

THE  TIMES

MAGAZINE



27.01.24

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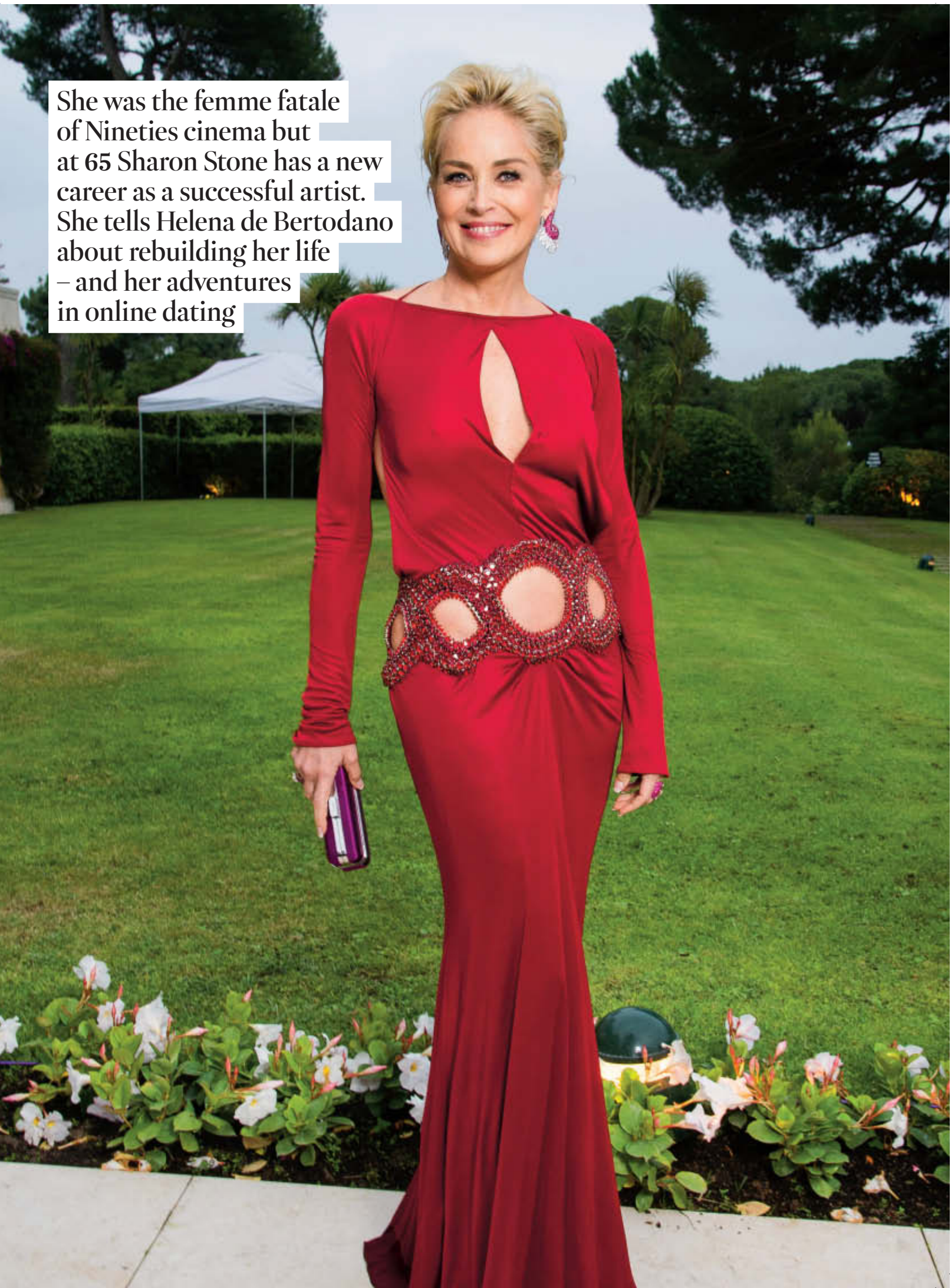
I WISH I HAD MONEY FROM ALL THE MEN WHO CLAIM THEY SLEPT WITH ME

Actress, writer and now artist – **Sharon Stone** has the last word

Sharon Stone with an exhibition of her artwork at the G Parker Gallery in Connecticut last October. Opposite: Stone in Cap d'Antibes, France



She was the femme fatale of Nineties cinema but at 65 Sharon Stone has a new career as a successful artist. She tells Helena de Bertodano about rebuilding her life – and her adventures in online dating



‘I’D BE ECSTATIC TO HAVE A RELATIONSHIP. I’M ON TINDER – I MET A FELON AND A HEROIN ADDICT’

This is the year," announces Sharon Stone, as she takes a forkful of penne alla vodka, "that I want to fall in love – 100 per cent."

