

BEHIND THE SCENES AT THE MUSEUM

Royal Academician **STEPHEN FARTHING** talks to **NATALIE MILNER** about his practice of painting gallery interiors, art and all

A pair of piercing green eyes look out from the canvas in Royal Academician Stephen Farthing's work *The Museum of a Slice of America: Madison Ave*. Who are they looking at and why? In a gallery, their gaze falls on the viewer; in the studio, they look at their creator. This motif runs through the works in the artist's latest exhibition, *Museums of the World*, which brings to the fore our relationship between art and environment.

For the show, which runs until 14 April across two Sussex venues, the painter has brought together 18 of his acrylic paintings of illustrious institutions. You may recognise London's Royal Academy of Arts, New York's Metropolitan Museum and the Whitney Museum of American Art. Yet, these venues weren't chosen for their prestige, they just happened to be where Stephen was living and working at the time. "Although my work is to do with art history, contemporary art and people's relationship with art, there is also another side to it," says Stephen. "I have known the Tate and the National Gallery all my life. I have lived in Washington twice, for up to a year. I would get to know the collections." The paintings are autobiographical, existing in dialogue with his favourite objects and artworks to create a new reality. "That's one of the useful sides of painting," he says. "You can paint things you believe will never happen; you can paint things you would like to happen. They're like prototypes of another world."

RIGHT *The Museum of a Slice of America, Madison Ave*, Whitney Museum, Manhattan, acrylic on canvas, 70x112cm

Stephen would start a new work with a sweep of a gallery, selecting three to six items and, setting aside their artistic or historical importance, let experience lead. "Anything less [than three] wouldn't be enough because it would be about the relationship between two pictures, or one picture and the architecture," he explains, "and any more than six would begin to look a bit like wallpaper."



Then he would form an image in his mind by toying with placement and scale, taking into account the architecture of the venue. "It's all about composition and establishing a relationship between things through colour, shape and, in the end, probably a narrative that has developed in my head," he adds.

There's a narrative of shape, form and line, too. In *The Museum of a Slice of America: Madison Ave*, based on Manhattan's Whitney Museum, the repetitive cake wedges mirror the window's sharp angles. Then there's the playful clash of classical and geometric patterns in a fictitious open-air museum in *The Museum of Pictorial Floors, Rome*.

STEPHEN FARTHING

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STEPHEN FARTHING: INSIDE THE ROYAL ACADEMY OF ARTS

"The exhibitions committee is the point at which the intellectual and creative side of the Academy interfaces strongly with the financial side. The Royal Academy of Arts receives no funding from the government, running entirely on the Friends and money earned by putting on exhibitions. It's where we make sense of a creative

programme that represents the ideas and ideology of the members. Just because an artist is famous it doesn't necessarily mean they're good. We're currently looking at shows for 2021/22. And of course one gets to see a lot of art – it is one of the things that has got me painting art galleries."



The galleries are on a grand scale, but Stephen's artworks measure 70x112cm, making them easy to transport and hang. This is no accident. He complements his creativity with a commercial mind-set honed by his role as the Royal Academy of Arts' exhibitions chairman. "Paintings, if they don't go into museums, are part of people's domestic décor," he continues, "so they have to fit into the spaces that people live."

For this project, Stephen would work quickly, sketch shapes and ideas in pencil or black fountain pen in a book no bigger than his hand, and then work on the canvas elsewhere. His vision would evolve by drawing loosely on a flat canvas with white blackboard chalk, having first applied a ground. Almost immediately, he'd wash off the marks and paint the shape he'd imagined, and repeat. This sketching process allows experimentation and a sense of freedom.

Stephen trained at London's St Martin's School of Art and the Royal College of Art under esteemed tutors such as John Golding and Peter de Francia, the latter being hugely influential in his intellectual approach to art. Tutor Howard

Hodgkin's enthusiasm for Stephen's work was a catalyst for the then young artist, and led to a painting which was his first to be accepted by a museum, and went on to win a John Moores Painting Prize.

A successful artistic and academic career followed, but Stephen is still able to surprise himself. Speaking about *The Museum of Exotic Modernism: St Angel*, his recent depiction of artist Diego Rivera's former studio in Mexico City, he laughs: "I painted it as it is. I didn't invent much, it was so weird and interesting. There's probably less of me in it than any of [the paintings]." His curatorial eye wasn't needed: the stage was set, papier mache models engaging the domestic studio it once was with the public museum it is now. And, committed to canvas, Stephen's painting of it becomes a treasured exhibit of its own.

Museums of the World runs from 3 March to 14 April at Candida Stevens Gallery, Chichester, PO19, and at the private gallery of art collector Simon Draper, Manor Place Museum, Chilgrove, Sussex, on 10 March. www.candidastevens.com; www.stephenfarthing.co.uk

ABOVE *The Museum of Exotic Modernism St Angel*, Diego Rivera's studio, St Angel, Mexico City, acrylic on canvas, 70x112cm

STEPHEN'S TOP TIPS FOR CANVAS GROUNDS

- **LEAVE BLANK SPACE** I sometimes paint on raw linen primed with a transparent acrylic base so I can see the brownness. One of the best things about drawing is blank space.
- **LET THE GROUND SHOW** When a bit of ground comes through the picture, it acts as

a reminder of how thick the paint is and where the painting began. I put a lot of emphasis on the colours I start with.

- **TRY ORANGE** A brilliant orange ground does stuff to colours. It interacts and creates unusual mixes. It even shows through black

to create a brown you'd never mix. If you put white over orange you get the most fantastic glowing white, but it's pinkish.

- **BACK TO BLACK** I sometimes prime in a grey or black to condition a painting. It starts you off with something positive, not negative.



TOP RIGHT *The Museum of Pictorial Floors, Rome*, a fictitious museum, acrylic on canvas, 70x112cm

BOTTOM RIGHT *The Museum of Vernal Entertainment*: London, The Royal Academy of Arts, London, acrylic on canvas, 70x112cm

