

Visual art

Art, money, fame — and a bit of fun



Rose Finn-Kelcey's works are spiritual and reflective, but most of all they're witty, discovers **Rachel Campbell-Johnston**

On March 30, 1987, a Van Gogh painting of a jar of sunflowers made newspaper headlines across the globe. The picture — *Still Life: Vase with 15 Sunflowers* — had been sold by Christie's in London for £24.75 million; a price that, tripling previous records, was to prove to be a defining cultural moment. As booming financial markets (six months before the Black Monday crash) combined with what can be described as the "sanctification" of modern art, they created a flourishing new trade that still sets not just the art world's economic agenda but its tastes also.

The British avant-garde artist Rose Finn-Kelcey responded. In that year she made what has become one of her best-known pieces. *Bureau de Change* is a replica of Van Gogh's iconic canvas, created out of coins.

This is the first thing visitors see as they enter the only survey show of Finn-Kelcey's work to be staged in this country since her death three years ago, at the age of 68, from motor neurone disease. It shimmers enticingly as you walk towards it — its 1,100 components (ranging from pennies to pound coins) laid down like fish scales, glittering and winking under the gallery lights.



On the simplest level, it works as a wittily deft one-liner. Art is money, it says. It has become a currency just as surely as this installation which, when broken up, will re-enter our economy. But the ramifications of Finn-Kelcey's ideas always run deeper and wider. At the same time as she speaks of that fusion of art, fame and money, she pays homage to Van Gogh and the alluring beauty of his paintings and alludes also, perhaps, to his yearning to "transubstantiate" the physical, to conjure the transcendent by creating a sunburst of light.

This sharp blend of ironic humour and profound seriousness is about the only thing that the selection of art works at Modern Art Oxford have in common. No two Finn-Kelcey works are alike. Rather, each subject she

In God's Bog, a giant porcelain shell is given a loo seat

approaches is seen as a fresh challenge. At one moment you are looking at photos of the huge slogan-painted flags that she hung, fluttering, from public buildings. At the next you are peering at the most intricately scissored cut-out.

Finn-Kelcey's range — as the subtitle of this show, *Life, Belief and Beyond*, might suggest — was extremely wide. Although predominantly a performance artist, she worked also with sculpture. She used photography and film, collage and cut paper. Anything from magpies to a matador might inspire her. That so many of her pieces were ephemeral, that they could not be owned (and hence traded), makes them all the harder to pin down.

Curators at Modern Art Oxford set out to help by grouping the works by theme. Through doing so they emphasise, for instance, her strongly feminist stance, or highlight her fascination with spiritual beliefs. And yet, the longer you look, the more you will discover echoes and reflections, resonances and developments between one piece and the next.



In her innovative 1976 performance, *One for Sorrow, Two for Joy* — documented in this show by photos, writings and a stuffed bird (she did the taxidermy herself) — she followed in the footsteps of Joseph Beuys (who spent three days locked in a room with a wild coyote) and shared a gallery space over two evenings with a pair of magpies. Finn-Kelcey saw these birds as her alter ego. She was drawn to their mischievously rebellious spirit. She liked their instinct to hoard. But where Beuys wanted to proclaim his troubled relationship with American politics, Finn-Kelcey approached the subject of human relationships more subtly. Feeling that the voices of women were not sufficiently heard in mainstream culture, she made a piece about attempts at communication, about trying to speak other languages and creating a forum in which they could be understood.

Her magpie love of all things that glitter can be spotted throughout her work. It is reflected in her use of coins, pixels, Lurex, LED technology and

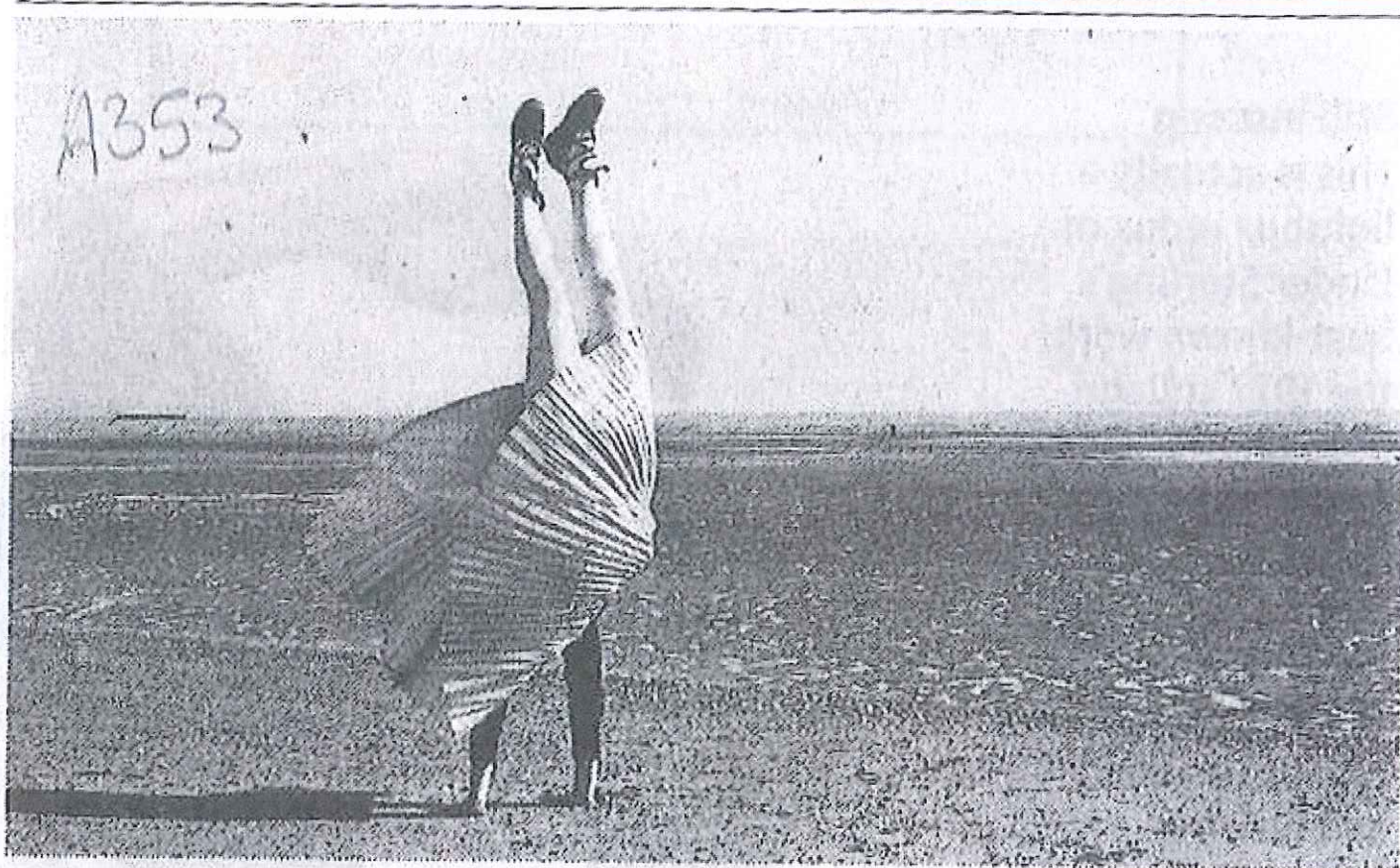
sequined matador suits. But beneath the shiny surface lies something deeper. In 1978 she made *Book and Pillow*. She wanted to speak about what she often imagined as the "small being" inside her: a tiny but naggingly persistent embodiment of inner character that made her unconfident, uncertain and awkward.

