







## Young Talent

# Emilia Griffiths

## All I am, all I feel

By Julia Pasarón

**For as long as she can remember, Emilia (Millie) Griffiths has been passionate about art. From colouring to drawing to making little sculptures with whatever materials she could find lying around the house. However, this Pre-Raphaelite-like beauty was not drawing unicorns or painting flowers; figurative art has never been her thing, her heart was set on abstract from the first time she picked up a crayon. Now 21, she is already selling her work to devoted admirers and embarking onto a new adventure at the University of the Arts, London.**

Looking at her paintings in her apartment in Notting Hill, despite the disparity of styles, techniques and subjects, there is a thread that connects them all: primary colours. "As a young kid I loved Spider-Man and I think that I may get my affinity with primary colours from it," she explains laughing, "but the truth is that I am not sure. Maybe it just reflects the bright childhood I had."

Her talent was rewarded quite early on. When she was eight, she won a

competition at school. She drew a horse jumping a cliff with the rider hanging from the saddle for dear life, inspired by her favourite film at the time, *Spirit*. Despite not adhering to the theme instructed by the school – she can't even remember what it was at the time – she was the unanimous winner and that success empowered her to continue painting what she wanted and not follow anybody else's rules.

All of a sudden though, she turned all her attention to sport, relegating art to a very secondary place in her life. "I won a race when I was 11 and I got hooked to the adrenaline of it," she shares, "so much so that after that I tried every sport I could, among them hockey, football and judo." She was very good at football and exceptional at hockey, which earned her a scholarship to her secondary school. She then played for Surrey County and went on to do England Under 18 trials.

And then, as suddenly as she started, she stopped and returned to art. "I felt I had achieved all I wanted in hockey. Being an athlete requires a massive

amount of sacrifice; you have to drop everything else and be fully devoted to it. I wanted to have a normal life."

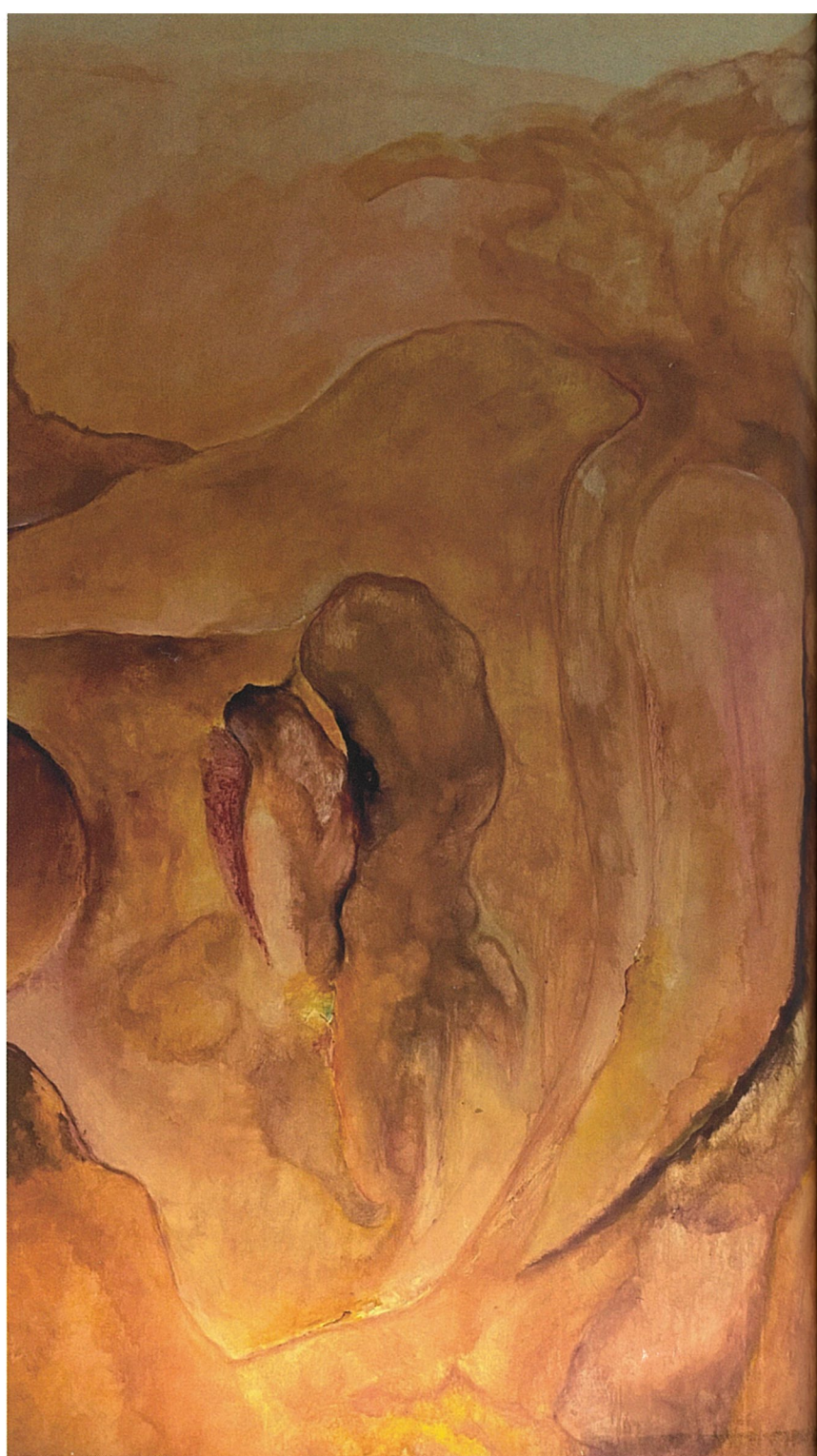
She believes that her experience with hockey influenced her art. "They bring out similar feelings," Millie explains, "to me, they are both about muscle memory, quick decisions, focus and skill. I could put all my energy into painting as I had done with hockey."

