



10 MINUTES WITH...

# LUCY DICKENS

AHEAD OF A NEW EXHIBITION OF HER PAINTINGS, THE GREAT, GREAT GRANDDAUGHTER OF CHARLES DICKENS DISCUSSES THE ART OF PEOPLE WATCHING AND REVEALS WHY THE RITZ LONDON BECAME HER UNLIKELY MUSE. INTERVIEW: **KATIE MCCABE**. PHOTO: **TOM DUNKLEY**

**You've focused on *The Ritz in London* for your latest series of paintings. Why did it interest you?**

I went in there to have a cup of coffee and thought there might be some drawing opportunities. They let you sit and watch, which I have done for many hours. My parents had a date at The Ritz when my mother was 18, before they were married. The history and the colours appeal to me. This is one of the only London hotels that keeps those slightly decadent fabrics. I love the golds, and the low lighting. Now, I've done it to death [as a subject]; you work on something and then move on to the next.

**Do you invent stories about the people in your work?**

I tend to not listen in. I find if you're sitting in the corner, things happen. The way I work is quite instinctive. There are several obsessions that I have: I love flags, I love groups of uniform and I am an avid people watcher, that obsession never wavers. It's all very theatrical.

**Are you satirising your subjects in *The Ritz* series?**

It's very tongue-in-cheek. People are eating scones and cream at 11am with someone playing piano, it's mad. I am making a bit of fun, but not in a mean way.

**You're related to Charles Dickens. Do you think that pushed you towards the arts in any way?**

It's completely natural. I have three sisters who are all incredibly arty and another two siblings who just aren't. I think it was in the family, though my father never pushed it. It was never talked about. But I feel very proud of [my great, great grandfather]. Especially when I read that amazing biography, *Charles Dickens: A Life*, by Claire Tomalin. Fascinating. In a way he reminded me of my father, he was just so clever and wonderful.

**Do you have a favourite Dickens novel?**

*Great Expectations*. Like all of his novels, it's hilarious and sad at the same time. *A Christmas Carol* is the one that my dad used to read to us when we were young. I always loved that. But I am not a great scholar of Dickens.

**You started out as a stylist and fashion magazine editor for Condé Nast. What motivated you to pursue painting?**

I was pregnant, and I had been doing little illustrations for *Vogue* and *Brides*. I didn't want to spend my whole life with the people there. I left when I was 29. It was a case of feeling unfulfilled and it was a very strong pull. I taught myself to draw again, really. I wanted to paint, but as I

hadn't got the proper schooling, I thought that maybe I shouldn't even try. In the end, I worked it out for myself, which I think is how I'd like to do things. I tried all these different styles until I found my own. I feel I have a very strong style now.

**You mainly work in oils. Why do they suit your style?**

I literally think in oils. I have a strong idea of what I'm going to paint from my rough sketch, and then I paint straight onto the canvas. I find oils easy to work with. As I use thin layers of paint, I can change things immediately without waiting for the canvas to dry.

**Your work has become more colourful in recent years.**

**What brought on the change?**

It's almost like I was doing [darker paintings] because it's what was expected of me at the time. I don't do that anymore. I am painting in a much freer way. I'll be painting until I am 90; if I live until then, I know I will still have a paintbrush in my hand. I cannot let go of it.

**"IF I LIVE UNTIL I'M 90 I KNOW I'LL STILL HAVE A PAINTBRUSH IN MY HAND... I CANNOT LET GO OF IT"**

**What advice do you have for artists who wanted to introduce 'people-watching' into their painting?**

You've got to get out there with your sketchbook and be patient. If you've got a camera that's all well and good, but really you've got to draw people. If you haven't got the composition right, forget it. I find it exhausting actually; it's the composition, the light, the colour – there is so much to think about in this style of painting. It is very full on.

**Unlike many grittier London paintings, your work remains optimistic. How do you feel about the city today?**

Colour makes me optimistic. When there are grey days like today, it's quite difficult as you go out and see things you just don't want to paint, and that's why you end up in places like The Ritz because they are just so joyous and dotty. I hope people don't think I'm just completely frivolous, it sounds like I spend my whole life in The Ritz and I don't... But I must say they do a very good cup of coffee.

**Lucy's next exhibition runs from 27 April to 13 May at the Osborne Studio Gallery, London SW1. [www.lucydickens.com](http://www.lucydickens.com)**