things are not done to her standards, Rachel Heller does them again until they are right. You can see this in her work, in her careful, yet bold strokes and the erasure and correction of mistakes. Accident and chance do not play a large part in her working process, which is built on craft, a long apprenticeship with her materials, time spent with paint, crayon and clay. For all their wild and stunning juxtaposition of colour and form there is a certainty to her work that says 'this is the world, this is how it is'.

She has gained this knowledge through working. For most of her life Rachel Heller has drawn and painted. She has sketched at art school, at weekends in museums and galleries (the Victoria and Albert being a favourite), at summer schools and of course at home, where she has been surrounded by painting and sculpture. She has had a number of mentors who have given her technique and developed her style. The list of people Rachel has worked with is impressive: Max Ellis at West London College; Ann Dowker, Nathan Cohen and Gethin Evans at Byam Shaw School of Art; Dave King at Working Men's College; John Lessore, Julie Held, Susan Wilson, Francis Hoyland, Ivy Smith, Andy Pankhurst and Marcus Cornish at The Prince's Drawing School, to name but a few.

In this it's important to dispel a myth often repeated about people with Down Syndrome: Rachel Heller is not 'gifted' with her ability, it hasn't come 'naturally' to her: rather she has laboured at it, developing a body of work through persistence and determination. That is not to say that Down Syndrome is not relevant to her career—those born with the condition show a strong bias towards visual communication and visual memory—but to emphasise that her achievements were not given, but achieved through passion and developed through education. As such, she is not dissimilar to any artist: the tradition of the visionary in possession of a unique gift tends to gloss over years of apprenticeship and tuition. With Rachel Heller, though, there is a political point to make. When she was born, in 1972, Down Syndrome children had no legal recourse to education. While the situation has changed and improved, Rachel is testament to the benefits of a long and full access to quality education, of the same standard as available to anyone else.

Her achievements can be celebrated in two ways. Firstly as an artist of particular skill and secondly as a woman with Down Syndrome. The two can and should be separated. The first is self-evident: it is the reason her work sells and likely the reason you are reading this introduction. What she does with colour and form is direct and audacious. Take for example her recent series of pastel seascapes in this exhibition: all united by a

remarkable, distinctive economy of line. Yet Rachel's style has an atmospheric quality that encompasses a range of emotions, from a brooding anxiety to a joyous celebration of delight. These feelings do not seem to be properties of the artist transferred to the page, they appear to be drawn out of her subjects. In this way her work reminds me of Josef Herman, whom her father collected and published a book on. Rachel's subjects are more traditional: the landscape, the reclining or seated figure, the still life. In Rachel's work these forms repeat anew.

That is to celebrate Rachel Heller the artist, disarming and brilliant as she is. The reasons she should be celebrated as someone with Down Syndrome are much less complex: it is because she has had a long, successful career. Rachel has worked with purpose, developing her technique and her confidence. This determination, will and ability demonstrates the attainment that people with Down Syndrome are capable of given full access to education and the encouragement to work creatively. In this, her family have been instrumental in ensuring she has had every opportunity to excel. Rachel's mother is Angela Flowers, the gallerist and her father was Robert Heller, the writer. Both had no qualms in encouraging Rachel to be an artist and were all too happy to support her education and career.

None of this has meant that Rachel's success as an artist was assured, of course. She has always worked in a climate where people with disability have been treated differently. While there has been positive change in regards to education in her lifetime, she has also seen a huge increase in practices of pregnancy testing and termination. While it is important to emphasise women's rights to end their pregnancies (for whatever reason), this is symptomatic of wider, cultural attitudes towards those with Down Syndrome. It is for this reason that it remains essential to celebrate Rachel's career as an artist.

In some ways Rachel's work documents her life: there is always fruit on the table, trips to galleries and sea views at home in Ramsgate or on holiday in Rosscarbery, County Cork. She does not always work in situ. Rachel has a formidable memory and can recall scenes and moments with uncanny accuracy and detail. Her memory is connected to her deep love of music, especially for the decade in which she was a teenager, the 1980s. She could tell you what the top ten in the charts was to accompany a particular scene or image. This hints at a heightened relationship between time and place, sound and colour. Her work flows like music, with repeated motifs, bright, vibrant melodies and dark timbres.

Because nothing is forgotten to Rachel, death troubles and fascinates her. I was once caught in a car crash with her. She was visiting me in Sheffield and we were driving to a gig in the centre of the city. A car raced past us at a large roundabout and then another shunted into our bumper, reversed and then shunted into us again. There were four of us in the car: two in the front, two in the back. I was pretty shocked, couldn't really do much but try to make sense of what had happened. I remember that Rachel turned and spoke, in her low, quiet voice, of public figures that had died in car accidents. The deaths of musicians, friends and family members stay present with her. She meditates on them. She will often remember someone who has gone in her conversation.

She likes order and routine, everything being in its place, just so. I remember she once went through my record collection and removed all the cellophane wrappers. Cupboards are organised the way she likes them organised. The way Rachel lives her life has informed me. Knowing her has made me think about living with Down Syndrome which has in turn led me on to read and learn about it. Yet of course we have a friendship aside of this, based around the finer things in life: pop music, food and dancing. Her days are measured out in the time it takes to listen to this song, followed by that song, then another, switching between CD and record in a prescribed order. This is her careful method to liberation: when she hears music she lets go, sings and experiences all the pleasures of the moment. Going to a live concert with Rachel is a mischievous and fun experience. We would do this in Sheffield. She would come up with her brother Adam, who would go off walking in the Peaks, leaving Rachel and myself to go to gigs and shop for records.

We never talk about her art and work. Rachel keeps it separate. I've never seen her draw or paint. Her working practices remain somewhat mysterious to me and she never knows quite what to say when I ask her about them. I suspect her art fascinates, intrigues and delights her as much as it does everyone else, which is why she is drawn to it and why she continues to produce such compelling and original work.

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