

SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW



THERE'S NOTHING BETTER THAN BEING ON A ROLL WITH YOUR PAINTING, BUT HAVING A MOUNTAIN OF CANVASES IN YOUR STUDIO CAN MAKE YOU FEEL BOGGED DOWN. **ALICE WRIGHT** ASKS FIVE ARTISTS HOW THEY COPE WITH UNSOLD ARTWORKS. ILLUSTRATION: **MOUNI FEDDAG**



Top tip

Tired of looking at old artworks sitting around your studio? Be bold: paint over them and start afresh

From ceremonial bonfires to trips to the rubbish tip, the issue of unsold work often leads artists to take extreme action. Piles of 'unwanted' canvases can become a burden, taking up emotional energy as well as precious storage space. But some artists have developed innovative and creative ways to deal with a build up, and by exploring their possibilities, they transform unsold work into exciting new opportunities.

"Whether you're just starting out, or a well-known artist, you will always have 'unsold' work in the studio and it should be well looked after, because it's a crucial part of your practice," says Jen Larkin, artist and Creative Director of Art Eye creative consultancy. The company helps artists reach new markets, such as interior designers and specialises in 'talent spotting' art which hasn't previously been exhibited or has lacked the right promotion.

Jen's top tip is proper storage. "Sturdy, wall-height storage racks are very useful, and these can be one of the best investments for your art, by protecting it from damage," she says. "Think of it as a 'holding area', never look at it as 'stock'. Even if you've moved on, it might be

exactly what a buyer is looking for – unsold paintings are an asset, not a problem, so always be sure to photograph each piece professionally. Even if you end up painting over it, at least you'll have a record."

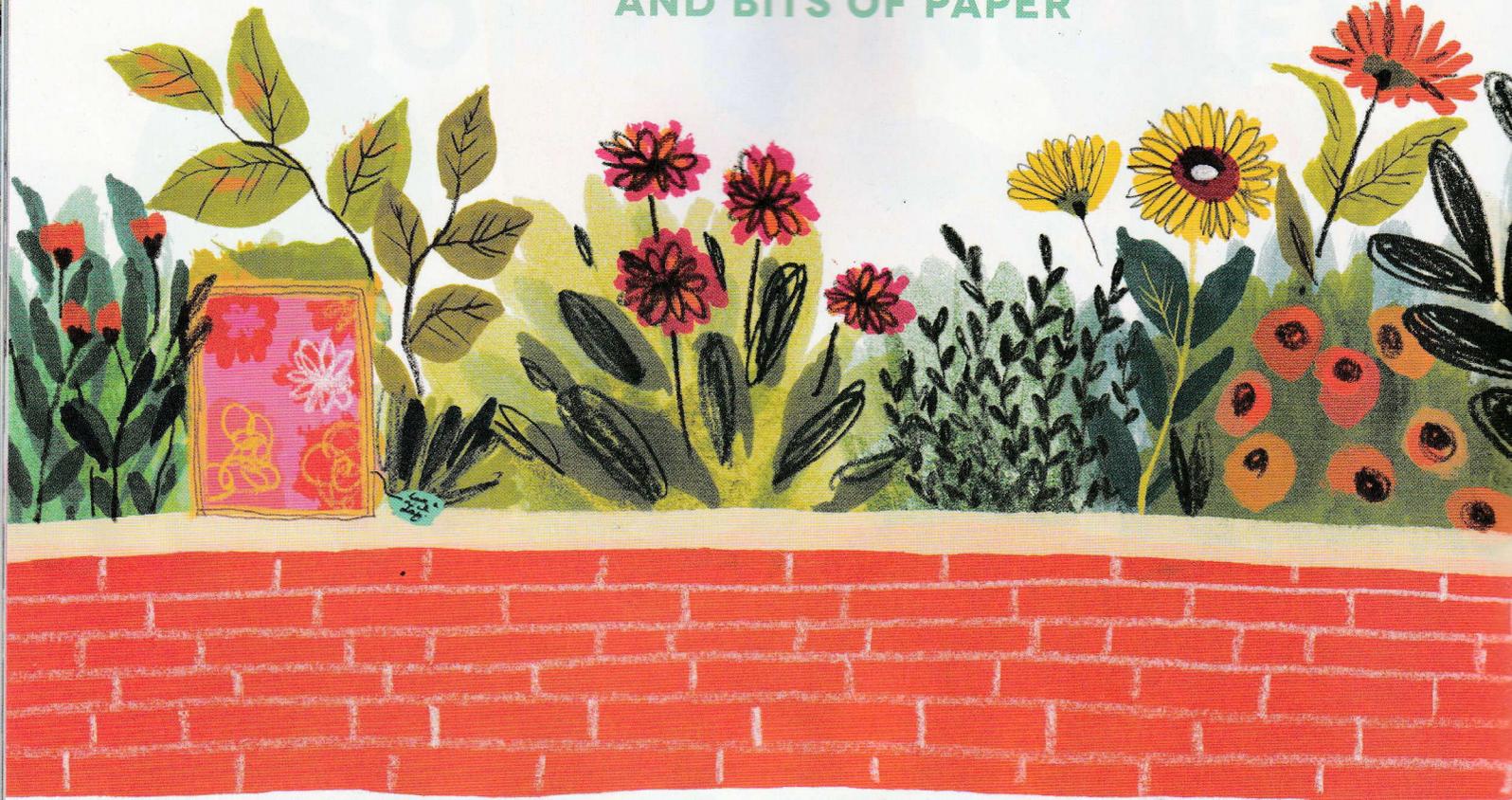
Pop artist Stephen Quick agrees that it's important to keep a record – part of his practice involves filming almost every painting from start to finish so they always exist in digital form – but other than that, he takes a slightly more pragmatic approach to unsold work. "I'm fortunate to have storage space but I do meticulously clear it out. I see it as a culling of the past. Stuff that doesn't sell isn't necessarily bad work, but if I create something that I like and it stays around me too long, I find myself trying to create that again."

