

PAINT STRIPPING

Katie Sarra, the world's only Tantric painter, tells Sarah Berry how she gets to the heart and the sex of her many models

I first met Katie Sarra at last year's Erotic Awards show. She was dressed in a pretty merlot-coloured corset and suspenders. Her pink cheeks were glowing with arousal and when I congratulated her on winning the converted golden cock, she panted breathlessly on the cusp of orgasm, 'Oh, thank you, I love him and all he represents in celebrating my work,' before proclaiming me beautiful.

Still panting, she explained that she was a Tantric painter and showed me to a display of her elaborate work — a dripping cacophony of bright oils depicting all kinds of bodies, in part or whole. While I'll admit to being rather turned on at this point, I did wonder: was this just an extravagantly poncy way to get naked or a unique, sensual and healing artistic experience? The Devonshire mother of two was only too happy to help us decide...

I began by asking what Tantric painting involved. 'Tantric painting is my practice in sacred sexuality, working the person or couple to bring them closer towards their own

divinity through the process of witnessing and mirroring. I give total permission, without judgment, for the model to enter into a charged high-energy relationship where they can explore their emotions in relation to voyeurism and exhibitionism with their body.

'We can play in this space and explore and potentially heal self-conscious inhibitions. Sometimes unexpected emotions emerge that need talking about and my therapy training equips me to explore these with the person in confidence.

'I embody these energetic responses on canvas. I paint from the heart and sex. I know when I am energetically connected with my model as I feel the energy from my base chakra up to my heart and this flows into the painting — It is when I feel most alive. Some of my models have said it was like making love or having an erotic massage without touch.'

So can anyone be a Tantric painter? 'This is high-energy work and I would not recommend anyone dabbling who is not trained in the therapeutic relationship or Tantra. After complet-





Performance painting at the Erotic Awards

ing a fine art degree in Leeds — and winning the painting prize for my year — I went on to train in psychiatric nursing before completing a postgraduate diploma in Hertfordshire as an art psychotherapist. I then worked as an art therapist in Hackney for eight years.

'I discovered Tantra about six years ago. Before then I had closed down sexually. I was a full-time mother with two small children and I hadn't left the house on my own without them for years. Then about seven years ago I started painting my friend, Tilly, once a week. I watched her body flower over the year — she hadn't changed shape or anything but there was this beautiful energy around her body. She'd mentioned this Tantra training she was doing and I when told her that I had a few issues with my sexuality she suggested I come to a Tantric workshop the following weekend.

'Coming from a psychotherapy background, I was sceptical but I had nothing to

lose. I had no idea what it entailed but I said yes to it and arranged for my husband to have the children for the weekend. We zoomed off down the motorway with music blaring and I have not looked back.'

So how do Tantra and art meet? 'One of the first Shakti Tantric structures we do is a symbolic undress, where you take off your clothes in a sacred space. Your clothes symbolise what you want to let go of. For example, with this jumper I take off my shame; with these tights I take off my embarrassment. My Tantric painting is really based on this very early structure.'

From this, I guessed that Katie was no longer closed off. 'No, now I am liberated sexually thanks to my training. Shakti Tantra is not your batik scarf-type Tantra. It's about gaining consciousness around our relationship with our bodies and our sexuality. I also trained in Chuluaqui Quodoushka, which looks at the union of different male

and female life force energies.

'Through these disciplines, I'm learning to play with, and experience, the pleasure of giving and receiving in the moment in sexual encounters. I've discovered that I'm an adventurer; I love playing with edges and having my virginity broken with new experiences.

'As I was getting healed in Tantra, it was wonderful to transform these experiences into what became a healing experience for other women. I started with the mothers at my children's school and it just grew from there.'

I wondered how Katie convinced them to strip? 'Well, I was very excited about the Tantra training and I told all the mothers about it that I met on the school run. They were all very curious and came round for coffee and to see the paintings. Our chats were intimate and safe and it was a natural transition for them to put down their cup, take off their clothes and be painted.

'I was excited to bring women from the school into an artist's studio and on to the gallery walls. But the bit I got most excited about was to do with some friends of mine who were very, very closed to their bodies. They were out of their comfort zones, having their body witnessed with loving eyes. We explored everything they loved and didn't love about their bodies, with the potential for a new, kinder mirroring to take place

'One woman hadn't been seen naked before by another woman; now she can use public changing rooms without embarrassment. Another had privately self-harmed. She became a goddess in charcoal without scars. Her scars were bigger to her than they were in my eyes. She told me afterwards that her husband has noticed that she has been less tense.'