Commissioning a Natural History Museum model maker, she presents an effigy of this inner creature, a tiny red homunculus mounted in the pages of a Perspex "book", which she lays on a pillow with a magnifying glass beside it. The sound of a buzzing fly fills the space with its irritating hum. Only when visitors lay their head on the pillow is this noise silenced. Then they can use the glass to gaze at the tiny, huddled figure.

Finn-Kelcey asks us to look inside ourselves and see what we find. She is one of the few artists of her era directly to address the spiritual. What does God mean today? Where can he be found? She responds to such questions with a mixture of reverence and the ridiculous. *God's Bog* is a 2001 work in which a giant porcelain shell is given a loo seat. Her 1999 *It Pays to Pray* was created for the Millennium Dome. A customised vending machine dispenses not bars of chocolate but prayers. Instead of a sugar hit, Finn-Kelcey offers a spiritual rush.

Curators of this survey show are keen to stress how carefully she planned her performances. Preparatory plans are on display. They are only for the anoraks. For the rest of us the show is fun — but with a dash of philosophy thrown in. **Rose Finn-Kelcey: Life, Belief and Beyond** is at Modern Art Oxford, 01865 722733, to October 15

Top: The artist as a matador (1986). Above: The Restless Image (1975). Left: detail of Bureau de Change



Rose Finn-Kelcey Oxford

The late Rose Finn-Kelcey had all the irresistible charisma of a self-doubting super-talent. *Life, Belief and Beyond*, the first exhibition of her work since her death in 2014, reminds us of just what an unorthodox thinker and persistently self-reinventing performance and installation artist she was. A typically unique piece is *Book and Pillow*, in which an alter-ego homunculus, commissioned by Finn-Kelcey from a Natural History Museum model-maker, lies on a Perspex book neatly resting on a pillow. As you peer at the imp through a specially provided magnifying

glass, the subtle movement sets off the sound of a common housefly's buzzing. The *Restless Image* (pictured), meanwhile, is a photograph of the artist hand-standing on Dungeness beach with her skirt whirling above her head. Often addressing the crises of confidence that tend to menace most artists, her performances tackled issues of possible spirituality, political exploitation and social self-worth. "Doubt becomes the thread of strength," she once said, an idea her work maintained up until the end. **Robert Clark**
Modern Art Oxford, Sat to 15 Oct

TATE ETC – 14 JUNE 2017

Rose Finn-Kelcey: A Restless Spirit

by Lisa Milroy

Ahead of the first posthumous exhibition of works by Rose Finn-Kelcey (1945–2014), artist Lisa Milroy remembers her inspirational friend



Rose Finn-Kelcey, *The Restless Image – A Discrepancy Between the Felt Position and the Seen Position. Self Portrait*
1975

Courtesy the Estate of Rose Finn-Kelcey

I've known and admired Rose's work for many years but only met her in 2005 thanks to Catherine Kinley, who nominated us to go to China on a research trip on behalf of the Red Mansion Foundation. It was the start of a lovely friendship.

When I remember Rose, I immediately hear her voice and laugh, sharp and warm, and picture her amazing red curly hair. I'm hit by a wave of fresh appreciation for her taste in eyewear, and how she stylishly transported her choice of drink in a small silver hip flask.

A now iconic photograph also comes to mind: *The Restless Image* 1975 in the Tate collection – a female figure posed in a handstand at the shore's edge, laced up wedge-y shoes hovering in the air, hands flat on the sand, torso and head caught in the folds of a marvellous white pleated skirt evocative of huge paper fans, or a ribbed seashell.

I am always touched and stirred by Rose's photograph, the image upfront yet mysteriously elusive, irreverent and playful, deadpan and serious, the figure simultaneously hidden and revealed, there but not there, trapped and free.

Lisa Milroy is an artist who lives and works in London.