We are sitting in her spacious art studio next to her Beverly Hills house, a classic fairytale mansion (which once belonged to the actor Montgomery Clift), complete with spiral staircase, glass-domed hall, balconies and chandeliers, overlooking a turquoise swimming pool. Stone, 65, is taking a break from a long afternoon of painting as she puts the finishing touches to an upcoming art show in Berlin.

"Sharon Stone paints?" she asks herself in mock horror, imitating the reaction of, well, almost everyone. "What the hell? She uses her arms too? Look at her. *Make her stop.* It was enough when she opened her mouth and made a sound. Oh my God..." When you have range, it's a lot for people to cope with. I have range."

Of course she is best known as an actress, a Nineties femme fatale who starred in movies such as *Casino*, *Sliver*, *Total Recall* and, most memorably, *Basic Instinct*, the 1992 erotic thriller in which she plays a bisexual serial killer who, under interrogation, uncrosses her legs to reveal – possibly – that she is wearing no underwear. "What are you going to do, charge me with smoking?" she purrs at the police officers. It is still the line she hears most often when people meet her in the street. "Or they tell me they know somebody who dated me or slept with me." She chuckles ruefully. "I just wish I had money from all those people who said they slept with me."

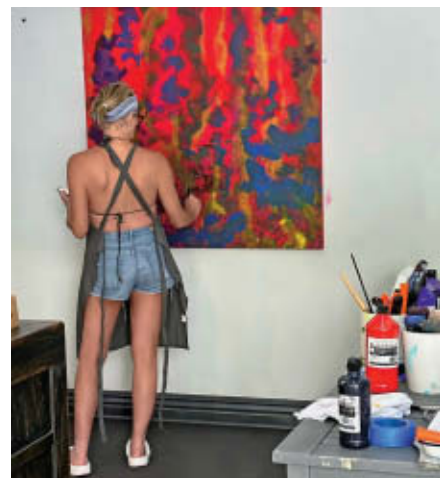
Married and divorced twice, her love life has been chequered. She has three adult adopted sons, Roan, Laird and Quinn, aged 23, 18 and 17. The younger two still live at home. Laird lopes in and introduces himself. "Come here, honey," Stone says, reaching up – he is much taller than her – to give him a hug. "He's going away to college," she tells me proudly when he is out of earshot. "He's receiving scholarships up the wazoo because he's a genius."

As well as painting, she writes songs – "I have a major artist recording one in February" – and books: she is currently writing a novel about nuns. Well aware of how much mockery this invites, she has developed a tough outer shell. "I'm an international artist who can take my artistry into many different forms..." "She's writing another book? That crazy bitch. F*** her. Next thing you know she'll have something to say again. Then we're going to have to put her down again."

In the art world, however, her paintings have been well received. The Pulitzer prize-winning art critic of New York magazine, Jerry Saltz, has especially



Stone at her exhibition in Connecticut and, below, in her studio



championed her work. As well as the show in Berlin, she recently celebrated the East Coast premiere of her work at the C Parker Gallery in Greenwich, Connecticut, which continues until February 20. Neither realistic nor quite abstract, her paintings are described by gallery owner Tiffany Benincasa as "a journey through the vibrant landscapes of her imagination". Selling for about \$5,000 a canvas, they have entertainingly oblique titles such as *It's My Garden*, *Asshole*.

"People say, 'Are you offended if people buy your paintings because it's you?' No. It's an emotional concept. All art is subjective. So I don't care if people buy my paintings because they match their sofa or because they like *Total Recall*. If part of the context is me personally, I'm comfortable with that. Because guess what: I've *eee*arned it." She emits a long and throaty laugh.

