



Portrait of an artist

STEPHEN Chambers: a key role in the Royal Academy of Arts Summer Exhibition

By JO CAIRD

THE HOUSE in Highbury where the painter and printmaker Stephen Chambers lives with his family, positively glistens in the sunshine.

Surrounded by Chambers' vibrant pieces, his sculptor wife Denise de Cordova's large works and the house's brightly painted and papered walls, I am here because Chambers is about to begin the hang for the Print and Photography Rooms at this year's Royal Academy of Arts Summer Exhibition.

It is the calm before the storm. Chambers must select around 150 pieces for display out of a potential 2,500 works, filling every available space in these two large rooms.

So, over coffee, with his youngest son making a paper mosaic Medusa at the other end of the table, Chambers takes a moment to reflect on his role at the RA, the differences between painting and printmaking, and the joy of doing exactly what he likes.

The Royal Academy of the Arts has held an annual Summer Exhibition every year since its foundation in 1768. Last year the show's 13,000 works attracted over 150,000 visitors.

Chambers joins a selection committee that includes Tony Cragg, Gordon Benson, Humphrey Ocean and Tracey Emin. The 13 Royal Academicians on the committee will select works from both established and unknown artists around the theme of "Man Made".

Chambers was looking forward to this task – his first Summer Exhibition hang since being made a member of the Academy in 2005 – although he is aware that the sheer number of prints up for consideration make it "a huge job".

He is also overseeing the Photography Room. The decision to put the same person in charge of both rooms is a response to the increasing overlap between the two disciplines now that digital technology has become such a large part of printmaking.

Chambers is content to deal with both, joking that having two different people hanging the rooms separately "could be pistols at dawn".

At this point, as at many other moments over the course of our conversation, the artist begins to chuckle, a wide smile spreading across his ruddy-cheeked face.

Chambers turns 48 this year but the only thing about his appearance that might lead you to this figure is his closely cropped grey hair – a childlike face and somewhat portly frame give the impression of a younger man.

Chambers' work tends to be on a large scale, featuring human or animal figures at the point of or in the midst of action.

His palette is bright and varied with shining elements and dark outlines that draw the eye.

There is something mysterious about his subjects, the sense of paused narrative holding the viewer's focus and posing questions about what comes before and after.

Chambers' paintings and prints are held in

private and public collections throughout Britain and beyond, including New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. His last solo show at Flowers East, entitled *The Gates of Paradise*, which took place at the end of 2006, was sold out.

The Print Room role is an interesting one for Chambers, he says, "because I'm not really a printmaker. I consider myself and am probably best known as a painter who makes prints and that's something different than somebody who considers themselves a printmaker primarily."

Never having studied printmaking – Chambers completed his first degree at St Martins School of Art then gained a Masters from Chelsea School of Art – he works collaboratively with masterprinters and technical assistants who "interpret what I need".

It is difficult to believe Chambers when he says: "Left to my own devices printmaking-wise, you'd probably be left with a potato print."

He has been working in the medium for almost 15 years after all – but his self-deprecating demeanour is very likeable nonetheless.

The effect of Chambers' preference for painting will be a Print Room "with a particular

interest in artists who make prints as a second port of call".

The commercial aspect of the room is not something that concerns him very much: "I want it to be an interesting room rather than a shop."

And indeed sales are not likely to be a problem at the Summer Exhibition; prints and photographs are the show's biggest sellers.

Royal Academicians are entitled to include up to six of their own works in the Exhibition and this year, for the first time, Chambers will be using his full quota, showing two paintings and four prints.

"Because of my involvement in hanging the print room, I think it's only fair to put my things there and let them be shot down along with everybody else's," he says.

Diversity is a feature of the Royal Academy that particularly appeals to the artist. He explains that when he was elected in 2005, it was "an ageing demographic and extraordinarily masculine". But since then "there has clearly been an attempt to get across a diversity of artistic practices, ages and genders".

The recent election of members such as Jenny Saville, Gillian Wearing and "dear old Tracy" has had a positive effect on the institution as a whole. "I think probably a lot of people who wouldn't even have considered it 20 years ago, including myself, now want to be involved."

Membership of the RA has not directly influenced the character or content of his work, Chambers says, but he has noticed "a couple of curious things about it". He regards his election as "a recognition by peers", an acknowledgement of good practice after years of the "solitary confinement of the studio".

He regards himself as "extraordinarily fortunate" to be able to spend time in the "21st century Dickensian hovel" that is his Hackney studio and make money from what he loves.

Following the RA hang he has a show of prints coming up in Newcastle, then shows of paintings in Cambridge and New York. He is constantly producing new work and challenging himself to stay inventive and original. As well as his beautiful solo work Chambers has collaborated with the Royal Ballet on several dance productions inspired by his paintings.

These projects are valuable in terms of his own creativity, forcing him into "a territory where I don't know what I'm doing...Inventing is always a good thing; if it's too familiar you run the risk of boring yourself."

Chambers is an artistic force to be reckoned with. When asked what the future holds he answers simply: "I've got a lot of work to do. I just want to get it done really". Time I left him to it.

The Royal Academy of Arts Summer Exhibition, is at Burlington House, Piccadilly, London W1, from June 9-August 17, 2008.