***Rose Finn-Kelcey: Life, Belief and Beyond* is at Modern Art Oxford, 15 July – 15 October.**

YOU MIGHT LIKE



ARTIST

Rose Finn-Kelcey

1945–2014



ARTIST

Lisa Milroy

born 1959



ARTWORK

Rose Finn-Kelcey

The Restless Image: a discrepancy between the felt position and the seen position

1975



ARTWORK

Rose Finn-Kelcey

The Magpie's Box

1977

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

Courtesy the Estate of 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 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.

“ She approached each project as an adventure that required her to learn new skills ”



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 it 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.

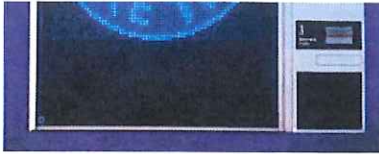
Gradually Finn-Kelcey moved away from performances towards **installations**. In 1987, Van Gogh's painting of sunflowers sold at auction for the record price of £24.5 million: a canvas that he had failed to sell for £25 had become a collector's item. This dramatic shift in status inspired Finn-Kelcey 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. Why 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.

- [Rose Finn-Kelcey: Life, Belief and Beyond](#) at Modern Art Oxford until 15 October

Critics' choice

Life&Arts



'Bureau de Change' (detail, 1987) by Rose Finn-Kelcey

over-riding concerns — perceptions of the self and the nature of power — in subtle, oblique, performance-based works. As Oxford's rich show — the first since her death in 2014 — makes clear, Finn-Kelcey was a ceaseless experimenter who believed art could be made of anything. She flew flags, "wind-dependent objects" announcing "Fog", from public buildings in the 1970s, developed "vacated performances" in the 1980s — table-top cut-out silhouette characters controlled by a croupier's rake in "Glory", responding to the Falklands War — and in 1999 made "It Pays to Pray", a reconfigured chocolate vending machine dispensing prayers instead of snacks for the Millennium Dome, recreated here.

At her best, she perfectly dovetailed the conceptual and material, socio-political comment and visual impact: a highlight here is the immersive installation "Bureau de Change" (1987), a critique of the record \$25m sale of "Sunflowers", in which a Van Gogh oil painting is glitteringly transfigured into loose change. modernartoxford.org.uk 01865 722733, July 15-October 15

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

It is a formally perfect black and white photograph, as finely balanced as its subject: a girl (a self-portrait) doing a handstand on an empty beach, tide far out, light clouds rhyming with the

patterns made by the receding sea on the broad expanse of sand. The stillness and rippled horizontals contrast with the arrow-straight figure, legs thrust in the air, and the rush of her satin pleated skirt, billowing into an arc in the wind. Incongruous, exuberant, intriguing, optimistic, the

composition embodies freedom — until you consider its title: "The Restless Image: a discrepancy between the felt position and the seen position".

Rose Finn-Kelcey staged this photograph in 1975 when she was 30 and already an exacting conceptual artist who expressed her

An exaggerated pearl is a useful description of a larger-than-life scagliola-surfaced worm that writhes in one of the derelict sheds. *Untitled (If This Isn't Nice What is?)*, 2017, is a fabulous baroque sculpture by Heather & Ivan Morison, the arrested motion of which has the quality of a curling slug and a surface of colourful polished marble. Both lumpen and opulent, the installation is an apt synthesis of the luxurious surfaces of the house and the decaying surfaces of the sheds.

Jasleen Kaur describes her work for the darkened pineapple sheds thus: 'Cairns is a series of three touch lamps influenced by the act of my parents who for 30 days ritualistically prepared a joth [a ghee candle] and placed it on a derelict plot of land by their house within a shelter of bricks and tiles. They were advised by a saint to light the joth at sundown for 30 days to ward off negative energies that remained on the site.'

Kaur is interested in the transformation of taste and meaning through transculturation and hybridity which inevitably produces newness as a synthesising of cultures and landscapes. However, for this show the quote above demonstrates the intensity of activity, of parents crouched over a shrine on wasteland now reconfigured in a pineapple shed. The work forms a critical hinge for the show where hybridity is neither historical fragmentation nor pastiche nor eclecticism but represents a cultural position. ■

STEPHEN LEE is a writer and an artist.

Rose Finn-Kelcey: Life, Belief and Beyond

Modern Art Oxford 15 July to 15 October

'Are you exasperated with your ego? Squeeze your "me" into this sponge. Hold firmly for a few seconds. Now let go.' These tongue-in-cheek instructions, together with a single sponge, were handed out to the audience during a lecture given by Rose-Finn Kelcey at the Hayward Gallery on the occasion of the 1995 retrospective of the notoriously megalomaniacal Yves Klein. The first posthumous survey of her work at Modern Art Oxford, curated by Emma Ridgway and Stephanie Straine, sets out to represent the full breadth of the artist's output from the 1970s to her death in 2014. The exhibition was conceived as a selective survey rather than a comprehensive retrospective, and was arranged thematically,

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



shifting ahistorically through documentation of her work in performance, video, photography, drawing, paper cut-outs, electronics, installation and sculpture – the full gamut of Finn-Kelcey's extraordinarily rich visual vocabulary.