Her education in art started in her primary school, which had a great arts programme. "From an early age we were told about all the masters, like Picasso, Matisse and Kandinsky, all of whom I love to this day; but it was Chris Ofili and his painting *No Woman No Cry* which I think impacted me the most. It was very inspiring." At boarding school she got to experiment with just about everything, from screen printing and acrylics to photography and take her first steps towards a career in art. At 16 years of age, she decided she wanted to paint for a living and never looked back. "I remember the moment quite vividly," says Millie, "I was looking at two large paintings





*Stress and Release*, by Emilia Griffiths.



I had recently finished and the feeling I got was overwhelming. That's when I knew."

For Millie, art is all about feelings, about translating her experiences on to the canvas, from her everyday life as well as from her holidays, moments with her family, with her friends. "That's what helps me create my own artistic language, the reason why I love abstract so much. My art is a bit like a diary of my life. I suppose my sketchbooks are exactly that." She is so in sync with her work that she reckons she sees something different every time she looks at one of her paintings. "It is almost as when you suddenly remember something you thought you had forgotten, or when a memory you were not aware of pops into your head. I love seeing my art hanging on walls because that way I can kind of see my past and that inspires my way into the future." It is no wonder that

when asked to define herself as an artist in three words, she replies without hesitation: "Alive, passionate and adventurous."

Part of her evolution as an artist is the diversity of media with which she works: acrylics, oil pastels, oils... "I like layering colours and using different supplies to do so. The first base is treated in a very different way to the final layer," explains Millie. "Basically, I love experimenting but without overdoing it, as I am currently concentrating on working on my style."

As with any other artist, Millie's style has changed over the years, often reflecting the painters who were influencing her the most at each stage of her development. In her early years, it was the likes of Graham Sutherland and Pablo Picasso. Later on, she got fascinated by surrealism. "I adore Dalí, even if I don't understand why, because

the truth is that I can't relate at all to his paintings, but I just find fascinating the way he tries to interpret the subconscious."

These days, Millie feels in her work the influence of Georgia O'Keeffe, Basquiat and even Banksy. "I love seeing art that is very different to mine, each in its own way, like it is the case with these artists," she comments, "I learn from it and it gives me ideas."

As a young woman, Millie is aware of how privileged she is that she can devote her life to her artistic calling. "I do realise how lucky I am. That if I had been born in a different place or in a different environment, I wouldn't have been able to pursue my passion, not to mention in a different time. Women in the history of art were not taken seriously at all." She does have a point. Up until well into the 20th century,



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female artists – but for rare exceptions – were considered second-class citizens, regardless of how talented they were.

As a Generation Z kid, Millie reckons that social media somehow helps both as a tool for self-promotion and to discover the world of art. “Of course, it is not the same as seeing a painting or a sculpture in the flesh, but it is better than not being exposed to art at all. At the same time, it makes artists much more accessible.” A good example of this is visual artist Friedrich Kunath, whom she discovered on Instagram and with whose art she has fallen in love. “I was surprised by the similarities I found between his work and mine,” explains Millie, “particularly in the use of primary colours, although his art is more figurative than mine. In a way he made me think of directions in which I could take my work. I was so spellbound that I actually contacted him!”

Millie very much enjoys the solitude that comes with painting. “To me, it is a sort of meditation,” she shares, “staring at the blank canvas and getting transfixed by it. That is how my creative process starts.” On the other hand, by her own admission, she finds it difficult having to create against a deadline. “I always found that difficult in school, having to do art on a certain day, at a certain time instead of when I felt the impulse to do it. I hope it is different at university. But maybe it will help to keep my mind ticking and to keep me grounded,” she adds with a slightly nervous smile.

Fast-forwarding five years, Millie sees herself living in Berlin, as she is very interested in the art scene in that city, “especially in abstract”, she specifies. “I find it very mature. I love conceptual art, installations, that sort of thing; and Berlin seems to lead the way.” Berlin is not the

only place where she would like to go to explore art. She loves travelling and hopes to do a lot of it over the years. “Travelling brings you new experiences, often intense ones, and my art is all about expressing my experiences and my feelings. Travelling puts a date stamp on my work, and I like the idea of, in the future, looking back at my paintings and remembering the places and experiences that inspired them.”

I am impressed not only with the talent of this young artist, but also by her determination, passion and ambition. I hope to interview her again in a few years... maybe in Berlin. ■

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