



Delfina Entrecanales with 14 of this year's artists, and, in his absence, Sadiq's sculptures.
Photo Chris Leinhard

DELFINA, LATTER-DAY MEDICI

Delfina Studios provides working space for young artists. Susan Loppert looks admiringly at the energy and achievements of Delfina Entrecanales.

Delfina Entrecanales is a pint-sized sixty-something Spanish dynamo with a thirty-something second husband and the mantle of Catherine de Medici on her shoulders. With her inspired brand of benevolence, she gives new meaning to the words patron and patronage. At the moment, though, she appears to be a lone beacon, waiting forlornly for others to emulate and imitate her. Must it always take an enthusiastic outsider to show us the way, to galvanise us from that sluggardly lethargy in which the vision is there, ideas are born, but their practical implementation requires far too much vulgar energy and commitment, too much Latin temperament in this cold northern clime?

In 1988 she formed the Delfina Studios Trust, a non-profit-making charitable trust whose principal aim is the provision of free studio space for promising young artists in the early and most difficult part of their careers. The Trust gives practical support to selected artists by offering them the opportunity to work in a stimulating environment, free to create, free from the pressures of having to earn and pay rent. And since a third at least of each year's intake comes from abroad – from as far afield as China, Colombia, the Ukraine, India and South Africa – the environment is a cosmopolitan one, fostering fruitful exchange of ideas and community spirit.

In September 1988 the trust opened its doors: the top floor of a converted Victorian

flour mill glorying in the resounding name – redolent of a bombastic industrial past – of the Maryland Works, in Stratford, East London, a stone's throw from Joan Littlewood's pioneering theatre. Delfina and her husband, Digby Squires, already leased part of the building from its Indian landlord for a philanthropic but ultimately unsuccessful jeans-making enterprise. So what brought about the change of direction, from denim to canvas, and transformed a sweatshop into ten airy white studios and a large exhibition space?

Delfina Entrecanales y Tavora came to England in 1948, aged eighteen, sent by her building tycoon father to escape Franco's Spain and learn English, which she did – fluently and volubly, but still with the

accent and cadence of Iberia – at Oxford, at one of the numerous language schools nestling in the shadows of the University. There she met her first husband, married in 1952, and embarked on the uneventful career of housewife and mother. By 1988, the children had fled the coop, had children of their own, and Delfina had divorced and remarried (a friend of her son's: minor scandal), but, although she describes herself as a 'hundred per cent Spanish mother and grandmother', she was not quite ready to take up lace-making.

She enrolled in a course for bored amateurs at Chelsea College of Art, for which Paolozzi was one of the teachers; from him she learnt of the plight of most sculptors and painters, of their difficulty in finding studio space at all, let alone at affordable rates, and of the horrors of their dealings with dealers, who took usurious commissions of as much as 60 per cent. It set her pondering on the precarious nature of the artistic existence, wondering how artists managed to survive; and she decided, impulsively and immediately (which seems to characterise all her actions), to put her fortune into helping artists materially, rather than simply by buying their work, as before. 'Under Thatcher, they lost many subsidies, they have to give 50-60 per cent commission to the galleries, and in London they no longer have the Victorian studios by the river, now converted into luxury penthouse flats. Then the idea of the trust came to me.'

She had the premises; where to find the artists? She had, in the past, bought paintings by Michael Heindorff from the Bernard Jacobson Gallery; Heindorff teaches at the Royal College and would, she correctly surmised, be able to recommend young talent. From the trust's inception, Heindorff has been one of the advisory panel of eight or so who select the chosen few, as have dealer Vanessa Devereux, and William Packer, art critic of the *Financial Times*; in the first year, other selectors were the *Glasgow Herald* critic Clare Henry, Jenni Lomax, director of the Camden Arts Centre, artist Martin Fuller and photographer Nicholas Tucker. Successors to the permanent triumvirate have included artist Jack Knox (former Head of Painting at Glasgow School of Art), and Jennifer Williams of the British American Arts Association; while the present panel includes David Abramson, chairman of the Morris Singer Foundry (a substantial benefactor in kind to the Trust), sculptor Javier Medina-Campeny, artist Armando Morales, journalist and broadcaster Hans Pietsch, and Sarah Wilson, who teaches at the Courtauld.