So can Katie show love to everyone who pays to see her? 'I guess, because I'm so open

in myself now, I'm open to seeing other people's divinity. And because I have found the divine in myself, I'm trying to think of a language that is accessible for that. When I look at somebody, I see the divine and the beautiful in them.'

Even the ugly ones? 'I can see the beauty in everyone and sexual connection is not navigated exclusively by airbrushed ideals. What I am exploring here is the uniqueness of the individual's energy, sexuality and beauty both in its masculine and feminine forms.

'Sexuality is not about being thin. When I'm painting someone, if they say, "I hate my bum," then I say, "That's exactly what I should be painting. That's where the healing is." But sometimes we have to build up to that point.

'Each year at Glastonbury I set up a boudoir in the Outsiders' tent. This is a semi-private space for people with disabled bodies to be painted. One guy who came to me had quite a lot of disfigurement from a terrible accident that he'd had. He wanted me to paint an aspect of his torso that was perfect. He needed the celebration of what he felt was beautiful about him.

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'The next stage would be to paint the parts of his body that have deep shame about them. It really does depend where a person's at with their body, as to whether I work at building their confidence first with the parts that they're happy with before we move on to healing their confidence with the parts that they're not happy with.'

And where does Katie paint? 'My boudoir in Devon is in the eaves of my studio draped in red satin like a tent. Models are surrounded with warmth and candles and are comfortable amongst lovely cushions. I stand with my easel in the opening of the red tent so they are cocooned in their own space with me just on the outside looking in.'

'I do also have a portable boudoir for people who wish to commission me to paint them in the privacy of their own homes. This is good for people who don't have the time to travel and for famous people wanting more privacy.'

'I enjoy painting at public events like at

Erotica and The Skin Deep Tattoo convention in Llandudno, where I do performance painting. When I do this, others can witness and share in the unique energy between me and the model. It's exciting for people wishing to play with voyeurism and exhibitionism.

When I asked her to describe a typical session, Katie told me, 'I ask the person or couple to bring with them a piece of music that they love to help relax them. We have a meeting with the eyes and as they undress, I invite them to symbolically remove things that keep them small or inhibited.'

'For men, looking at me can open up their sex connection and I can be invited to strip to my lingerie to excite this. This, in my experience, is less important for women who, on the whole, are seeking a healing rather than a sexual connection that brings alive that potency.'

'We play around with lighting and positions. I invite the person to sit, stand or lie where they want to instinctively go. If they go into something that's unnatural, the energy will jar in their bodies. But I'm also looking at what's beautiful so I will adjust them into a position and they can see themselves in a mirror. They have to be very comfortable as a big canvas can take up to four hours — though we can have breaks on longer sessions.'

'I don't do any preliminary sketches; I paint spontaneously in the moment. As I feel into looking at them with my heart, we create an energy loop and the dance begins. If I were just using my eyes, the painting would have no heart. It might be technically brilliant, but what's the point of that apart from being clever?'

I was interested to know whether men and women were really all that different in terms of their sexuality, according to Katie. 'Yes, I think that there are real differences



The flying cock is truly the hardest award in the biz

between men and women. With men, their sexually generally starts with their sex; if you want to reach a man you start with his cock. With women, the sex opens after the heart has opened. These are the laws of nature and what you learn in Tantra.

'But everyone's sexuality is so different. I've started working with sex therapist Rachel Foux on a project called *Lessons In Love*. Here we work with male clients, some who prematurely ejaculate. This means he doesn't hold his sexuality in his sex for long enough, and it will shoot up his body into his chest or his throat or his head. So I'd work differently with him to bring the energy back down again.

'I have been blessed to witness a man discover the woman in him in a beautiful painting experience after he'd presented himself to me in transvestite mode with make-up and jewellery. He wept when he saw himself as a woman and said that he'd grown emotionally

from the experience. I was very moved.'

Katie has done a lot of work with pregnant women, and I wondered how a woman changes during this time. 'When I'm painting someone who's pregnant, there's only three or four months when they're really big and their body's in bloom. It's beautiful to capture this point in their lives and it's lovely for them to look back on.

'They often say the experience is nurturing and healing — a beautiful honouring preparation for the actual birth where you are seen and touched by medical staff who, with the best intentions, are strangers in the hospital environment.