Born in Northampton in March 1945, Finn-Kelcey was educated at the Ravensbourne College of Art and then Chelsea School of Art. She lived and worked in London and was an active member of the Women Artists Collective in the 1970s. No single work could ever represent the remarkable scope of her 40-year-long career but *The Restless Image – A Discrepancy Between the Felt Position and the Seen Position. Self Portrait*, 1975, captures something at the root of its vitality. Taken on a beach near Dungeness, the self-portrait focuses on the body of the artist inverted in a handstand, strong on the firm sand, her face temporarily obscured and sheltered from the gaze of the viewer by the billowing folds of her silver pleated skirt. Time is temporarily arrested. Finn-Kelcey inhabits the image, compelling us to reflect back on the private act we are witnessing, on the position felt and the position seen. The title of the work is borrowed, in part, from René König's *The Restless Image: A Sociology of Fashion*. Published the year before the photograph was taken, the text charts a history of fashion, from the antique bikinis of imperial Sicily to hot pants in London in the 1970s, as 'a special form of regulated behaviour'. A vitrine of preparatory photographs exhibited for the first time at Modern Art Oxford revealed Finn-Kelcey grappling with that form, testing out costume alongside handstand techniques against her studio walls. These entertaining studies reveal the handstand on the beach to be far from spontaneous, instead a carefully crafted visual essay on looking itself, and the relationship between the performer and audience.

The Restless Image heralded Finn-Kelcey's move into 'vacated performance', her chosen terminology to describe live work realised by surrogate performers, a concept that notably prefigures the post-millennial 'delegated performance' tendency synonymous with the work of Tino Sehgal amongst others. 'I wanted to be both inside and outside the work,' she explained, 'and yet, as it unfolded, to also be an objective viewer.' It was with her work in performance that Finn-Kelcey first came to prominence and in that work that the exhibition at Modern Art Oxford was appropriately anchored. The earliest featured was *One for Sorrow, Two for Joy*, 1976, a performance that took place at Acme Gallery in London's Covent Garden over two days in which she appeared in dialogue with two magpies, offering food and various suitably shiny objects while challenging the presumed centrality of the authoritative male voice. That work was presented along with two videos from the 1980s: *Glory*, 1983, and *Bull's Eye*, 1985. The latter records the artist performing solo on stage meticulously executing the role of a matador. *Glory* appeared at the heart of the exhibition: a compelling 20-minute single-channel video made from documentation of a performance of the same title presented at the Serpentine Gallery in May 1983. In that performance, made in response to the Falklands War, Finn-Kelcey animated and controlled 100 surrogate performers locked in what she described as 'a kind of Blitzkrieg' on a large tabletop. In the video which followed, the white cardboard cut-outs of clichéd images – famous politicians, film stars, and various images associated with war and conflict, from cowboys to the mushroom cloud of an atomic bomb – are returned to the filmic conventions from which they were originally taken. The only colour is the blood red of the gloves worn by the artist – the master puppeteer dictating the looping narrative accompanied by a maddening fairground-like soundtrack, its joviality jarring with uneasy irony with the imagery on screen.

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The skilful interplay between performance and object was further developed in *Bureau de Change*, first presented in 1987 at Matt's Gallery, London and subsequently acquired by Tate. On 30 March 1987, Van Gogh's *Still Life: Vase with Fifteen Sunflowers*, 1888, sold at Christie's in London for a record £22.5m. *Bureau de Change* was Finn-Kelcey's response: a theatrically spot-lit, floor-based recreation of the oil painting rendered in coins protected by a CCTV camera and a patrolling uniformed guard. The auratic object is reduced to nothing but spare change in a concise questioning of the art market and the wider attribution of value.

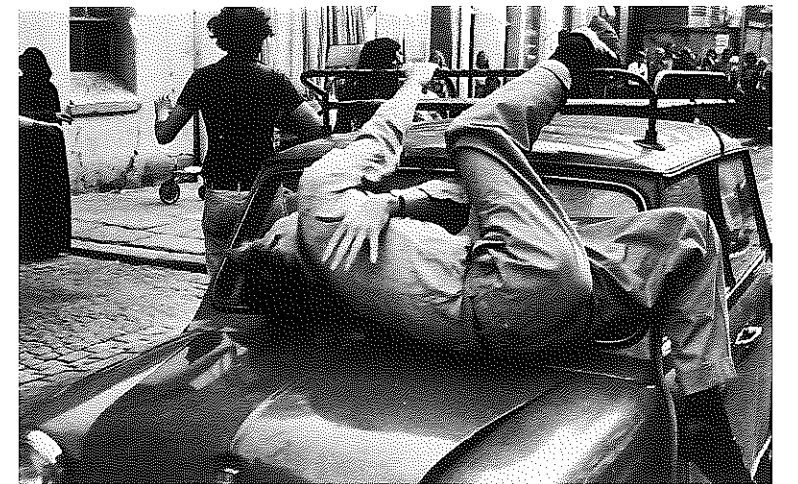
The first exhibition to include Finn-Kelcey after she graduated was a group show of emerging artists at the then Museum of Modern Art Oxford in 1968. It is fitting that her first retrospective was mounted here, if tantalising that the exhibition was not extended into the Piper Gallery which could have accommodated one of her large-scale installations from the 1990s. Nevertheless, 'Life, Belief and Beyond' firmly asserts Finn-Kelcey as an important figure in the complex landscape of postwar British art. Further institutional recognition should deservedly follow. The sheer range of work on view is testimony to Finn-Kelcey's remarkable dexterity as an artist, and her drive to critically subvert and humorously challenge the status quo. Describing her work, she once said: 'I work in the belief – or dare – that I can continue to reinvent myself and remain a perennial beginner.' This important survey affirmed Finn-Kelcey as ever restless, fearlessly teetering between states of reverie and earthly critique. ■

ISABELLA MAIDMENT is a curator based in London.

