



An example of Emma's art from her *Concilium Plebis* collection



A portrait of actor Rupert Procter in the role of Clinic, from Owen Tooth's film *The Opening*, which Emma also worked on.

Whether your eye is drawn to the striking eye make-up or distinctive black clothing, Duffield's Emma Simcock-Tooth cannot be ignored. Nor can her art. She produces stunning portraits of ordinary people in a classical Renaissance style. Wendy Roberts reports. Pictures: Kate Burnett

Emma Simcock-Tooth is used to double-takes. The Derbyshire artist is as striking as she is talented, as unique and surprising as her formidably impressive art.

Some may say she is a walking piece of art in herself thanks to her theatrical presence. Stunning eye make-up and clothes with an historical air show her creativity in evidence every which way.

She is certainly used to stares. When she's not painting, she's at the sewing machine making frilly blouses, big bustle skirts and gorgeous historical hats.

And she's not afraid to wear them. "I'm a much nicer person when I'm dressed properly," said Emma. "I love wearing these outfits.

"People stop in their tracks to look at me. I love it. One of my favourites is a 4ft wide pannier dress. It's fabulous. I wore it around Camden Market in London the other week and people were rushing out of shops to look at me."

Emma doesn't own a pair of jeans and wouldn't dream of lazing round the house in an old tracksuit.

In a whisper she admits that she wouldn't even open the door to the postman if she wasn't fully made up. "I have to be well presented. It's who I am. Outward appearance can be an extremely powerful tool. I know that."

Emma is well aware that appearance can signal political, social or religious views, what music you enjoy, your role models – even your aspirations. "I've been experimenting with my own image through clothes, tattooing, piercing and make up for many years," she explained. "I guess you only have to look at me to realise that."

However, it is not Emma's unusual appearance but her fascinating fine art – described by critics as "jewel-like treasures" – which is catapulting her to places she's never been before.

She's been creating stunning art for many years, before she hit her teens in fact, and she's currently working on her biggest project to date. She's delighted to reveal that she has received full Arts Council funding to carry out the project.

In recent weeks, she has been creating 13 oil paintings, entitled *Concilium Plebis* which, translated from Latin, means council of the ordinary people.

"It's been a massive undertaking," said Emma, who is dressed in a black blouse and extravagantly frilly, layered white skirt. "But I'm almost there now.

"It has taken over my life but it has been well worth it."

Before being able to even wet her brushes, Emma had to take to the streets to find the right subjects to paint.

Young mothers, youths in hoodies and teens wearing baseball caps have been her inspiration.

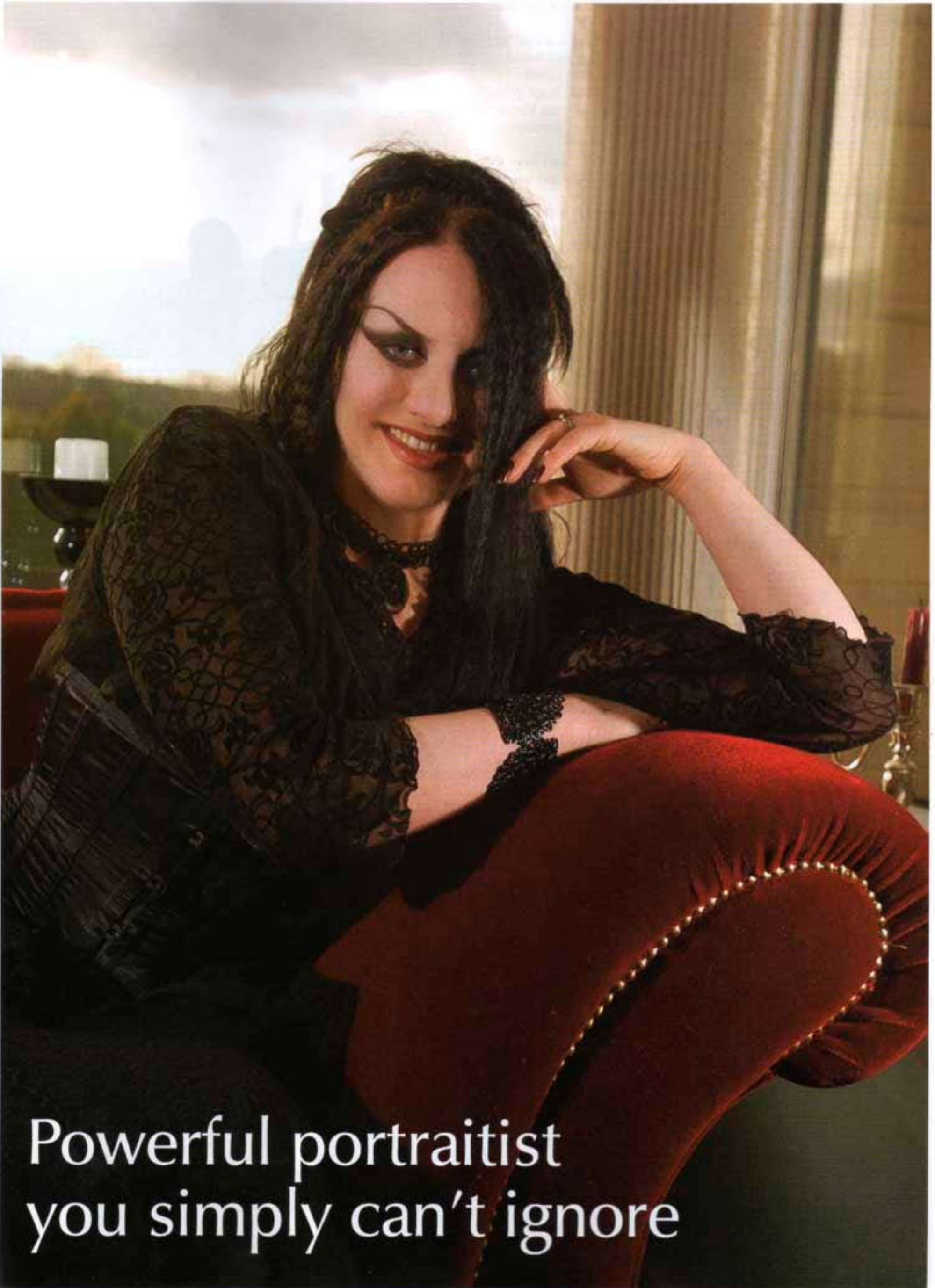
"I found the ubiquitous 'chavs', 'hoodies' and 'scallys'," smiled Emma. "And I painted them. They are arguably the life and character of the Midlands, if not the UK.

