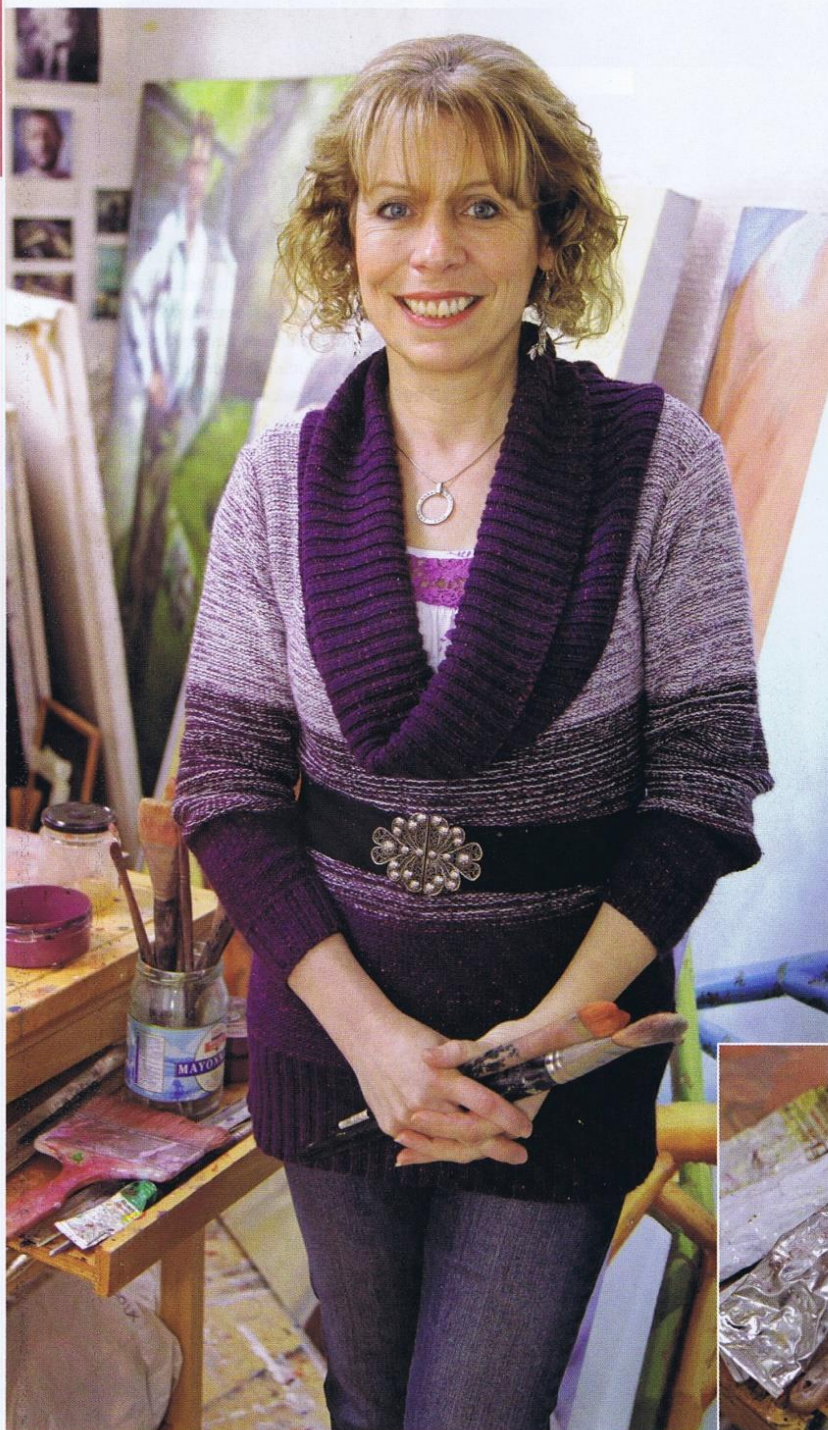


on the job

In the studio with **CLAIRE PHILLIPS**

WORDS & PHOTOS: STEVE PILL



THE ARTIST

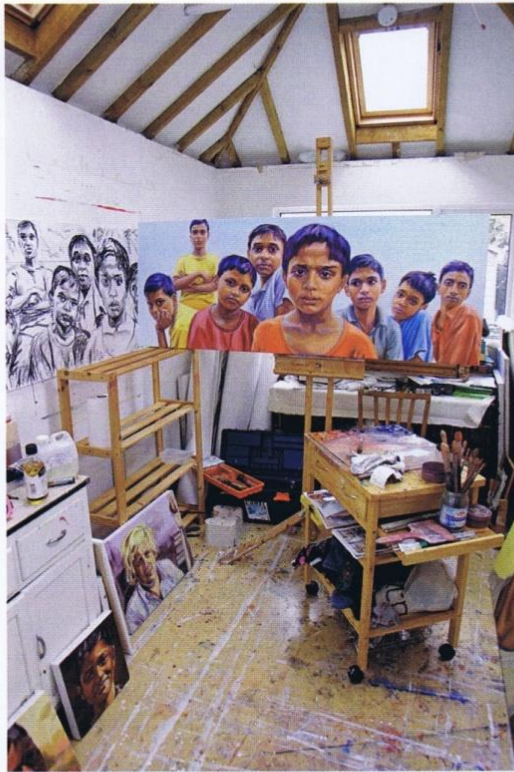
Now a leading portrait painter and member of the Association of Sussex Artists, Claire Phillips actually arrived at art quite late on. Born in Hammersmith in 1963, she initially trained as an engineer. When she took a break from working to have her three daughters, she turned to life drawing as a hobby: "It was originally about finding a bit of time for me!"

