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In The Studio: Callum Innes, artist

'I make a lot of paintings to take the work forward... to find the rightness'

Callum Innes's Edinburgh studio, one of the most beautiful I have visited, was nearly razed. Until six years ago, Innes worked in a studio directly opposite, from which he watched as they prepared the building, formerly Drambuie's offices, for demolition. Finally, curiosity got the better of him. In its previous life, the building's glass roof had been obscured, the Drambuie staff having complained that it was too bright. Innes gutted the interior, flooding it with light.

Innes is an Edinburgh native, and the studio, in a narrow lane in the centre of the city, is an oasis of calm. Downstairs are facilities for storage and preparation of canvases. Upstairs is a bright, airy, contemplative space.

Innes was a finalist for the 1995 Turner Prize and won the 2002 Jerwood Painting Prize. His work now shows in prestigious galleries around the world and he spends much of his time away. He "fantasises", he says, about leaving Edinburgh: "but I travel a lot and when I get here there is a sense of anonymity to go along with the work."

Recently he was commissioned to produce a work for the Edinburgh Arts Festival. "I was asked to do a sculpture near Regent Bridge, but you can't make a sculpture there. It is such a beautiful bridge. I didn't want to vandalise it or touch it and the wonderful thing about lights is that they can be turned off at any moment." The result, a painting in light, emphasises the structure of the bridge, and lights up what was previously a dark passageway.

At first glance, Innes's paintings appear deceptively simple. He started as a figurative painter, and recalls travelling to London on the "slow" bus and seeing the work of Barnett Newman at the Tate. His work "only slowly evolved to abstraction." He edits his work rigorously: "To take the work forward you have to make a lot of paintings, to find the rightness."

In the inner sanctum where he does his "messy painting" the floor and walls are protected with paper – changed, he says, every week. More unusual are the two protruding side flaps of paper that form almost a proscenium arch. This, he tells me, is where the paint from his sideways gestures is caught so it does not splash on neighbouring works. I ask why he covers his floor and he explains that as he mixes his paint with turps, the floor would get overly oily and he might well fall.

Once he destroyed 30 paintings to make 50 book covers. "Most of them should have been destroyed, but some…" he pauses. "I can only release something I can believe in."