On the April day of our interview, the rumbling of trains a constant counterpoint to our conversation, Delfina and the administrator, Bridget Ashley-Miller, were in the throes of organising the preliminary selection of this year's fifteen artists. Over 600 people had requested application forms, of whom 230 had actually made application by

the closing date, the end of March. The previous day, Heindorff, Delfina, and her co-trustees, husband Digby Squires and daughter Blanca Leigh, had narrowed these down to a shortlist of 55, from which the final selection would be made by the full panel on 27 April.

Application is by means of ten slides (whether for painting, sculpture, photography, installation, performance or video, with the caveat that 'while artists in any medium may apply, there is no technical equipment provided for such things as printmaking or ceramics'), a short description of career to date, and two letters of recommendation from 'professionals in the field'. Those eligible are artists 'who have work of outstanding quality, are able to move to London and can work harmoniously within the studio and have no formal ties to any commercial gallery. To be considered, artists will have to be seen by one of the trustees or advisers, or be recommended by two respected art authorities. Artists who have been out of full-time education for a year or two are preferred'. (Delfina is on record as saying that 'artists who haven't given up after facing the outside world must at least be serious'.)

The application form asks only six pithy questions: Are you currently employed (full- or part-time)? Do you presently have a studio? Are you represented by any gallery? Why are you interested in coming to Delfina Studios? Do you have any specific space requirements for your work? And (warily) – Do you use any particularly noisy or otherwise disagreeable processes in your work? This last may have led to the disarming statement that 'unfortunately, it has proved necessary to make some rules to ensure the smooth running of the studios' – one of which is that anyone wishing to listen to music should use a walkman. The only cardinal rule, in a place where flexibility reigns, is that an artist should make reasonable use of the studio, failing which the trustees reserve the right to award the space to someone who would use it to better effect.

So what form does this manna from heaven take? Delfina Studios has space at present for fifteen artists (having expanded from the initial ten). British artists – or artists permanently resident here – are awarded free studio space for two years; while foreign artists are offered a year, during which their accommodation is also provided by our Lady Bountiful, who last year bought a nearby terrace house with space and amenities for six people.

Each studio space is about 400 square feet. Although no studio equipment is provided, light and heat are paid for by the trust, and there is a common area, furnished with mugs, kettle, fridge, and pay-telephone, where finished work may also be stored (Delfina hopes eventually to have a canteen, or at least a coffee counter; how about a tapas bar?). Artists are given keys to the studios and have free access, day or night (no beds provided).

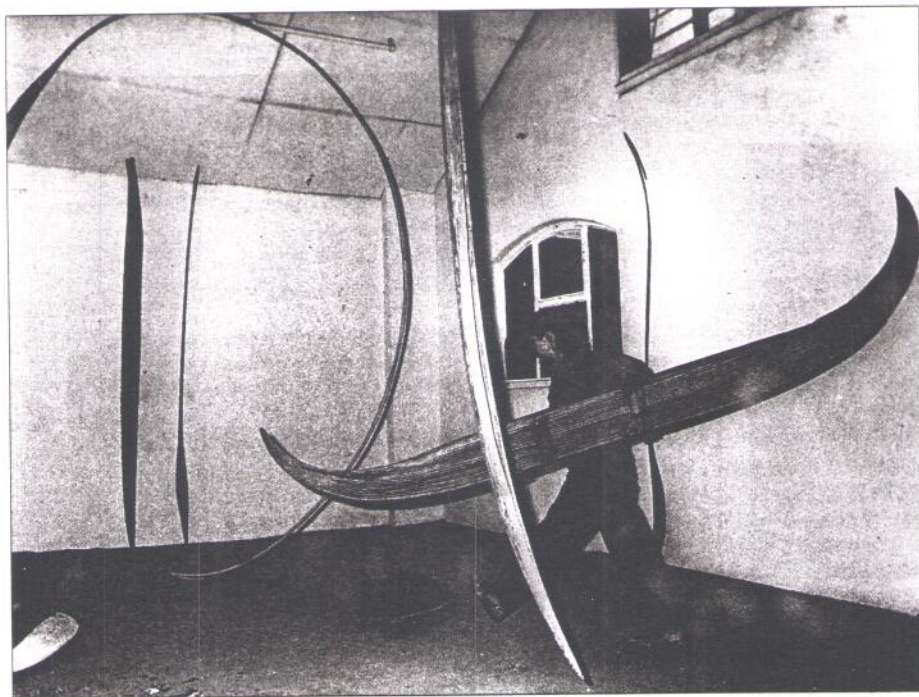
In addition, each year the trust organises a grand summer exhibition and a smaller, less grand, winter show, in which each of the artists is shown, both as part of a group in the communal main gallery, and individually in their studios radiating off it. To these shows are invited the great and the good, the chattering classes, the silent majority, dealers, critics, collectors. The wine and food provided by Delfina are not your plonk and peanuts: Australian chardonnay and fine red Rioja are proffered along with exotic melting morsels. In these greedy times, people have been known almost to kill for an invitation to the Delfina bash and nosh, where a broken-nosed bouncer in black tie, Essex Man from hoof to plume, scrutinises all invitations, whether ambassador's or punk's. Delfina feels that if the curious are intrepid enough to trek to Stratford East they should be rewarded with sustenance equal to the visual feast.

