



Inspired by classical European art, Alexandra's portraits are all characters with a name

BRUSH UP

Combining her love of historical Western art with unusual 'canvases', Alexandra Dillon has created a powerful body of work

WORDS ANDREINA CORDANI IMAGES © ALEXANDRA DILLON





LEFT Each object adds a layer of meaning, such as these surrealist lock and key artworks

BELOW Alexandra's journey into painting on brushes started from a chance project



A paintbrush is an essential tool for many artists, but Alexandra Dillon has made them into her canvas instead. From her Santa Monica studio, she transforms them into strong, provocative women's faces. Her striking, often startlingly 3D images provoke instant reactions as well as thoughts about anger, strength and women's role in society.

How did you become an artist?

I've always been an artist. I did take a different turn in college and studied film, but after film school I wasn't finding my way in the industry - I was working for creatives but I wanted to be the creative! So I returned to my first love, painting. I went to Florence to study classical realism, which led me into painting portraits and creating characters.

How does that love of historical art inspire you?

I like the kind of art that speaks to us across the ages - Old Masters, Byzantine, classical or Renaissance art. And cave painting, which is the purest art there is. Older art forms tell a story immediately when you see them - and yes, there may be more subtext when you look closer, but they don't need to be explained by a plaque on a wall.

I became fascinated with the Fayum mummies - a group of Roman Egyptian mummies with portraits painted on them. Looking at those faces makes you realise we have not changed as human beings since that time. It gives me a sense of belonging - to the human race and to this big experiment of life. It's a wonderful feeling. I loved painting them and when I started working on brushes they lent themselves so well to the material.

Why did you go from painting *with* brushes to painting *on* brushes?

There was an artist I knew whose studio burned down. He asked all the artists he knew to make art out of the remnants of the fire. I took the burnt paintbrushes without really knowing what I was going to do with them. At first I stuck them together and made some abstract art, but then one day I painted a face on one, and I knew I was on to something.

Pretty soon after I started painting on axes and cleavers, and I began to understand that if I chose the right object it would create a dialogue between the face and the purpose of the object it's painted on. So a cleaver became a screaming cleaver - at once terrified and terrifying. The axes became a metaphor for hidden aggression, especially women's anger which we are so often told we are not supposed to have. I started to realise my work was primarily about women and women's roles in society.

Has your style evolved over time?

I've learned how to use the materials in a way that lends itself to the character. For instance, the brushes have lines in the metal part and I found that how I place the face in the brush makes all the difference - that line will end up being the line between the lips, or

The portraits are influenced by art styles from Roman-Egyptian mummies to Baroque realism





Found objects bring their own worn patina and story, becoming a part of each artwork

Axes, trowels and cleavers are a metaphor for women's suppressed anger



under the nose, or the eyebrows. I learned how to get more character out of each brush. I started out using oil paint but because of the drying time I found I was losing the spontaneity of creating the characters, so I switched to acrylic and found I could create more interesting, engaging faces.

Where do the faces come from?

None of them are copies or based on real people, but they are characters – they emerge in my head the way a novelist's characters do. They all have names that pop into my head while I'm working. They're often strong women, who have lived lives with trials and tribulations and joy and pain. They've survived. I came to realise that this was the context of my work.

You've recently started painting on dresses – how has that come about?

I love fashion and I was thinking about the way we use clothing to express our identity. I thought it would be interesting to invert the relationship between the wearer and the dress, so the character and identity are plastered on the dress rather than the other way round. Some of those I've painted, the ones with a 1920s feel, allude to my grandmother and great-grandmother who were both movie extras in

Hollywood and worked on the set of *Ben Hur*, dressed as Roman maidens. For a day they got to assume that whole persona.

Why use found materials? Why not just paint on new items?

They have their own story to tell and their own history, and that makes them much more attractive to me. I love the patina of old materials – they're already beautiful through their wear and tear, and that's not so different from the characters I'm painting, who are also more beautiful from their wear and tear. Older objects have their own context, which becomes part of the piece. And of course recycling and upcycling is good for everybody.

Do you enjoy using social media as an artist?

Yes. There's a lot of debate among artists about whether we should share our work on social media, but for me it's really validating to know people are enjoying my work. I'm so grateful to anyone who follows and comments. Putting your art out into the world, letting people see it and enjoy it, is the way to go. 📌

>> alexandradillon.com
[@alexandradillonartist](https://www.instagram.com/alexandradillonartist)