In Case There's a Reason: The Theatre of Mistakes

Raven Row London 30 June to 6 August

The most headline-grabbing performance art has featured guns, bodily fluids, excrement, nudity, beds and placards. Scandalous material of this type is conspicuously absent from Raven Row's survey of The Theatre of Mistakes, which partly accounts for why this artist collective has been under-evaluated. Founded in early 1970s London, the group has taken a cross-disciplinary approach to performance, theatre and participation. This exhibition was appropriately multifaceted, presenting an expansive archive, as well as a free public workshop and a performance piece. Documents and photographs from the 1970s were arranged on glass-topped tables and walls of the

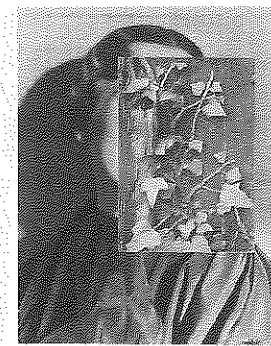


upper floors, while the lower-ground level was set aside for the live elements.

Over the years The Theatre of Mistakes has proved itself adaptable to a range of situations – a farm, a prison, an urban residential street, as well as more glamorous settings such as the Serpentine Gallery, Hayward Gallery, Paula Cooper Gallery and the Stedelijk Museum – in a consistently pragmatic and direct manner. Amongst an array of early photo documentation of performances and workshops that took place at the Purdies Farm artistic retreat is a cardboard tag with the hand-written message 'TOMORROW BUY A BAR OF SOAP + PAINT IT BLACK!'. This uncredited, Yoko Ono-inspired example of instruction-art is seminal for what rapidly developed into complex lists of instructions, stage directions, games, manifestos and pedagogy.

The earliest documents show that the group was originally called 'The Ting' and then 'The Ting: Theatre of Mistakes' and later simply 'The Theatre of Mistakes'; 'Mistakes' referring to the Keatonesque potential of mistakes that occur within a structured performance. Later, the group created the conceptual piece *Mutuality*, 1976, a series of joint signatures by members Anthony Howell, Fiona Templeton and Mickey Greenall, who simultaneously held a single pen with inevitably scrawly results. The 'best' version was made into a rubber stamp to be used as an identifying mark for the many documents that were being produced; that their logo is indecipherable betrays a fundamental wariness around authorship and leadership. 'Mutual authorship', as they they called it, is a reasonable solution considering that over a hundred performers and artists contributed between 1974 and 1976.

The Theatre of
Mistakes
The Street 1975
performance



John Stezaker, *Mask LXXVII*, 2007. Courtesy
The Approach, London. Photo: FXP photography.

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In God's image?

Transcendent artist of new beginnings

LAURA GASCOIGNE

Life, Belief and Beyond
MODERN ART OXFORD

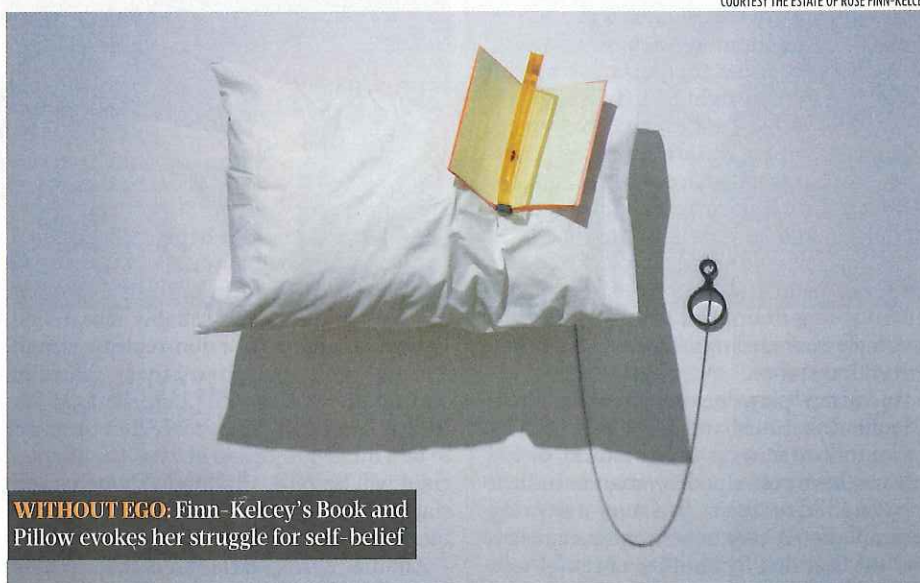
HERE IS AN interesting question: does a Catholic upbringing produce more thoughtful conceptual art? Or is it because I am on the same wavelength that I think so?

Two conceptual works have stayed with me from "Sensation", the 1997 exhibition of Young British Artists (YBAs) at the Royal Academy that introduced conceptual art to a mass audience: Damien Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* – aka the pickled shark – and Adam Chodzko's *The God Look-Alike Contest*. Hirst's shark needs no introduction, but even some of those who visited the exhibition may have missed Chodzko's inconspicuous contribution, a display of responses to a discreet ad placed in *Loot* asking people who thought they looked like God to submit photographs. When we say we are made in God's image, what do we mean? Chodzko's awkwardly literal attempt to answer that question provided a rare moment of quiet in a noisy show.

What got me thinking about this subject is "Life, Belief and Beyond", an exhibition at Modern Art Oxford (until 15 October) of the work of another artist whose name, like Chodzko's, will be unknown to most people. Born in 1945, Rose Finn-Kelcey belonged to an earlier generation of cutting-edge artists who pioneered ephemeral performance art in Britain, and although her works were sometimes highly public, her profile was not. She rarely recorded her performances, and many exhibits in this show have been scraped together from material left in her studio on her premature death in 2014, aged 68, from motor neurone disease.

Finn-Kelcey's ambivalence towards the commercial art market – she chose not to be represented by a gallery – was one obvious thing that distinguished her from the YBA generation; her insistence on meticulously crafting her own work was another. So was her constant desire to break new ground and throw herself into projects that meant learning new disciplines from scratch.

