

Having hosted a solo exhibition in London, artist Suzy Murphy joins an auspicious list. But her upbringing was less so. She tells **Sarah Caden** about growing up one of 11 in a tiny flat with her Irish family, and how she was considered privileged and poor at the same time



Suzy Murphy leads me up the stairs of her artist's studio. We're on FaceTime. She's in London, in the almost secret Italian village near Fulham, and I'm in Dublin, but her screen leads me up to the mezzanine to find a watercolour she painted aged nine. She also has a neatly made bed up there, and on the way back down the stairs, Murphy directs my attention to the far end of the lower floor, where there's a small but perfectly formed kitchen area. One could happily move into this studio, I observe.

"I do. I sleep here," Murphy says, cheerily. "Though not all the time, obviously, because I have to go home and feed my family."

So, there is her actual home, and there is the studio, which Murphy has had for 15 years and is her home away from home. Keeping her two homes and her two lives quite distinct, Murphy says, is the key to making both work.

She did not bring her, now grown-up, three sons to the studio to mess around with paints and canvases when they were little. Securing the studio as hers alone was important and separate to being a mother. There was regularly that feeling other mothers will recognise – of doing all things and all of them badly – but she persisted. If you really want something, Murphy says, you must keep going and keep doing it, and an artist is what Murphy always wanted to be.

She drew obsessively as a child and was a bit of prodigy – see the watercolour at age nine – and all without any family involvement or interest in art. She studied at Central Saint Martins in London and painted landscapes when, as she says, they weren't at all fashionable.

These landscapes capture her emotions, rather than her surroundings. She is an artist of recurring images, including a lurcher-type dog she calls "Toby was a girl", as indeed her childhood pet was. Recent paintings feature little burning houses – symbolic of the desire to destroy the domestic or, as an artist and a woman, find yourself destroyed by it.



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Left: Suzy Murphy in her studio. Picture by Emma Hardy and Stephanie Wolff

"I was a love child," she says in a stage whisper, when I ask about her beginnings, as part of a large Irish family in the East End of London.

As a young child, she was one of 11 living in a small flat in Whitechapel, much like the Irish corporation flats of the 1960s and 1970s. It was her grandparents' flat, where they had raised their eight children. Her mother was 18 when she was born and they lived there, until Murphy was five, with her grandparents, aunts, uncles and even her grand-uncle, Noel.

"My grandma was a typical strong Irish woman who had eight children after the age of 30. Noel was her brother – 15 years younger than her. So he wasn't much older than me and we shared a birthday."

Unlike a lot of London Irish, her family's relationship with Ireland wasn't that close. They weren't a family who returned every year, or sent the kids over every summer to throw off their shoes and city ways. Noel never came back once he left Ireland, she recalls, and her grandparents returned only occasionally.

When relatives came to visit, it was often when they were sick, as the flat was near a major London hospital. So they weren't joyous occasions, she explains, though nights they visited often ended with singing *Danny Boy* and weeping.

"My grandma was from Ballyclare [Co Antrim] and my grandparents got married in Northern Ireland and then moved to London with four of their children. My grandpa, I'm not sure where he was from exactly, but he was a bit of both – a bit English and a bit Irish. I think his family had moved back and forth. My grandma was Protestant, but the children were raised Catholic, so I suppose she was in huge disgrace. There's probably a story there."

Most likely there is, but Murphy doesn't believe it's hers to tell.

The Whitechapel flat was a cramped space – with a toilet but no bathroom – but it was the place where Murphy was loved and cherished.

"Because my mum was young, I was close in age to her siblings. My uncles Sean and Barry were eight and 10 when I was born. I was raised like another child. I was very much the baby of the family. Everything was, 'Don't make Suzy cry'. They'd be in trouble if they made Suzy cry. And I had all these aunts and uncles who were made to play with me, and downstairs we had Nelly Connolly from Waterford, whose children were also made to play with me. So I was quite pampered in all this poverty and it didn't feel poor at all."

When she was five, Murphy left these close connections and moved to Canada.

"I went with my mom and my stepfather to Alberta, Canada. There was a big push to get people out of the slums and into the Commonwealth. They just wanted to clear the slums, I think and now they wouldn't let 11 people live in one flat with three bedrooms and no bathroom. So we ended up in Alberta for a few years, which really influenced me."

"That's when art became really important to me. I was obsessively drawing from that very young age."

Her work appears to be all over her studio, though at the time we speak, much of the recent paintings are in a solo exhibition called 'Of Dark and Light' at the Lyndsey Ingram gallery in London. That show ended just before Christmas, during which time she was also selected to decorate The Connaught's Christmas tree.

This honour was something she found particularly thrilling, not only because it's one the prestigious hotel previously bestowed on artistic big hitters such as Damien Hirst, Antony Gormley, Sean Scully and Tracey Emin. Murphy's tree featured 'Toby is a girl' as a series of neon dogs running around the branches of the tree. In Murphy's art, the impact and impressions of her earliest years are always there.

Whitechapel remained home, even when she was in Canada. "I was very deeply homesick for my grandparents, and my great-uncle Noel and the dog and my »

» cousins. And I think I made the landscape my home. Where we were was really rural, on the edge of the prairies, and I desperately wanted to get back to the East End. I made my peace with it to an extent, and when we did come back to London, when I was about seven, I really missed Canada. I was kind of Canadian by then and had this awful Canadian-East End accent."