The aim, of course, is not only to expose the artists and their work to the public but to sell it; and this the shows have achieved with extravagant success, despite the recession. And, remarkably, as though to add insult to the injury inflicted by the largesse of general studio space, publicity and exhibitions, the trust takes no commission at all on the sale of work, so that the artist receives the whole sum, complete and entire. All that is asked in return is that each artist, on leaving, give a piece of work to the trust's collection, at present housed in a barn in the country, for future exhibition.

Such disinterestedness is pretty astonishing. So what's in it for Delfina herself? Satisfaction, for one thing; 'motherhood without the pain', for another; and, probably most important, involvement in burgeoning international cultural interaction at a time when most idle rich women of her ilk and age involve themselves in society charity functions, which are high-profile in *Vogue* and *Tatler* and *Harpers* but otherwise empty. At another time, and if she had been a man, Delfina would probably have inherited her father's mantle and business; she has certainly inherited his volcanic energy and enterprise, and from him probably the passion for art: he collected Spanish classical paintings, and her brothers – the McAlpines, as it were, of Spain – have expanded this to include a large number of Spanish impressionists and contemporary artists. But they are not involved in the trust, nor in her new Spanish project, the Casa Manilva.

Two years ago the trust converted an eighteenth-century inn in the village of Manilva, in the south of Spain, between Gibraltar and Marbella, into a residence for artists from all disciplines – writers and musicians, film-makers and photographers, as well as painters and sculptors – who are invited to spend between one and three months working and living in the house, exchanging ideas and points of view.

The first residents started using the



Lucy le Feuvre and her carved wooden boat sculptures, in her studio at Delfina.
Photo Chris Leinhard

house last autumn, and this year – Spain's big year, the year of Columbus, the Olympics and the World Fair – Delfina welcomes the bemused villagers, up till now excluded from the activities of Casa Manilva. Led by their mayor, they will be involved in their own small festival, the *Semana Casa Manilva*, from 19–23 August. In addition to exhibitions and workshops, the focus of the week will be a community performance of *The Magic Flute*, with children of the village as well as professionals (arias will be sung in German, recitatives given in Spanish, the whole reduced, somehow, to an hour), and all props, costumes etc. will be made by artists and villagers under the direction of Thomas de Mallet Burgess, who has worked on community projects for Opera 80 and the Welsh National Opera.

For this project, too, Delfina relies on professional advice, in this case from Rodney Slatford, Dean of the School of Strings in the Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester. The week's imaginative music programme – from Albeniz to Gershwin, via Borodin, Schubert, Copland and Shostakovich – includes candlelit performances by the Issey Miyake-costumed Brodsky Quartet (the apotheosis of the designer quartet?) and pianists Peter Bridges and Elena Riu. Castles in Spain? No: Casa Manilva.