Stephen regularly reassesses his work and his advice is to be clear-headed about unsold pieces, whether it's because an artist is producing too much or pricing them too high. "I'm sure people who keep everything are either not growing or not seeing why something isn't selling," he says. "You've got to become detached from your work otherwise you will drown in canvases and bits of paper."

For Stephen, 'culling' his unsold paintings is a cathartic process, and he is unafraid to paint over them. He often gives the rest away on Facebook, and they are soon snapped up by friends.

Social media is a useful way to find new owners for unsold work and some artists have even turned it into a game. Using the hashtag #freeartfriday, artists deposit work in public spaces and then post clues on Instagram and Twitter encouraging people to seek it out. Those who >

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can't face giving work away outright could try swapping with artists they admire, potentially a canny move if their work goes on to rocket in value.

And if storage is at a premium, long-running shows at venues such as bars and restaurants can help to free up space, even if it's just for a few months. "There's one at a local wine bar at the moment that's three months long," Stephen says, adding "it's got work that is not what I see as my best or most representative of what I'm doing now, but it's so that I can get it out of the studio for a while. I'm treating it as a storeroom."

London-based artist Paola Minekov has also recognised the storage potential of finding long-term hanging space. She has recently started painting and drawing again after taking time off following the birth of her daughter, and the artwork is beginning to pile up. "I'm producing quite a lot of work all of a sudden but I'm not ready to go back to exhibiting full time," she says.

Paola has always been proactive about marketing herself as an artist and was a keen networker before she had her baby. Interior designers were among the contacts she made at networking events, and Paola is now in discussion with some of them about supplying her paintings for their showhomes. She sees it as a way of getting her paintings out of the studio and potentially reaching new buyers, without the effort required for an exhibition.

As Paola has recognised, successful artists need to be

business-minded as well as talented creatives, and while unsold work isn't necessarily 'bad', it is essential to take stock if it starts to build up. It may be over-priced, in which case holding a studio sale can be a good way to have a clear out. Or it might not have reached the right buyer yet, as watercolour artist Abigail McDougall has found. "Often your unsold work will comprise pieces that are perhaps your most experimental ones, or of a subject matter that doesn't appeal to a wider audience." She suggests saving these for future exhibitions where there might be more "discerning customers".

But sometimes the assessment might be that it simply isn't up to scratch, and for Chris Insoll this represents an exciting opportunity to have another go. "I usually try to rework pieces which I think can be improved," says the Cornwall-based artist. "Indeed in these cases I take the kind of risks which I might not with a new piece." Chris describes how he, and other artists, often 'tighten up' over the course of a painting. But when something doesn't sell he feels free to 'attack' it and has created some of his best work this way.

Ultimately, it's important to remember that unsold paintings don't represent failure. Allow them to pile up unloved and they could become dispiriting, but see them as opportunities to take risks, make new contacts or even just have a bit of fun online, and they can quickly become fresh and exciting once again.

ABOVE
Some artists choose to give their unwanted work away by putting it in a public place for a lucky stranger to find and keep