Back in London, her mother and stepfather opened a sweet shop in Clapham and the three of them lived above it. They then took the decision to send Suzy to a fee-paying prep school. "That set me free. [My mother] wanted me to have advantages, I suppose. I was the child in the family perceived as having the least and she wanted to give me a good start.

She says she had never perceived herself as the child with the least, but going to a private school definitely changed things. "I was in this weird situation where I was the poorest kid at school, and then got teased in the East End for my posh accent. It's strange to say I spent every summer in Whitechapel, but I did, and I went home to my grandparents a lot of weekends. That was still where I gravitated."

After studying art at Saint Martin's, Murphy says it wasn't easy to launch a life as an artist. "It was a struggle. Obviously, I came from a background where no one was going to support me, but I was really lucky at the beginning. I got some really good breaks at the beginning and then it was a struggle, but then I got married, which meant things were easier financially, but then there's the struggle of motherhood."

Her husband is Irish-Irish, born and raised in Dublin. Murphy is his name, as Riley was her maiden name. She'd rather not talk about him, but says she thinks it's significant that she married someone Irish and that her husband is massively supportive of her work.

"I would never have married a man who didn't completely believe that art was also my purpose. Sometimes, he's like,



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'Oh, my god, please go to the studio'. Because I'm somebody who needs to work."

They had three sons, now all in their 20s, over two-and-a-half years. "I had a newborn, a one-year-old and a two-year-and-four-months-old. I'd arrive every year at the Catholic church with a new one and with the third, the priest said: 'It's so good to meet someone living the faith.' I was thinking, 'I'm having a good word with my gynaecologist, actually'.

"It was tough, but I had help at home four days a week and that made all the difference. It meant no matter how bad the nights were, I could still go in and work. And I did. Even if it was just two or three hours, I would do it. I kept my studio. I never gave up my studio, even when the babies were small."

Up to then, Murphy had mostly worked on commissions, but while her sons were very young she cut out the tough deadlines and did small group shows. She kept at it, while also fulfilling her need to be a good mother. "In order to be there for bedtime, bathtime, all that, I couldn't do the volume of work I wanted to do.

"There are only two things in life that really ever compete. They are your children and your passion, because they are equally there within you. Of course you go through years of thinking you're doing both things badly, but it's still important to keep going at both.

"With children, you share so much of yourself. What I tried to do was keep my work separate. I wasn't one of those mothers that brought their children to the studio, or took them to shows, or was like, 'Darling, you've got to understand Cezanne'. If they'd really been interested, I'd have encouraged it, but none of them showed a lot of interest, so art was very much my world and I kept it private for me. Which, when I think back, maybe it was my way of keeping it alive, making sure it survived."

Murphy is in white, paint-splattered dungarees as we speak. White, she tells me, is her



From L-R: 'She Burns'; 'Aspen Skies'; 'Aspen Green', all Suzy Murphy
Picture courtesy Lyndsey Ingram, copyright the artist



The artist in her studio. Picture by Emma Hardy and Stephanie Wolff

work uniform. It's a habit that helps with the shift of mindset. I suggest, from home to studio and she outlines a very conscious ritual of moving from one aspect of herself to the other.

She got in the habit, many years ago, of leaving her house in the morning dressed all in black, then changing into her whites at the studio, and changing back into the



black outfit to return home again. Then, she most often changes into something more comfortable again, she laughs.

The process is effective, she says. She doesn't have to think about what to wear on rising each day; just puts on the layers of black, before stripping them off to put on her whites and become Suzy Murphy the artist, once she's at

Top right: 'In the Heart of Winter'.

Picture courtesy Lyndsey Ingram, copyright the artist

Below right: Suzy Murphy in her studio. Picture by Emma Hardy and Stephanie Wolff

work. You could nearly say it's a process of turning on and off her persona..

Her work has always enjoyed a steady following, even though she explains how it was unfashionable to be figurative in her early working life. "Everyone wanted conceptual then and I did my work never thinking I would have the level of success that I have now. It

has built steadily and authentically and I like to think that's because really, I've done it for me."

Over the years, she has dipped into different media, but painting has been her steady devotion. A motif of trees in her work turned into sculpture at one point, and out of that came a period of making jewellery.

"There was no game plan, but you get very physically tired painting or printing and I just thought, I'd like to sit down for a while, so I started making these little things and then I made this necklace." She raises a chain around her neck for me to see more clearly on camera.

"I made this necklace for me.

They're my feet. The idea I had originally for my goddaughter when she was turning 21. I thought, what would I tell someone turning 21? And I thought, keep your feet on the ground and your head in the clouds. So, they're my feet, in gold-plated brass, and then there's a cloud further up the chain."

"It's very talisman-like, it's quite heavy. So I made it for myself and then it ended up I did a collection for this really beautiful shop, Connolly in Mayfair, and it was fantastic, but it was a one-off. I'll never do jewellery again."

She threw and painted and glazed about 70 plates once she got into pottery, Murphy says, reminding me that when she does something, she does it obsessively. At least 10 of the plates are displayed on the shelf behind her, and a sculpture of "Toby was a girl" on the top shelf.

The work is all around her, and you realise that it's not only the case that Murphy's childhood beginnings show up as motifs in her work, but in how and where she works, too. The cosy studio; the stuff everywhere – not clutter, but a collated collection of little keys to who she is. It's a tiny home. It's a crowded flat. It's a highly sophisticated artist's space, but it's very much Whitechapel, too.

"Yes," says Murphy, "that flat will always be home. That will always be where I think of as home." ●