"It was hard because I knew what I wanted but there was always the fear that I might not be able to find it. But it wasn't that tough. People wanted to help, after they got over the shock of what I was asking them to do.

"Can you imagine it, you're just minding your own business, shopping round town and someone like me pounces on you and says, 'Hey, can I paint you for a piece of work I'm doing?' It was surreal – but great."

Emma feels that the type of characters she focused on are not always presented in the best of lights and she wanted to address that.

Presented in the style of Renaissance paintings, lit and posed like Caravaggios, Emma has created something extraordinary and new. ►



Powerful portraitist  
you simply can't ignore

She has come up with something stunningly atmospheric, a classical take on 21st Century life.

In one piece of work, a boy's hood casts a deep shadow across his face – but is he really one of those menacing thugs we have heard about on TV or does he have the pensive expression of a saint?

Another painting shows a young girl wearing a tracksuit, huge gold earrings and holding a baby. For the world, she looks like the Virgin and Child but is she one of our ever-growing numbers of teenage mums, so often unfairly blamed for society's ills?

"After all, Caravaggio's models were the people he plucked from the streets," said Emma. Who can forget his images of angels and wise men with vividly dirty toenails?" she laughed.

It's Emma's attention to detail which has enabled her to pull off this extraordinary feat. Her fine art is framed in beautiful old-fashioned, gold-coloured gilt frames to contrast 'the great and the good' of traditional oil paintings.

This body of work ties in with Derby's Joseph Wright Collection and has already been shown at Derby Museum and Art Gallery.

"Wright himself was partly influenced by Caravaggio's Dutch followers and painted real people during the industrial revolution," said Emma. "These are paintings of real humanity."

Emma's art is engaging but relevant. The images do not poke fun at the models but show them as they are.

"My main aim was to take something thought of as ugly or threatening or low-brow and find beauty in it.

"I wanted to encourage people to face their fears, to engage a completely new audience who would probably never have had their portrait painted and who otherwise would never have set foot in a gallery.

"After all, entering an art gallery may be as intimidating for a hoody as pushing past him to enter a shop is for an elderly shopper."

As soon as Emma has finished her project, the paintings will be shipped to Liverpool for an exhibition this month.

But before that, her work has taken pride of place at Derby's Banks' Mill Studio, which was once an old Victorian rope factory.

"I've loved doing this," said Emma. "But it's been tough."

Emma admits that she has been painting every single day to meet the deadline for this work but she's not complaining. The result has been so satisfying that she plans to create more than the original 13 paintings.

"Why stop?" she said. "It's been so much fun I'm going to carry on."

It's not just Emma's art which is entertaining and curious. She's a larger than life, love-life character with a passion for individuality.

As well as the striking make-up and passion for vintage clothing, she is an avid animal lover and owns a black hen called Linda. While we



*Emma with her pet black hen and, right, a self portrait.*





Above: Emma at work in the Derbyshire countryside near her Duffield home. Right: Various examples of her powerful portrait work.

chat, Emma's feathered friend made a new home in my handbag. "She likes you," said Emma. "She's a lovely hen. We are inseparable. She's a great companion."

Also hugely influential in Emma's vibrant life is her film-maker husband, Owen Tooth. He's the love of her life and extremely supportive.

She has enjoyed some involvement in his work thanks to her seemingly endless creativity. But nowhere is that staple facet of her life more at home than on canvas.

She considers herself a portraitist first and foremost. It is the creation of likeness which fascinates her. It is at the centre of her work. That element is amply displayed in her breathtaking Concilium Plebis collection.

"The people you chose to paint must be extremely proud," I venture.

"I guess so," said Emma. "I hope they come and see the work."

Gareth, the guy with the fantastic tattoos, was an amazing guy. I've lost touch with him but I hope he'll get to see it."

In the conservatory of Emma's Duffield home, we talk for hours but only touch the surface of Emma's character and talent.

I hate to leave because she's so inspiring – but my much more mundane and structured life beckons.

We shake hands and promise to meet again.

"You could paint me," I hint.

With that, Emma smiles and leads me to the front door...