Stone appears without artifice: no

make-up, thick glasses, tousled pixie-style hair streaked with grey. "I'm falling apart," she jokes. "I'm Mrs Potato Head when I have to go out now. I have to glue the pieces back together." She is dressed down in paint-splattered black drawstring trousers and a khaki vintage sweater with very worn Donatella Versace boots, also covered in paint. Underneath her sweater is a T-shirt sporting the words "Brains Are the New Tits". Even her bulldog, Bandit, who accompanies her everywhere, has green paint on his nose. "Bandit, down," she says when he pounces on me.

She is like a splatter painting herself, chucking all sorts of emotions at me, bursting into tears one minute, roaring with laughter the next. She can be warm and generous, inviting me to dinner and insisting on clearing up everything herself afterwards. And she can be very abrupt. "That's a lazy question," she says bluntly when I ask her if she would do anything

With Michael Douglas in *Basic Instinct*, 1992



With her second husband, Phil Bronstein, in 2000



'My friends say I go upstairs and come down as Sharon Stone. Like putting on a Superman suit'

differently given her time again. "That has no relevance and no purpose. Let's talk about things that mean things."

I am no art expert, but her paintings seem accomplished and striking. Some are better than others. A brightly coloured canvas titled *The Lovers* is standing against the wall. At the bottom are vague ghostly shapes representing two human forms. Above is a large square of turquoise with what looks like an ethereal planet floating out of the top and a black jagged line cutting through the colour. In the middle are four solid lines in bright pinks and oranges. I ask her if she can explain the painting.

"I've been a lover," she says briefly.

I look at it again. Hmm, there's a lot going on here. Is it incorporating different lovers or is it about one person in particular? "None of your f***ing business," she replies.

Somehow, in person, this is funny rather than rude.

She is, however, candid about her love life and says it has been "years" since she has been in love. "I'd be absolutely ecstatic to have a relationship... It's just that I spend so much of my time painting, the guy's probably gonna [have to] pop out of the woodwork. But that may very well happen."

As a Hollywood star once ranked one of the "50 most beautiful people in the world", one would think that she would not be short of suitors. But it seems that the struggle is real, even for her. In recent years she has tried online dating in an attempt to find a meaningful relationship. "I didn't want to just go on Tinder and f*** somebody. Do you know what I mean? It's so easy to f*** somebody. You don't have to go on Tinder; you go

to f***ing Coffee Bean [a chain of coffee shops]. It's not hard."

It's probably not the same for everyone. She is, after all, Sharon Stone. She scoffs. "It's not that hard for anyone. Men f*** flashlights; a warm can of beans. Let's get into reality. You go to the supermarket if you just want to have sex, but if you want to have a connection..."

Her experiences with online dating have been mixed, to say the least. There was the man she discovered was a convicted felon, and someone who was "a heroin addict who's clearly 20,000 heroin injections later than the picture he sent me". She met him in the garden of the Bel-Air hotel and was horrified when he arrived. "I tell the waiter, 'I'll have a glass of water.' He had a cocktail: absinthe or something. And I said, 'I'm sorry, I can't stay.'" And no, she does not try to hide her identity on dating apps. "I go on as myself. It's not like I can fake it." Initially Bumble blocked her, assuming the account was not genuine, prompting her to tweet, "Hey Bumble, is being me exclusionary? Don't shut me out of the hive."

But there have been some positive experiences, including two relationships during Covid. She never met the men in question but found them fascinating. "I was almost like a therapist. One whose wife told him she wanted a divorce and they had two little kids. He was struggling to process it. And [the other] had broken up with his girlfriend. She had gotten pregnant and instead of marrying, she got an abortion... He was still very much in love with her and I helped him process it. It was really rewarding for both of us. I don't know how to explain it."

Her experiences gave her an idea for

a television show, so she continued dating as research. "I mean, I wasn't opposed to falling in love with somebody, but I thought it was going to be pretty unlikely."

She says she does not have any set prerequisites in a partner. "I don't look for anything. I've never looked for anything. Because I don't think that's what happens. You're standing somewhere, someone walks up and starts talking to you and you turn around and think, 'What?' And the next thing you know, two years have gone by. You don't look for a list and then your list arrives. That's what people do who don't have relationships. So that they can comfort themselves with the fact that they don't have a relationship and feel that they're actively making an effort towards that happening in their lives."

