

# frieze

## Jeff Keen

Kate MacGarry

Jeff Keen was no minimalist. You're apprised of that at the entrance to this selection of works from the 1950s to the '90s, where several of the late artist-filmmaker's early films are looping. The opening two minutes alone of *Meatdaze* (1968) – an eight-minute 16mm film intended as a compacted simulation of an entire movie programme – overwhelm the eye with intensely accelerated and inventive footage; rewatching it on the BFI boxset *GAZWRX: The Films of Jeff Keen* (2012) invites athletic use of the pause button. To a thunderous soundtrack of kitsch war-movie orchestrations and booming bombs, a cut-out biplane soars through a gallery of Old Masters, red goo bursts from an anatomical drawing, torpedo-like cocks spurt, giant bubbles menace a doll's house ... and that's about two seconds' worth. Then several 'features' begin. Keen, wearing a boiler suit stencilled with 'JEFFKEEN FLIX', paints a morphing battle scene on the wall; naked figures with painted faces cavort in a flat; and finally there's a party scene, albeit one that revolves around blowtorching dolls. It was 1968, and to contemporary audiences this disorderly amalgam of unfettered libidinal energy and media overload probably made a fair amount of instinctive sense.

As seen here, though, *Meatdaze* is complicated by the wider context of Keen's art. The Brighton-based artist and pioneer of expanded cinema, who died last June aged 88 (and whose work was showcased last September in the Tate Tanks), had served in World War II, working on experimental tanks and aeroplane engines. Afterwards he became interested in Surrealism and Art Brut. As demonstrated by works in the concurrent, larger retrospective 'Shoot the Wrx' at Brighton Museum & Art Gallery, in the late 1940s Keen was making Picasso-flavoured paintings of tortured, distorted figures – while also loving B-movies, comics, John Heartfield and Hannah Höch. He took up filmmaking as British art went proto-Pop. All these influences bubble through his wildly inclusive films, whose ensemble casts, multiple exposures and haywire storylines echo and perhaps anticipate those of Andy Warhol and Jack Smith. They're reflected, too, in his auxiliary production of 2D works (replete with forces-style stencilled texts on dirty grounds), assemblages and sculptures, barely seen outside Brighton galleries until a couple of years ago, when Paris's Galerie du Centre began showing his paintings. The result is that this show, which touches all bases, feels like a soup made out of individual soups, scalding hot and, in

## About this review

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Jeff Keen, 2013, installation view

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places, burnt.

Keen's art is structurally gristly, but what comes out of it most strongly is a translocation of the violence he witnessed in war into culture, wherein it might provide an exhilarating headfuck that retains a latent critical dimension. He seems to have been warring with categories and borderlines from the start, and comes off as a rigorous anti-formalist as well as a reflector of unstoppable bodily energies. One pointedly varied grid of images here ranges from a gnarly Dubuffet-ish scrawled martial monster (*The Million Dollar Devouring Machine*, 1950), to a black-painted sepulchre full of useless eyeglasses (*Spectacles Case*, c.1962), to what appears to be a 1990 cover for *RAYDAY*, the frenetic comic he home-produced from 1962. William S. Burroughs contributed to it, and he and Keen shared an intense resistance to the authority of language – Keen regularly hiding, warping, refusing words – and a devotion to showing the world as steered by base instincts. In Keen's case, this was achieved via a full-on, knowingly excessive art. 'It's Auto-Bio-Graphik / But not an Autobiography / Direct Projection / & not an illustration / See the world drawn inside-out...', he once wrote.

That visceral bent could midwife works like *NUM NOM* (1970), with its splayed and torched doll on a dense bed of text and splatter, but also – from the same year – the sparer, graphic *Plane over Target*, with its clean-lined mushroom cloud. With scant accompanying information, some of the works come across as non-sequiturs: the *Mister Soft Eliminator helmet* (c.1981) and *ARTWAR Helmet* (1990), among others, might be props for films or freestanding works. The overriding impression here, as with Camden Arts Centre's exhibition 'The Bruce Lacey Experience' of last year, is of a heroic cross-media blurting of thematics both pained and exhilarated that nevertheless finds more focus in Keen's films. What becomes difficult, accordingly, is disentangling the sense of bombardment that comes from encountering an unfamiliar and many-tentacled oeuvre, and the specific assault that Keen appeared to want. Maybe, though, there's no useful distinction to be made. Scrambled together like this, all sirens howling, his art positions one squarely on the burning deck.

**Martin Herbert**

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