

Ian Berry:

Works in denim reflect contemporary times

by ZJ Humbach



What is more universal than denim? From clothing to bedding, from upholstered furniture to insulation in homes, we love denim. It's versatile, durable, and comfortable. Ian Berry takes denim to another level, creating art that speaks to everyone.

"It started when I noticed my old pile of jeans in my childhood home. I was moving to London and didn't want to throw them out," explains Berry. "I'd done a collage of Gordon Brown and Tony Blair out of newspaper and thought I could apply the same principle, but in denim." What started as a simple observation became so much more.

Today, Berry is a member of two elite global clubs. In 2013, *Art Business News* recognized him in an article entitled *30 Under Thirty: Young Artists Revolutionizing the World of Fine Arts*. *Sourcing Journal* named him to

Ian Berry works on Ideal Home, a piece in his Behind Closed Doors series, at his studio in 2016.

Photo by Debbie Bragg



***And Still the Voices are
Calling from Far Away***

47 x 47 inches | 2019
Photo by Debbie Bragg

its latest *Rivet 50*, an index of the top 50 influencers in the world for the denim industry.

When Berry first began working with denim, he was studying to become an advertising art director. “As I began cutting up my blue jeans, I thought about the times wearing them. Then I thought about the people, particularly [as seen] in advertising, who made jeans into what they are today,” says Berry. “I found it fascinating that because some icons wore jeans, it led to us all wearing them. For most, a pair of jeans is the default garment in the wardrobe. Denim is the only material I feel truly comfortable wearing.”

Berry is literally surrounded by denim 24 hours a day. “I have approximately 3,000 pairs of jeans in my studio—it is a sea of blue. I have a room with just greys and blacks. I also have many jeans hanging on the walls. While it may look like a mess, it’s my organized mess, and I do remember where certain jeans are. I

also organize by shade and by wash and those with interesting characteristics.” Most of his inventory is donated from brands, mills, friends, and people who send packages from all around the world. “The studio is very large. I need it for all of the jeans. I often joke that people love the studio more than my work!” His studio overlooks the oldest canal in London, and is a haven of peace for him. He lives above the studio in an apartment that used to be a dog biscuit factory with his wife, who is from Sweden, and their five-year-old son.

Berry requires few tools to create his art. “It is quite simple. It’s my scissors—sharp for detail; blunt for portraits—glue, and my hands. I rarely sew, but have on occasion. I work directly from color photographs as you lose the detail in black-and-white photos.”

The color photographs also enable him to better see the effect of the light. “Lighting is so important. I always think about the way light hits things, such as a metallic subway car, a shiny polished bar top, the tiled floor, or a shimmering pool. I love to take denim, a matte material, and make it shine.”

To create a work, he first cuts a varying range of denim, usually starting with a palette of seven and adding more to create the layers in his work. “For example, the laundrette machine door alone has 15 layers. My goal is to blend the layers to make it look like it isn’t denim. Rather than using pockets and rivets, which would overemphasize that it’s denim, I like to use interesting pieces of denim to make it look like paint. I love it when someone looks at my work and suddenly says (particularly in a cool American accent), ‘Oh my God, it’s made of blue jeans!’ My work is so much more than denim, which is just my paint.”



Ian Berry in the *Secret Garden* installation

2017

Photo by Lucinda Grange

Berry's work is defined by his attention to detail. His art, while breathtaking in photos, truly needs to be seen in person to appreciate its intricacies, the labor of love that goes into each piece, and the message being portrayed.

His work portrays contemporary life and current issues. "I depict the fading urban fabric that makes up our communities such as the local pubs and laundrettes that are closing down. Places where people had interacted in the past are fading," expresses Berry. "And while we are much more connected thanks to technology, in person it is becoming less."

Berry typically works in series, which can take up to a year to put together, and *Behind Closed Doors* is one of his favorites. "This body portrayed beautiful, *Elle Decoration* magazine-style homes but was juxtaposed with a single person, who sat in the dream of materialism but appears

so alone," explains Berry. "It really connected with people, and many said, 'This is me.' It was really moving to see all kinds of people express this. I am very proud of this body of work because at the time, I was also working with Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM), a British movement against male suicide—the leading cause of death for men under 45 in the UK."

After doing *Behind Closed Doors*, his work took a different direction. "I wanted to go brighter, happier. I had been in Los Angeles, California, and had a great time. I began working on *Hotel California*, which was inspired by the hotels I stayed at and their pools," says Berry. "I wanted to bring that brightness into my London doom and gloom. I also wanted to challenge myself with water, particularly the ripples. The details just went on and on. If I decided I didn't want something in or I wanted to add something, it was particularly

Secret Garden installation

Close-up | 2017

Photo by Lucinda Grange

difficult because I had to also deal with the reflection."

Installations have become a big part of Berry's work in the last few years. *Secret Garden* includes the last denim manufactured in America by Cone Mills after 112 years of production. The work was initially exhibited at Children's Museum of the Arts in New York City and is now being requested by other museums worldwide and even famous department stores.

"I say no paint, no bleach, no dyes in my work, and that holds true for my installations. The only exception I make just for my installation work is that I cannot cut everything by hand," confesses Berry. "I use my friends at Tonello [a garment finishing technologies company] in Italy to laser cut some things like the vines in *Secret Garden*. Some may say it's cheating, but it's the tools the denim industry uses now, and it allows me to do bigger creations."



I Had to Stop for the Night

24 x 48 inches | 2019

Photo by Debbie Bragg



The Gently Revolving Drum Goes Quiet

20 x 48 inches | 2015

Photo by ianberry art



The Laundry

Approximately 10 x 18 x 10 feet | 2017

Photo by Lucinda Grange

Berry's hope for *Secret Garden* was to inspire children to tap into their imaginations to become more creative. He often offers free lessons for children. "I really believe in education to inspire children and to also help schools that are now underfunded."

He finds denim crosses borders, languages, cultures, and more. "It allows me to communicate to many people. I truly believe there is something in the denim that draws people in. People who are normally scared of a gallery tell me they just had to come in. I think there is something familiar and comfortable in the denim that does that," muses Berry. "You don't need to be an expert to enjoy or wear denim. It's the material of our time, and since I portray contemporary life, I don't think there's a better material to use." ■

ZJ Humbach is a freelance writer, quilting and sewing teacher, and professional long-arm quilter. She owns and operates Dream Stitcher Quilt Studio in Thornton, Colorado.