

Review

Rose Finn-Kelcey review – flying puns, smart pranks and prayers for 20p



Arts Collective, Northampton

An overdue celebration in her home town of this funny, direct, critical, satirical conceptualist shows her spiky social commentary is as fresh and relevant as ever



Intercession concession ... Rose Finn-Kelcey: House Rules at Arts Collective, Northampton. Photograph: Angus Mill

Eddy Frankel

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ose Finn-Kelcey wanted to make art that was neither pompous nor condescending. Those are pretty rare ideals in conceptualism, where pomposity and condescension come with the territory, but Finn-Kelcey was a pretty rare artist.

This show in Northampton's brand new £5m art centre – a very colourful retrofit of the historic municipal offices and town hall annexe, filled with artist studios – is a homecoming. Finn-Kelcey was born here in 1945 and grew up on a nearby farm, but spent the 1970s onwards causing a big old feminist ruckus with all sorts of art pranks, installations, performances, videos and photography in London before her death from motor neurone disease in 2014.



Fuel for freedom ... Power to the People. Photograph: Rose Finn-Kelcey/Angus Mill

Her approach to conceptual art is summed up neatly and perfectly by *Power for the People*, a 1972 work that saw her hoist two huge flags up on Battersea power station, back when it was still a power station, keeping London lit and heavily polluted with coal. The flags, emblazoned with huge stark sans serif letters, are punny, silly, smart. And they riled posh neighbours across the river in Chelsea so much that they had them taken down. That's Finn-Kelcey: talking about collectivity, togetherness, societal thinking, all while exposing the way those things are policed and restricted by

people in power. The work is documented here in a big photo, the flags flapping in the wind, the power station belching fumes into the London sky.

Another photo shows an installation of swinging saloon bar doors installed in a Texas park. Removed from context, they act as dividers, as architecture of separation and permission. They say this place is for you, that place isn't, you can go in there, but not in here.

That idea of permission and who gets to grant it comes up again in a later work called House Rules, two little LED displays, one red, one green. Instructions scroll by on the green one – clear it, calm it, dry it, whip it, chop it – while restrictions scroll by on the red – no floating, no gaming, no trusting, no washing. Do this, don't that. Like any feminist punk icon, Finn-Kelcey saw society's restrictions as expressions of power and repression, and she wasn't going to let them go unchallenged.



Papal address ... Rose Finn-Kelcey: House Rules. Photograph: Angus Mill

Her other big topic was spirituality. There's a huge rug in the middle of the gallery of a Vatican postage stamp, with God now wearing an eye patch like an all-powerful, almost all-seeing pirate. Blobby yellow sculptures dot the space, giant versions of

grain sacks from a Playmobil set, used here to represent everyday souls trying to enter the Pearly Gates. Neither work is all that great, both a bit ugly, a bit obtuse.

Way better, and the best work in the show, is *It Pays to Pray*, a fully functional prayer vending machine. Whack in 20p, pick a number, and sad, silly, poetic stanzas flash up on the LED screen: “No one will pull my hair”, “It’s not worth it”, “I just want to curl up and go to sleep”. They’re prayers for the 21st-century atheist, for jaded millennials and grumpy boomers, supplications for freedom – and boredom. That’s what passes for religion these days.

Finn-Kelcey was a funny, direct, critical, satirical, intelligible artist who cared deeply about people, spirituality and power. This isn’t the big retrospective her work deserves – it’s a relatively small display of photos and a handful of objects – but it’s a great introduction to an artist to whom bigger institutions should pay a whole lot more attention.

- [Rose Finn-Kelcey: House Rules](#) is at Arts Collective, Northampton until 1 August

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