She is careful about whom she introduces to her children. "I think being a parent made me more thoughtful about who I would date. Once you recognise that the decisions that you make impact someone else... This is why I joke about my boyfriends from foreign countries, because I always think it's one thing if you're away and having some fun. But then what happens is that person wants to keep dating you. You're like, OK, well, I'll date you when I see you in that foreign country."

"Then if it continues, the person wants to come and see you in your country. You're like, 'I'll see you in New York or in Miami. Why don't we have a beach vacation?' I try to take it for a while before they end up in my house. I am not looking to have some guy move in with me; I'm trying to find out if the person I'm with can hold their own. Generally you find out that's a big 'no'. And by the time you find out, you haven't scared the children."

Her parents had a good marriage. Her mother was an accountant and her father a factory worker. She grew up with her two brothers and one sister in Amish country in rural Pennsylvania. But although her parents adored each other they did not demonstrate much love to their children, and Stone still has a complicated relationship with her mother. "But she just called to invite me to lunch, which is fantastic. Although," she adds drily, "I may need a nap after."

Her childhood was mixed. "Some things were really terrorising." In her book *The Beauty of Living Twice*, she describes how, when she was eight, her maternal grandfather sexually abused her five-year-old sister in front of her. With a high IQ, Stone was assessed as "academically gifted"; she entered second grade – a class of seven-year-olds – aged five. But she struggled socially, vividly remembering the time the most popular girl in class randomly slapped her across the face. "It still hurts my feelings. I could cry about it right this second [she does]. Becoming a movie star did not make it hurt less." ➔

she says through sniffles. “And being pretty didn’t make it hurt less. I’m still the fragile girl that she slapped across the face, who carries that as an insecurity in my life and goes into parties and thinks people won’t like me. It’s why I don’t like to go anywhere. It’s why I’m so shy.”

She is meant to be going to an Emmy party this evening but, after some deliberation, decides she’s going to cancel. “It’s just too f***ing much. I have paralytic social anxiety. I have always had it. I’m fantastic in a crisis. If you’re bleeding to death, I’ve got you covered. What I don’t like is 17 people talking all at the same time. I just would like to go home. Enough with the chaos and the noise of nothing.”

She went to college on a creative writing scholarship but quit to move to New York (she subsequently completed her degree in 2016) and become a model, earning her first movie role as “pretty girl on train” in Woody Allen’s 1980 film *Stardust Memories*. In 1990 she starred opposite Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Total Recall*, playing his calculating wife.

Stone is an unusual Hollywood interviewee. She is upfront about almost everything, even her age. When someone mentions the date today, she claps her hands. “Yay. Two exact months until my birthday and I’ll be even older. Sixty-six. I like being alive and healthy. And I think that we should all be super-thrilled to make it. Because I’ve witnessed any number of people not making it. I think that people who are embarrassed about being older are just stupid and ungrateful.”

As someone who was once given a one per cent chance of survival, every year is a triumph. In 2001 she had a stroke that resulted in a 9-day brain bleed followed by a 7-hour operation in which 22 coils were inserted into her brain to stabilise the artery. It took her years to fully recover. “It made me more fragile, which I think made me have more depth as a person.”

Her star sign is significant to her. “I’m a Virgo rising, which is why I’m so pure-hearted, level. I do have a Scorpio moon, though, which is the part that people are scared of. That’s where your sexuality is and where the sting is. Like [she puts on a sing-song voice], ‘I’m fun till you cross me.’”

You cross her at your peril. If someone tries to take advantage of her on the business front, she goes into battle. “I have no gender issue about business. Business is business. And a contract is a contract. [She is referring to the time when a studio tried to underpay her for *Basic Instinct 2* after they had agreed the same fee as Michael Douglas received for the first film.] It’s not about whether or not I have a vagina. It’s about whether or not we have a contract. If we don’t have a contract, f*** me. But we have one, so f*** you.”

And on a personal front, she is a divisive person. She has many friends in

‘I was trying to recover from a nine-day brain bleed. And then they took my child’

Hollywood but others describe her as difficult. “Nobody likes a mouthy broad.” She shoots from the hip and has no truck with the fake cloud of luvviness that envelops the acting world. As names pop up in conversation she can be biting: one famous director is “a dickaholic” (meaning a dick who’s an alcoholic); someone else is “completely without compassion.”