However, following encouragement from her tutor, she signed up to a five-year, part-time degree in fine art at Sussex's Northbrook College. "It was amazing," she says of the course. "I sold two paintings from my degree show and that gave me a boost."

Determined to keep up the momentum, the first thing Claire did on leaving the college was to arrange an exhibition for herself and a few fellow students in a year's time. "You have to be proactive," she explains, "you have to go out of college and get yourself seen. I arranged the exhibition so we would have something to work towards."

The 49-year-old artist now paints full-time from a garage in her Sussex home, which she has converted into a studio thanks to the addition of new windows in the sloping roof.





THE PROJECT

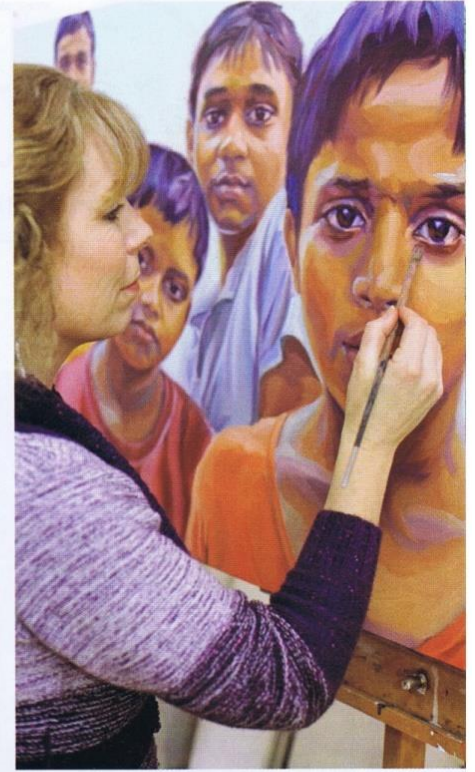
After graduating from college, Claire began a series of paintings called *The Human Face of Death Row*. She worked with the human rights charity Reprieve, meeting the families of inmates and painting prisoners on death row. The portraits were exhibited at London's Oxo Gallery in 2009 and after this she was keen to find a similar project.

"I didn't want to keep going over the same thing so I was looking for another idea. I really find it interesting to paint people who I feel have got a story to tell."

She chanced upon an article in *The Sunday Times* about the Indian charity Bachpan Bachao Andolan, known as the Save the Childhood Movement, which aims to free children from exploitation and promote ethical trade practices. "I put a proposal to them and they were really excited about it," she says. "They are really keen for western people to understand that this is going on, and if you're buying something really cheap with lots of handwork in it, then you need to maybe question where you are getting it and put pressure on the manufacturers."

For this new project, Claire and her husband visited the charity's immediate rescue home in Delhi. "I did a lot of art classes and games with the children. That was quite emotional actually because the little ones that had just been rescued had never drawn before, so they started drawing the patterns that a lot of them had been sewing onto garments. They'd had no chance to express their imagination before that."

She is currently working on a new series of portraits, based on photographs of these Indian children, which she intends to exhibit next year.



THE PROCESS

Despite her background in life drawing, it wouldn't have been practical for Claire to sketch all of the faces required for her project on location. Instead, she took hundreds of photos and began working through them on her return.

It was, however, important to have had that initial contact. "A lot of it is about meeting the children first-hand," she explains. "Meeting someone, taking their photos, and interacting with them. It's hard to paint someone if you haven't had that personal relationship."

While Claire admires the work of legendary *National Geographic* photographer Steve McCurry – "he's got a fantastic eye for composition" – she admits her own photos aren't up to scratch so she tweaks them in Photoshop and pieces together multiple portraits to make a composition. "The painting of the eight boys in my studio now is taken from several photos. I don't hide that in my paintings. I feel that photography is a fantastic art form."

With the face settled upon, she will draw it out with charcoal sticks on a large scale to familiarise herself with it and see if it works. Several drawings hang in the laundry room just outside the studio door, ready to be tackled.

The painting begins with oils from Seawhite of Brighton, a company that is literally based around the corner from her studio. The choice isn't only based on convenience; Claire enjoys the fact that they stay wet for longer and blend very smoothly. "I work in quite big strokes and so you have to step back to see how you are getting on. I prefer not to get dragged down into the detail or look too photographic. I would rather it was a bit more expressive."

www.clairephillips.com