'This sacred experience helped the women to claim their bodies for themselves as their temples from which the biggest love is born. The painting gives the woman a tangible reminder of her blossoming and amazing bountiful body after her baby is born. The rewards from this last years as the child grows up and this gives me enormous pride that

I have contributed to the celebration of life and love.

'I did a painting of one of my women friends here in Devon about two years ago. She was wearing a fluffy, pink furry thing round her waist and we called the painting *Pink Rabbit*. When you look at the flavour of the painting, it's quite girly. I then painted her in full pregnancy and it's really interesting. You can see her body moving from girl to woman within these two paintings. It's the same body, but under very different circumstances.'

So is Katie ever not in the mood? 'Tantra teaches you that there is only the moment. So I might not be in the mood one moment but in the next I am. When I am preparing for a person and when I meet with them, I let go of my story and attend to theirs. I regularly attend to my own body with receiving and giving Tantric massage to keep me open and available and in the mood for the people I work with so I am not carrying stuff that might get in the way of flowing energy. Sometimes I need more healing than others to keep me in balance. So I am naturally open most of the time.'

But does she ever actually come while she is painting? 'I can be orgasmic while I am painting but to actually orgasm would release energy that is potent for putting into the painting. Of course as a woman, I can build it again, but it is the sexual charge that fires my paintbrush.'

Did this mean Katie ever slept with any of her subjects when the painting was finished? 'There is no touch in my work as an erotic artist between the model and me and this boundary is clear from the beginning.

'I offer a consultation before being painted and this is the time when we explore together what they feel safe with and where they don't want to go. This is particularly important

when I am working with couples when the man says, "Yes I want you to paint us having sex," and the woman says, "I am not comfortable with that."

'When we enter into the Tantric space with beautiful music playing, candles lit, warmth, red satin fabric and cushions and the person relaxes and their body opens, it is important that I honour them and keep them safe from action that they might not do when sober.

'If I succumbed to the desires of the often open sexually highly charged relationship, then it would not be conscious and the person and me might have a hangover from it. A bit like that awful dawning moment after a drunken night out when you have had a fantastic time but have done something you regret. It can mar the experience and I want people to harvest this experience as good food for their comfort and celebration with their body. If they want to go further in their exhibitionism next time then their consent is informed.'

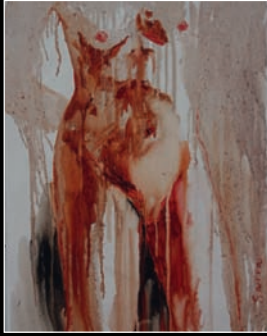
Katie is a woman who oozes sexuality, and I wondered whether she got propositioned a lot. 'Yes, and I welcome that energy, though I don't necessarily have to respond to it. It is always a gift to be treasured when someone gifts you with his or her love. I love the play and exploration with erotic expressions and there is no need to make it physical for me. In fact I love being with all that energy.'

That being so, I finally asked what lay ahead for Katie Sarra. 'K Sarra Sarra, whatever will be will be! Life is a canvas ahead with many hopes and plans.'

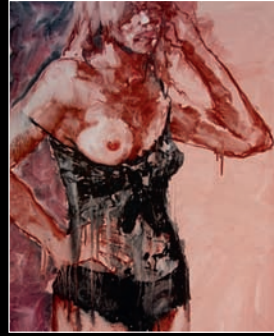
Katie Sarra's Tantric painting sessions start from £200, not including the paintings, which start at £300. For exhibitions, performance dates or to book a session visit www.katiesarra.com



Holding with ink



Pure



Amazon call



Us two



Sara and Dragon Ray being cheeky



Amazon heart



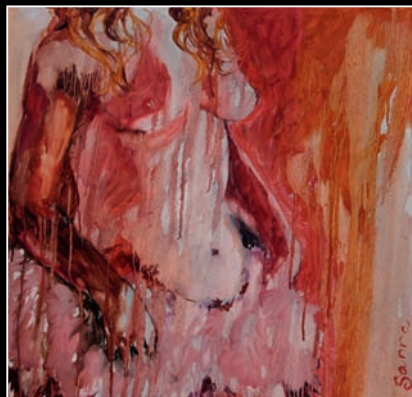
Wolf yoni



Study



At the Llandudno Skin Deep Tattoo convention Aug 2008



Pink rabbit