These are borne out by the variety of works in this show, ranging from a copy of Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* created from coins in response to news of the painting's sale in 1987 to a Japanese corporation for \$25 million to her 1986 performance, *Bull's Eye*, for which she mastered the ritual sequence of passes



WITHOUT EGO: Finn-Kelcey's *Book and Pillow* evokes her struggle for self-belief

executed in the closing stages of a bull fight – an achievement all the more remarkable in someone who had had polio as a child.

It is no coincidence that these passes are called "veronicas" after the veil held up by Veronica to the face of Christ on his final *corrida*, the road to Calvary. Brought up in a formal Catholic family and educated in a strict convent school, Finn-Kelcey through her art became increasingly preoccupied by the idea of God. Her unfinished work *God's Bog*, a toilet in the elegant shape of a snail shell, was a witty feminine riposte to Duchamp's urinal, but it also raises the serious ontological question, where does created matter come from and where does it go? It wasn't enough for Finn-Kelcey, as for Duchamp, to make art about art; she had to dig deeper.

WHILE AT THE British School in Rome in 1996 she circulated a Visual Questionnaire to trainee priests asking for illustrated answers to the two questions: "What does God look like?" and "Where does God live?" The responses on display are very touching, despite, or because of, the poverty of the drawing.

Recognising that "works of art have the unique attraction of being at once ethereal and material", Finn-Kelcey was blessed with a unique gift for mixing the banal and the transcendent in ways that, instead of debunking the transcendent, elevated the banal. In 1999

she was commissioned to make a work for the Millennium Dome and installed four vending machines on one of the walkways offering a selection of prayers in the place of chocolate bars. "I thought that you go to a chocolate vending machine when your blood sugar levels are low, and you also pray when your spiritual levels are low." Called *It Pays to Pray*, the installation may have disappointed children but will have made their parents stop and think.

As a woman artist in what was then an overwhelmingly male world, Finn-Kelcey felt herself constantly pulled in opposing directions, between the need to assert her artistic position and the conviction that "to be really creative ... you have to become open and clear your mind of ego". Her struggle for self-belief was acknowledged in *Book and Pillow* (1978), in which a book contains a "tiny being" trapped in Perspex that "surfaces when I feel most vulnerable, guilty, inadequate, negative ... How often he tells me that my life is a waste of time ... The little wretch – poisonous little voice."

The voice never succeeded in silencing her, or diverting her from making work concerned with transcendence. "If you set out to speak about something being transcendent, you are always thrown back on the fact that you are here, that you are material and that you have to deal with day-to-day things of living." That contradiction lies at the heart of Catholicism – as does a belief in new beginnings.

THE RESTLESS IMAGE

Philomena Epps on Rose Finn-Kelcey: Life, Belief and Beyond at Modern Art Oxford, 15 July - 15 October



Rose Finn-Kelcey, *Divided Self (Speakers' Corner)*, 1974. Courtesy the Estate of Rose Finn-Kelcey

Rose Finn-Kelcey's retrospective exhibition—the first since her death in 2014—opens with the photograph '*Divided Self (Speakers' Corner)*' (1974). The artist appears twice in the image, in conversation with herself on a bench in Hyde Park. '*Divided Self*'—perhaps a nod to R.D. Laing's 1960 classic exploration of madness—sets up a premise that runs throughout the show. As a conceptual artist working across media, Finn-Kelcey was deeply concerned with the subjective and the personal, as well as how these are interwoven with structural power and agency; she often staged works in public spaces or within civic institutions, ranging from broadcasting corporations to churches, energy suppliers and government spaces. The combination of wit, imaginative capacity and intellectual thought locates Finn-Kelcey's practice in an avant-garde lineage. Despite her reputation as an 'artist's artist', her work is often accessible in nature, a stance reflected by the curatorial inclusion of rough cuts, preparatory sketches, performance documentation, unfinished work, and archival materials. Here, process is privileged.



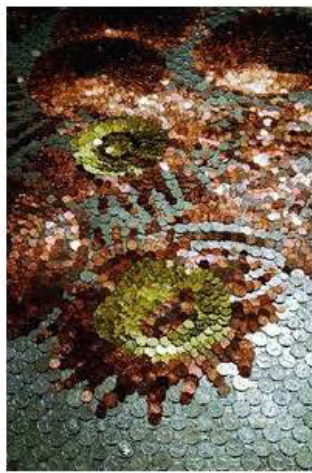
Rose Finn-Kelcey, *Untitled: Bullfighter*, 1986. Courtesy the Estate of Rose Finn-Kelcey

Perhaps Finn-Kelcey's best-known work is 'The Restless Image: a discrepancy between the seen position and the felt position' (1975), a black and white photograph bought by Tate in 2002. A female figure is captured in a handstand on the beach, her pleated skirt billowing in the wind like a paper fan. Alongside this iconic image, Finn-Kelcey's research works are displayed in a large vitrine. Previously unseen, these capture the precise and architectural study necessary to create such a striking image: the pleats of the skirt are fanned out, the handstand repeated again and again. As with much of her work, the final result—a restless image—might be objectively light-hearted, but has been produced through intellectual rigour and physical challenge. This meticulous attention to detail, intrinsic to Finn-Kelcey's practice, is also illustrated in the preparatory works on show in the middle galleries, in which multiple self-portraits show the artist practising the matador's 'cape pass' for the cover of *Performance* magazine. For Finn-Kelcey 'performing' was not enough; the artist had to be the matador.



