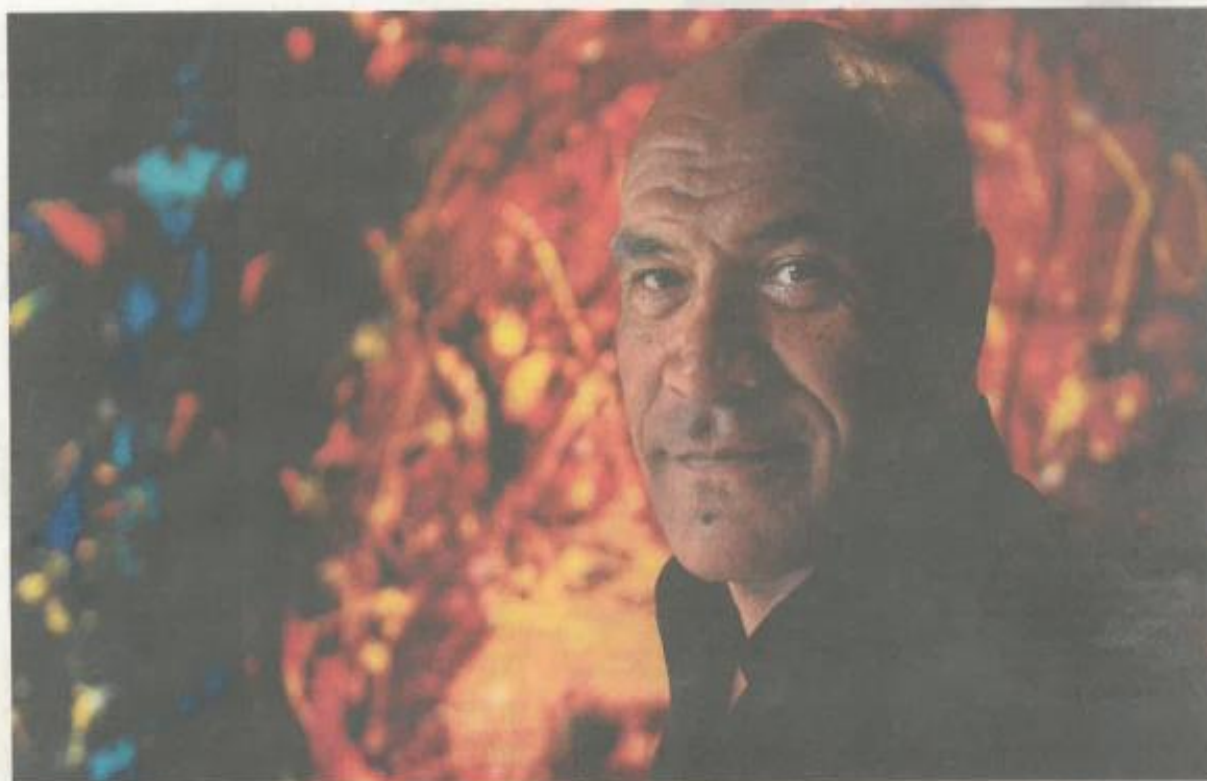


UPFRONT

Kevin Sharkey on finding his niche and using art as therapy



Kevin Sharkey (61) is an artist. He was born in a Mother and Baby home on the Navan Road and was adopted at six months' old. He has been a TV presenter, actor and songwriter. Now he is a full-time artist with his own gallery. He lives in Dublin.

Tell us about your childhood. I was born in a Mother and Baby home to a Dublin woman and a Nigerian student. At six months, I was adopted into a big family in Killybegs. There were seven kids and I was second last. I grew up as the only black kid in the parish.

What was it like being perceived as different?

The locals were intrigued and mostly welcoming. They'd invite me in to their houses for a cup of tea. Not only was it 'let me feel your hair' or 'rub your skin' but when I was 12, old ladies used to rub their bingo cards on top of my afro hair for luck. It was all good-hearted.

Really?

I was part of the community. I had 37 medals for Irish dancing. But the day I saw a black person, everything changed overnight. When I asked my mother why she didn't tell me anything about Africa and black people, she said that she didn't want to confuse

me and in a way, I'm glad she did that. I didn't have any culture other than the one that was around me.

Describe how not wanting to fit in was the making of you.

I thought fitting in was boring. I wanted to do creative things. I was always making art and that creativity saved me as a child. It helped me transcend the pain of my upbringing.

How did your creative life change after meeting your birth mother?

After I met my birth mother, she told me that she didn't want to keep in touch. I found a way to escape feelings of disappointment. You can't be angry when you are doing something beautiful. There is a lot of healing in creativity.

But you were a secret painter for years?

I used art as a therapy. I'd paint and then throw them out. I was 38 before anybody saw my paintings.

Choose three words to describe yourself.

Happy, creative and ambitious.

What drives you?

The energy that I'm lucky enough to wake up with every day. Also

not wanting to accept other people's limitations on my value or my work.

Best advice you were given?

As an artist, I was told that if you don't like what you've done, you can always paint over it. Remove the fear of having to get it perfect.

Best advice you give?

If you have somebody in your life who makes you smile, keep them very close to you and don't take them for granted. Also, forgiveness is key, and understanding that good people sometimes do



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'There is a lot of healing in creativity,' says artist Kevin Sharkey

Interview by Ciara Dwyer

Picture by Steve Humphreys

bad things and bad people sometimes do good things.

At one stage, you were homeless. Tell us more.

I had put everything into my art and gallery and didn't have a plan B. I was sleeping on friends' couches. I had to go to a shelter on Amiens Street. It was a short experience but you don't forget it.

How did you get back on your feet?

By painting and by going to Merrion Square every single Sunday and hanging my paintings on the railings. I had to keep focused.

Who are your role models and why?

I admire rich artists because they have turned their talent into a living and made it pay generously. It's not an easy thing to do.

What inspires your paintings?

It could be deep colours that represent the Donegal sky. I always try to bring energy and colour to the work and I like experimenting. I'm working on an exhibition of portraits which I'm planning to bring to New York next year.

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