

Rose Finn-Kelcey: Life, Belief and Beyond, Modern Art Oxford review - revelation and delight

First posthumous show of an influential but little-known artist

by Sarah Kent | Wednesday, 19 July 2017



Divided Self (Speakers' Corner)', 1974 by Rose Finn-Kelcey

Rose Finn-Kelcey was one of the most interesting and original artists of her generation. Yet when she died in 2014 at the age of 69, she could have disappeared from view if she had not spent the last few years of her life assembling a monograph about her work. It's a beautiful book that helps you appreciate the range and complexity of a practice that might otherwise be too elusive and too mercurial to grasp fully.

Modern Art Oxford's partial retrospective similarly brings Finn-Kelcey's work into focus, and we can hope that it will kickstart the process of acknowledging her importance. Her work is funny, beautiful, clever and poetic, but when a body of work feels light and ethereal rather than weighty and substantial, it is unlikely to attract the attention it deserves. Her *modus operandi* didn't help; she approached each project as an adventure that frequently required her to learn new skills – from taxidermy to bull-fighting passes, the moves of flamenco to controlling the movement of steam. "I have this idea that I want to reinvent myself each time I make a new piece of work," she said. "If I choose a new medium, that gives me that space, and I can feel I'm starting again." As a result, no two pieces look alike and, since her projects were often ephemeral and exist only as videos or photographs, it is hard to appreciate the scale and breadth of her output.



From 1975 -85 her work was almost exclusively performance-based, but that didn't prevent it from being incredibly labour intensive. Take *Glory* (pictured above), for instance, which was performed at the Serpentine Gallery in 1983 and then restaged for the video version now on show in Oxford. A cast of 100 cardboard cut-outs gradually fills the table-top stage. Political leaders such as Lenin, Churchill and Thatcher, whose Falklands War inspired the piece, are joined by soldiers, cowboys and indians, a bucking bronco, hangman's nooses and a vast array of weaponry from knives, scimitars, axes, maces and bows and arrows, to canons, hand grenades, submachine guns, missiles and atom bombs.

The *blitzkrieg* that ensues is orchestrated by the artist using a croupier's rake to a soundtrack of jaunty music interspersed with the sounds of battle. Sporting a cartoon "splat" on each hand as though to were a knuckle duster, she fights an imaginary opponent whose grunts and groans indicate their resounding defeat. To the throb of rotating blades, a helicopter hovers above a battleship and a submarine; cue the pinging of sonar made familiar by black and white war films like *The Cruel Sea*. Close your eyes and you could be watching any one of the Hollywood blockbusters that inspired this balletic exploration of carnage and our endless fascination with conflict.

Gradually Finn-Kelcey moved away from performances towards installations. In 1987, Van Gogh's painting of sunflowers sold at auction for the record price of £24.5 million: a canvas that he had failed to sell for £25 had become a collector's item. This dramatic shift in status inspired Finn-Kelcey to transform the picture into money – literally – since once an artwork is perceived as an investment opportunity, it is hard to view it in any other way.

Ironically, though, she couldn't afford the £1,100 of loose change needed to create the image, so she had to construct it piecemeal, a section at a time. Later that year, though, *Bureau de Change* (pictured below and detail above right) was realised in full with borrowed cash that had to be returned to the bank once the exhibition was over. Arranged in two layers on a false floor, hundreds of old ten pence pieces, shillings and pound coins create an astonishingly good likeness of the painting. A museum-style guard and a security camera watch over this valuable asset which, on screen, resembles the original painting even more closely. Mounting the stairs to a platform reminiscent of an auctioneer's podium, you get a clear view of art as money. The irony is that this final manifestation of the work now belongs to the Tate and is probably accruing value as I write. One day it may even be worth £24.5 million.





In the 1990s Finn-Kelcey began making large scale sculptures such as *Steam Installation*, 1992 (a cloud of steam that billows between the bed and hood of a giant steel structure), *Royal Box*, 1993 (a walk-in freezer) and *Pearly Gate*, 1997 (a full-sized gate sprayed pearlescent white). None of the large sculptures is included in the show, which is a shame since it skews one's perception of her output.

The artist was brought up a strict Catholic, and religious belief is a recurring theme in her work. How in a materialistic age does one approach the subject of the divine? As in *Pearly Gate* (a farmhouse toy enlarged to heavenly proportions), her answer was to use the banal, mundane or matter-of-fact to address our desire for the spiritual or ineffable.

It Pays to Pray, 1999 (pictured above left) is a vending machine that instead of dispensing chocolate bars such as Ripple, Delight, Bounty and Wispa offers a prayer written by the artist. Wry humour and a light touch characterise her approach. "The work plays on the accepted orthodoxy that chocolate is associated with happiness through a chemical change/charge and that people use vending machines for a quick 'fix'," she explained. "You go to a chocolate vending machine when your blood sugar levels are low and you also pray when your spiritual levels are low." Choose Delight and bright blue LED lights spell out "Keep me warm, Keep me safe, Keep me in the lap of luxury". Choose Picnic and you get "I love eating. I love food. I love the smell of food. I love the taste of food. I love the look of food. I love the effect of food. Thank you for my dinner."



Women artists of our generation were routinely ignored, dismissed or patronised; many gave up and those who persisted often felt isolated, as if they were talking to themselves. On a practical level, Finn-Kelcey joined the Women Artists' Collective and helped found the Women Artist's Slide Library, groups whose purpose was to offer help and support. But she also addressed the issue in her work. *Divided Self (Speaker's Corner)*, 1974 (main picture) is a pre-photoshop black and white photograph of herself sitting on a park bench – talking to herself. The idea is incredibly simple, yet it continues to resonate across the decades because it encapsulates the experience of being a woman at a time when female voices usually went unheard.

Modern Art Oxford's show is an excellent start; what we need now, though, is a full retrospective in a London gallery.