Rose Finn-Kelcey, One for Sorrow
Two for Joy, 1976. Courtesy the
Estate of Rose Finn-Kelcey

Finn-Kelcey's performance and installation based work was informed by her active feminism, deeply related to her ongoing engagement and negotiation with the world as a woman. In 1976, Finn-Kelcey sat in the window of Acme Gallery in Covent Garden accompanied by a pair of tame magpies, whose recorded calls were broadcast to onlookers on the street. The work, titled 'One for Sorrow Two for Joy', was a knowing response to—rather than critique of—Joseph Beuys' 'I Like America and America Likes Me'. Finn-Kelcey was interested in vulnerability, and how well women were being understood or represented in overtly masculine forms of language. The magpie was her alter ego; a symbolic and mythical female species, associated with witchcraft and mischief, complete with an alternative mode of communication. The work represented a pivotal, internal search for her role as a female artist in a male-dominated art world.



Rose Finn-Kelcey, Bureau de Change, 1987. Courtesy the Estate of Rose Finn-Kelcey

'Bureau de Change' (1987) best exemplifies Finn-Kelcey's ability to mount a political argument as object. In response to the unprecedented sale of Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* for 22.5m, she recreated his 1888 'Still Life: Vase with Fifteen Sunflowers' from £1000 of loose change. The installation—a floor piece—is complete with a viewing platform and a television monitor running a live video feed of the work, all under the watchful eye of a security guard. 'Bureau de Change' manifests an astute polemic against the commodification of art, and is indicative of Finn-Kelcey's playful criticality.



Rose Finn-Kelcey, Power for the People, 1972. Courtesy the Estate of Rose Finn-Kelcey

In the performance 'Glory' (1983), Finn-Kelcey choreographed a table-top ballet using cut-out characters to mount a critique on the Falklands conflict, particularly the 'jingoistic' media reportage. These figures become surrogates for significant and historical politicians, heroes and heroines. 'Glory' particularly contrasts with 'One for Sorrow Two for Joy', as Finn-Kelcey became more interested in being removed from the performance, operating as the orchestrator, or controller, and articulating a desire to inhabit a space that is at once both inside and outside the work.

Finn-Kelcey's dissenting early flag works, such as 'Power for the People' (1972), embody the artist's unpredictable public activities. 'Power for the People' was flown at Battersea Power Station for only 24 hours before the Chelsea residents on the other side of the river complained. Similarly, a year earlier, the 'Gale Warning' flag at Alexandra Palace (formerly the broadcasting station for BBC2) resulted in the BBC switchboard being jammed by concerned callers.



Rose Finn-Kelcey, *The Restless Image*: a discrepancy between the seen position and the felt position, 1975. Tate. Purchased 2002. Image courtesy the Estate of Rose Finn-Kelcey

In 1999, Finn-Kelcey was commissioned to realise a project in Greenwich for the Millennium Dome's public walkways. Four old Cadburys' chocolate vending machines were reconfigured to dispense non-denominational animated prayers in LED lights, each named after a popular chocolate bar—Mars, Bounty, Drifter, Time Out, etc. The name of the chocolate triggered a certain prayer, responding to 'sinful' states such as gratification, neediness, sloth. Finn-Kelcey wittily merged the necessity for boosting both blood sugar and spiritual levels, converging the sudden need for chocolate with the need for prayer. Finn-Kelcey's engagement with religion and spirituality remained light and playful, with works such as 'God Kennel' (1992) or 'God's Bog' (2001) joking with cartoonish, fabricated objects. Where does God sleep, and where does God shit? Religion is located in the ordinary, in the domestic. As part of her 1996 residency at the British School of Rome, she wrote to trainee priests asking them 'Where does God live?' and 'What does God look like?' The results are amusing and endearing. God appears as an exceedingly benevolent, amorphous father figure.

'Book and Pillow' has not been exhibited since its debut at Venice in 1978. The spectator is invited to put their head against the pillow affixed to the wall to examine the Perspex book attached with a magnifying glass. Inside the book is a little wax-like creature, commissioned by Finn-Kelcey and made by a model-maker at the National History Museum. The maker designed the effigy from a series of descriptions written by Finn-Kelcey about the 'small being' within her. The 'small being' was said to represent the disruptive, unimpressive side of her personality. It is anxiety and self-doubt, personified. On touching the pillow, the noise of a buzzing fly is silenced. The fly represents the mind's inner chatter—the subconscious—and the background buzz of everyday life. Finn-Kelcey's staging of psychic vulnerability and her invitation for us to lay our heads down, is evocative of the beauty and intelligence of her practice. Where human nature is laid bare, gently.

Philomena Epps is a writer based in London, and the founding editor of Orlando magazine



VALUABLE PIECE: Van Gogh's Sunflowers created in in loose change displayed at Modern Art Oxford

Picture: Ed Nix

▲ Copper look at art show

A MODERN art exhibition in Oxford will give visitors the opportunity to see Vincent van Gogh's 'Sunflowers' like they've never seen them before.

The piece, Bureau de Change, makes a wry comment about the value of art by recreating the famous piece in loose change.

By the late Rose Finn-Kelcey, it is made up of 2,400 coins which amount to about £1,000.

The piece will go on display today at Modern Art Oxford in Pembroke Street in an exhibition called Life, Belief and Beyond.

It is the first exhibition of works by Ms Finn-Kelcey since her death in 2014 and focusses on her explorations of power, performance, political commentary, and perceptions of the self, belief and spirituality. It will run until October 15.