International cross-cultural exchange is Delfina's driving force. The trust's policy is to invite artists from countries with which exchanges have not traditionally been arranged, whether through lack of funds (although accommodation is provided, each foreign artist has to find his or her fare as well as money for materials and subsistence) or because of other, usually political,

obstacles. Because of Delfina's Hispano-phonetic ties, there has been an emphasis not only on Spanish artists, but on artists from Latin America, including Cuba (the trust is attempting to raise funds to bring one Cuban artist each year to the Studios for the next three years), as well as Africa, Asia, and those parts of the former Soviet Union and its sphere of influence which cultural freedom never reached.

A little-known but no less astonishing fact is that the London Borough of Newham – where the studios are located – is twinned with Moscow. Bureaucracy, working in more (or less) mysterious and convoluted ways than usual, invited seven Delfina artists to take part in the annual ice sculpture festival, Vyugovey, in Gorky Park, Moscow, last year; 300 professional artists came from all over the (then) USSR, and Delfina Studios was the only British representative (the trust paid for air fares and special clothing). This year, ten Delfina artists have been selected to take part in the Barcelona Biennale, which will coincide with the Olympics. And exchanges have been arranged between Delfina alumni and artists from other countries: Jesus Alonso to India, Lucy le Feuvre to Prague, Dillwyn Smith to Berlin, Lallitha Jawahirilal to Johannesburg, for example – all part of what Delfina happily describes as 'a little United Nations'.

Expansion is planned at home as well as abroad. Many of the trust's graduates have moved to the floor below, to the converted Maryland Studios (where they pay a heavily subsidised monthly rent of £150, which includes heat and light), and there is now a total of 46 artists at the Works. A further new space, 3000 square feet of the ground floor, called Stratford Studios, was opened

in January for rent to sculptors at similarly subsidised rentals. And Delfina's dream (and she has an uncanny way of making her dreams reality) is to convert the rest of the ground floor, a vast 14,000 square feet, into a community space for craftsmen – potters, weavers, furniture makers, illustrators, private presses, printmakers and so on. 'My whole idea is the development of a working artistic community.'

But even the Entrecanales fortune is not a bottomless pit. Up till now, all funding has come from Delfina herself (£154,500 in 1991, £102,000 the previous year – and this does not take Casa Manilva into account), cleverly administered by Digby Squires, who is an accountant. ('I am the accelerator, he is the brake', says Delfina.) A further £150,000-odd is needed for the ambitious expansion programme; when Delfina realised this a couple of years ago, she tried to raise the money in Britain – totally unsuccessfully she admits ruefully (one suspects she is not used to failure).

Delfina's gestures are grand, lavish even, but the money involved is not excessive and is acutely targeted to have maximum effect. This is practical, imaginative sponsorship without millions; the modesty of the amount needed is in contrast to the effect and spin-off she is creating. How is it possible that no-one in this country understands this creative energy in our midst? The trust is a registered charity, and tax incentives apply; it is just the sort of initiative that the Tory government applauds and encourages, but where is the corresponding awareness and appreciation from our grant-giving institutions and, indeed, our business community? The scratched old record of recession is no excuse in the face of the modest amounts involved.

The day of our interview, she had just returned from a fund-raising mission to Washington and New York, from meetings with the Andy Warhol Foundation and the Krasner-Pollock Foundation (which has already given a \$6000 bursary to the Chinese artist, Jian Jun Xi, one of the original group of ten, who has stayed on and married an English girl). Whether the much larger sums required would be forthcoming was not yet apparent.

Delfina Entrecanales is one of a handful of a rare and unusual breed of private benefactors randomly scattered worldwide: Henri Levy established the Binz foundation in Switzerland a decade ago; the Karl Hofer Gesellschaft was set up in Berlin 40 years ago; in Bombay, there is the Mohile Parikh Centre for the Visual Arts; in the United States, the Mary Walsh Bequest and the McDowell Trust.

But in Britain Delfina is unique. And she wishes she weren't. She is a fervent believer that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. Her dearest wish? 'Flatter me'.

Delfina Studios Trust Summer Exhibition opens on 25 June for ten days. (Maryland Works, 22 Grove Crescent Road, Stratford, London E15 1BJ, tel: 081 519 8841.