In politics too she has strong views. Trump, unsurprisingly, is “a fat disgusting pig”. Hillary Clinton is “gorgeous, composed, organised, the greatest example of statesmanship”. A strident activist, she is proud of her relationships with many world leaders. “Heads of state from all over the world write to me because of all the [humanitarian] work I’ve done.” She was especially close to former Israeli president Shimon Peres, whom she once described as her “mentor” and travelled to the Middle East under his leadership to help promote peace. Last month, she won Global Citizen of the Year from the United Nations.

As she speaks she is appraising one of her paintings titled *If We Make It*, an interpretation of the world post-apocalypse. “It just seems like something black should be rolling through it.” She gets up to squeeze out some black paint. “I’m just going to leave it out so it gets a little tackier.” She selects a roller brush, lights some Japanese incense and puts on a recording of the haunting medieval music of Hildegard of Bingen, which she always listens to as she paints. “It’s a spiritual experience,” she says as she starts applying the roller in staccato movements down the centre of the canvas, then adds a sweeping sinuous shape, hinting at a snake, also in black. “There,” she stands back, satisfied. “The movement of the painting is now full and complete.”

Snakes feature strongly in her work. “Envy: a deadly sin,” she whispers theatrically. Usually the object of envy, she admits to feeling it too. “I didn’t really know it at the time. I remember when my second husband [the journalist Phil Bronstein] married his mistress and she said I was jealous... I SURE didn’t want to be with him any more. All capital letters. Like, could you put him inside Fort Knox and lock him up... And then they took my child. [In 2008, Stone lost custody of Roan, then 8, whom she shares with Bronstein, after a four-year custody battle following their divorce.] It’s one thing when they take your husband because it’s, like, have at it, please. But

when they take your kid...” She trails off.

“Then I had envy. Envy of the way they manipulated the court system. And envy is a deeper thing than jealousy. It’s dangerous. It’s in your bones. Then I understood.”

She looks back on it as the worst period of her life. “I was trying to recover from a nine-day brain bleed where you can’t find your f***ing shoes. And then someone takes your kid.” She is talking through tears now. “And then they continued by trying to take my reputation. [The judge asked her young son, ‘Do you know your mother makes sex movies?’] And make as if I was a bad person. And that’s when I understood that the only thing that I could do was hold steady, [with] no response or retaliation.”

It took her years to reestablish her career. “I lost my place in line.” But in recent years she has had several successful roles, most notably in the Netflix psychological thriller series *Ratched* (2020), portraying an heiress who hires a hitman to kill a doctor for maiming her son.

She still gets offered the occasional femme fatale role. “It’s a cheap thing to do. I get that I’m good at it.” But she does not mind that she is forever associated with *Basic Instinct*. “I was magnificent in that film. I’m thrilled with the fact that I’m in a movie that’s still successful 30 years later.”

Sharon Stone, she says, is almost a persona, not someone she really recognises. “My friends say I go upstairs and come back down as Sharon Stone. It’s like putting on your Superman suit. People don’t expect to meet me; they expect to meet the characters that I play.”

She is sometimes irked by the assumption that she is fabulously wealthy. “I don’t have money to splash around. I never got paid like the men got paid. [People] think that all those stories in magazines that I have 17 cars and 3 houses are true. No. I have one house and a 15-year-old Bentley Continental that I bought myself for my 50th birthday.”

As for the house, she says, she bought it as a shell and it has taken her 30 years to renovate it. “The police said I had to move into a house behind gates [because she had so many stalkers]. But it was a dump, and it’s taken me all these years to build it into the estate it is today. I couldn’t buy an estate like this.”

She shrugs. “If they want to think I’m rich, OK. They can think I’m thin while they’re at it.” She is chuckling now. “And stunning. And have no problems. They can think I’m still young too and I have a boyfriend. Let’s pretend I have it all, shall we? Let’s not pretend I’m like you and me and the rest of the world, just scraping through.” ■

Sharon Stone: Welcome to My Garden is at the C Parker Gallery in Connecticut until February 20 (cparkergallery.com)