



Brushing off passing years

*William Tillyer may be approaching 80, but as the artist generally found at the top of a stepladder tells **Sarah Freeman**, he is facing one of his busiest ever years. Pictures by **Gary Longbottom**.*

William Tillyer is a creature of habit. Monday to Friday, the artist wakes early and by 10am he will be at his studio on an unremarkable looking industrial estate on the edge of the North York Moors.

After a small cup of strong coffee, he begins work and the next seven hours or so are spent armed with icing bags and large decorating brushes as he pushes paint through a series of large-scale mesh rectangles. The tools of his trade, which also include a couple of pairs of giant stepladders, may be workmanlike, but the results are anything but and while Tillyer is about to turn 80 he remains as prolific as ever.

“I don’t know what else to do but paint,” he says sitting in his office filled with art books and catalogues of past exhibitions, and there will soon be a few more to add to the collection.

To mark his landmark birthday, London’s Bernard Jacobsen Gallery, which Tillyer has been with since the 1970s, has planned four exhibition of his work and the series will be complemented with the publication of a monograph of his career to date.

“That’s why I put these up,” he says, pointing to a series of images pinned around the office walls. Divided into decades, the prints are an artistic timeline, charting his journey from Middlesbrough to Paris, via the Slade School of Art and finally back to Yorkshire.

“I now only live 12 miles from where I was born, so I suppose I didn’t get very far,” he says with typical modesty for a man who has earned worldwide renown. “But you know it has been interesting to look back and see how my style has

JUST WILLIAM: Main picture above, William Tillyer in front of one of the artworks in his studio; above right, other examples of his work; inset right, some of the tools of his trade.

changed over the years. It’s important, I think, to know where you came from.”

Tillyer’s parents owned a couple of hardware stores in Middlesbrough, but there was never any pressure to go into the family business and besides he knew where his vocation lay from an early age.

“I was lucky in that I grew up at a time when every town had a decent art college,” he says. “That creative side of education was something which was both encouraged and supported. It was the post-war years and there was a real sense of optimism about the future. To be honest, it never really occurred to me not to do art.”

“I know that as everyone approaches their dotage they look back on their early years and tell you how good things were, but I do believe that the 1950s was a golden period.”

After initially studying at Middlesbrough College of Art, Tillyer headed to London and the Slade School. Both, he says, were the making of him as an artist and by the time he found himself in Paris in