



COUNTRY ESTATE  
SPORTING ARTIST

## Art in the field

John Fitzgerald captures the thrill of a race day not with a camera but with a paint brush or sketch pad. He tells Janet Menzies how.

SURELY there is nothing to beat the feeling of walking into Cheltenham Racecourse on a Festival morning. The car parks are filling up but the stands are still empty as streams of racegoers make their way determinedly to their favourite bars. The craic in the Guinness Village is in full swing long before the first horse is led into the pre-parade ring, and there's talk of a good thing in the second race. It is John Fitzgerald's job to capture these heightened moments live on canvas.

He admits: "It is quite high pressure doing it live, in front of an audience, but the more you do it the more confident you get. I am trying to capture all the elements of the day and to convey the energy of the occasion. The movement, the colours and the light are all so important. In a painting at Royal Ascot I depicted ladies walking over to the course from the picnic area. I made it very impressionistic, and people love it. I hope it has a timeless quality."

County Meath-based Fitzgerald started live painting at the Dublin Horse Show. "It was a way to meet people and engage with an audience, but then I was asked if I would do a weekend at The Curragh and paint there as well. That led to me becoming artist-in-residence at The Curragh and now I have my own studio and gallery there. I can't really paint live at the big Derby weekends because it is just too busy. I prefer to paint at the smaller meetings, and particularly the evening meetings – working in the late afternoons you get lovely sunsets, that is wonderful."

Fitzgerald first took his easel over to England for the 2014 Cheltenham Festival, where Channel 4 Racing filmed him painting AP McCoy's portrait as well as doing running sketches around the parade ring and weighing room.

Fitzgerald explains: "I go round the racecourse and do a lot of quick sketches. You have to remember what was going on and I video it to help me remember. You can't really paint horses while they are jumping the fences because you can't be right there – it would be dangerous. I record it on my iPad, it triggers the memories and the feelings."

Last season, Fitzgerald was hoping to take his work to Aintree to capture Tiger Roll in the COVID-hit Grand National, so the race remains on his to-do list. He remembers: "Growing up in Ireland, every Saturday we had BBC Grandstand and it was Peter O'Sullivan, Julian Wilson and Richard Pitman, and I remember their Grand National commentaries so well. I was always keen on horses, and my father was big into his racing. Fairyhouse is about 10 miles from me and I used to spend a lot of time there with my dad."

As Fitzgerald spent as much time as he could in the weighing room at Fairyhouse Racecourse, there was an assumption that he could become a jockey – until the inevitable teenage growth spurt.

Instead, Fitzgerald studied industrial design in Ireland and Wales before joining his father in his estate agency. He remembers: "The art was a slow burn. I had a little studio and I had started painting but I was in the family business. Then I got a commission to paint a horse and things took off from there."

Fitzgerald counts his main influence as Munnings, and it is also easy to see his love of Degas in the fluidity and looseness of his paintings of horses at the start. "I don't think I was consciously influenced by Degas, but when I was younger I used to look at the ballet dancers series and I love the perspective, which was high, looking down on the dancers. Another influence has been Joaquin Sorolla, who is known as the Spanish Master of Light, and his work is all about light. I am very inspired by his use of colour."

This can be traced not just in the racing scenes but also Fitzgerald's horse portraits for owners of their famous winners. "The horses have such different characters and you get a sense of the horse when you are painting, so I try to convey that in a painterly way, although you also have to remember that owners will want detail."

Fitzgerald's 2021 project was to have been a major exhibition in the autumn, but he feels this is unfeasible. Instead, he's picking up another strand of his work: "I began doing sculpture as an extension



from working in 3D design, and now I want to work on it again and develop my style. I want to gain a certain looseness and movement that I think I have achieved in my painting. It has taken a little while of experimentation, but I think with horses I have found my style." ■



John Fitzgerald is artist-in-residence at The Curragh ([curragh.ie](http://curragh.ie)). He visits and exhibits at UK racecourses regularly. You can also see his work on his website: [johnfitzgeraldart.ie](http://johnfitzgeraldart.ie) and on Facebook at John Fitzgerald Art



Top: 2019 Irish Champion Hurdle winner Apple's Jade. Above: Frankie and Enable. Right: bronze of an Irish stallion. Far right: Royal Ascot, Trackside