Subversive power of a quiet wit

Whether performing handstands or re-enacting war, the restless Rose Finn-Kelcey was a true original

Laura Cumming

@LauraCummingArt



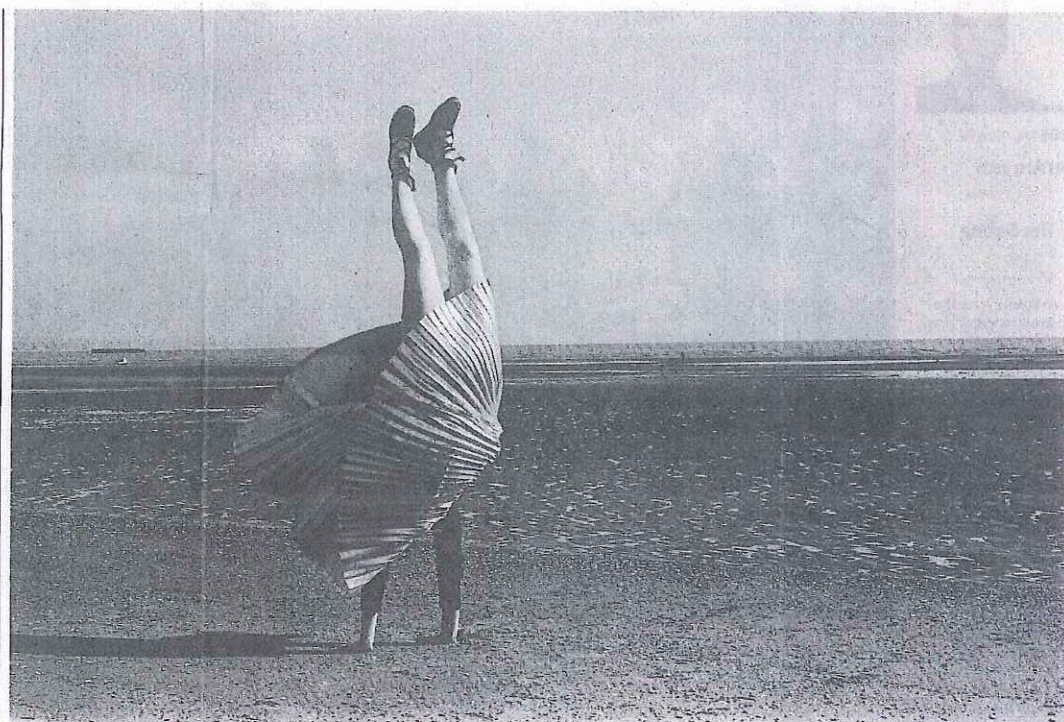
Rose Finn-Kelcey: Life, Belief and Beyond
Modern Art Oxford, until 15 Oct

Complete uplift: that is one way to describe Rose Finn-Kelcey's most enduring work, a photograph of the artist performing a perfect handstand on a beach. It is a jubilant scene, immediately stirring the same impulse in the viewer. And yet it is also mysterious, for the pleated skirt she wears seems to fall upwards, covering her torso and head like a vast paper fan so that her identity is concealed. An image of exhilarating spontaneity turns out to emerge from close deliberation: that is one revelation of this enthralling survey.

Finn-Kelcey (1945-2014) needs and deserves a lifetime retrospective. She was an artist of evergreen originality. But though she came from a celebrated generation of conceptualists, from Susan Hiller to Richard Long, and although she taught a generation of equally famous YBAs, she was impressively leery of limelight and the gallery system. Her art, moreover, is frequently ephemeral and so unpredictable that no two works are ever alike. She avoided the signature look and the market commodity.

At Oxford, for instance, three exquisite yet mordant papercuts of suspicious figures – including Gaddafi, it seems, crawling into his hole – hang next to an LED sign flashing up ever more preposterous instructions in perfect parody of the nanny state. A classic doghouse hangs upside down from the ceiling, newly estranged like some kind of inverted tabernacle (*God Kennel* is its title). And a sequence of photographs shows a boxing glove impotently punching at a bubble, which simply floats free of these dumb blows. The vision is both moral and political in a gracious, undogmatic way, which seems to have been very much Finn-Kelcey's style.

She came to public prominence in the 1970s with a series of colossal flags flown over London landmarks. *Here Is a Gale Warning* blew over the BBC's Alexandra Palace, causing anxious citizens to phone into the news. *Power for the People* involved four enormous black banners flying from the corners of Battersea power



'Complete uplift': Rose Finn-Kelcey's *The Restless Image*: a discrepancy between the felt position and the seen position, 1975. Tate Collection, courtesy the estate of Rose Finn-Kelcey

station during a period of industrial unrest. Photographs of this dramatic intervention are startling enough, even today; the actual sight must have stopped passing traffic.

This subversion was not accomplished without great difficulty, and Finn-Kelcey wrote a vivid and hilarious account of the bureaucratic negotiations, which involved endless GLC red tape (including "one official lunch, complete with gin and tonic"). But absurd loopholes eventually allowed her to persuade a rigger to hoist the banners for a day. Whereupon she received official warning that what she had already achieved was, of course, strictly forbidden.

Her aim was for "a public art form that is neither pompous, interfering nor condescending". That philosophy is embodied through this show. Pondering the oppressive hardness of modern architecture, she came up with a "room" entirely composed of steam, kept in place by curtains of air and spectacular to those who saw

it. Contemplating God, she wrote to priests in Rome asking them to draw what they thought He looked like. The results are riveting: abstract, numinous, a pair of hands cradling a figure, flames, lights, hearts, a vast presence over which people clamber like so many children in a playground.

As a counter, Finn-Kelcey designed a chocolate machine that offers prayers for a refundable 20p, drawing analogies between the brand names – Bounty, Delight, Ripple – and the intense self-indulgence of the 21st century.

She could be fiercely epigrammatic. In the opening gallery at Modern Art Oxford, the curators have recreated *Bureau de Change*, from 1987, the year in which Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* sold for a record \$39.9m. Finn-Kelcey reprised this masterpiece in coins on the floor of Matt's Gallery in London. Old money, new money, filthy lucre: the result is a strange, shining ghost of the original painting that turns it, literally, into hard cash. A museum guard patrols the

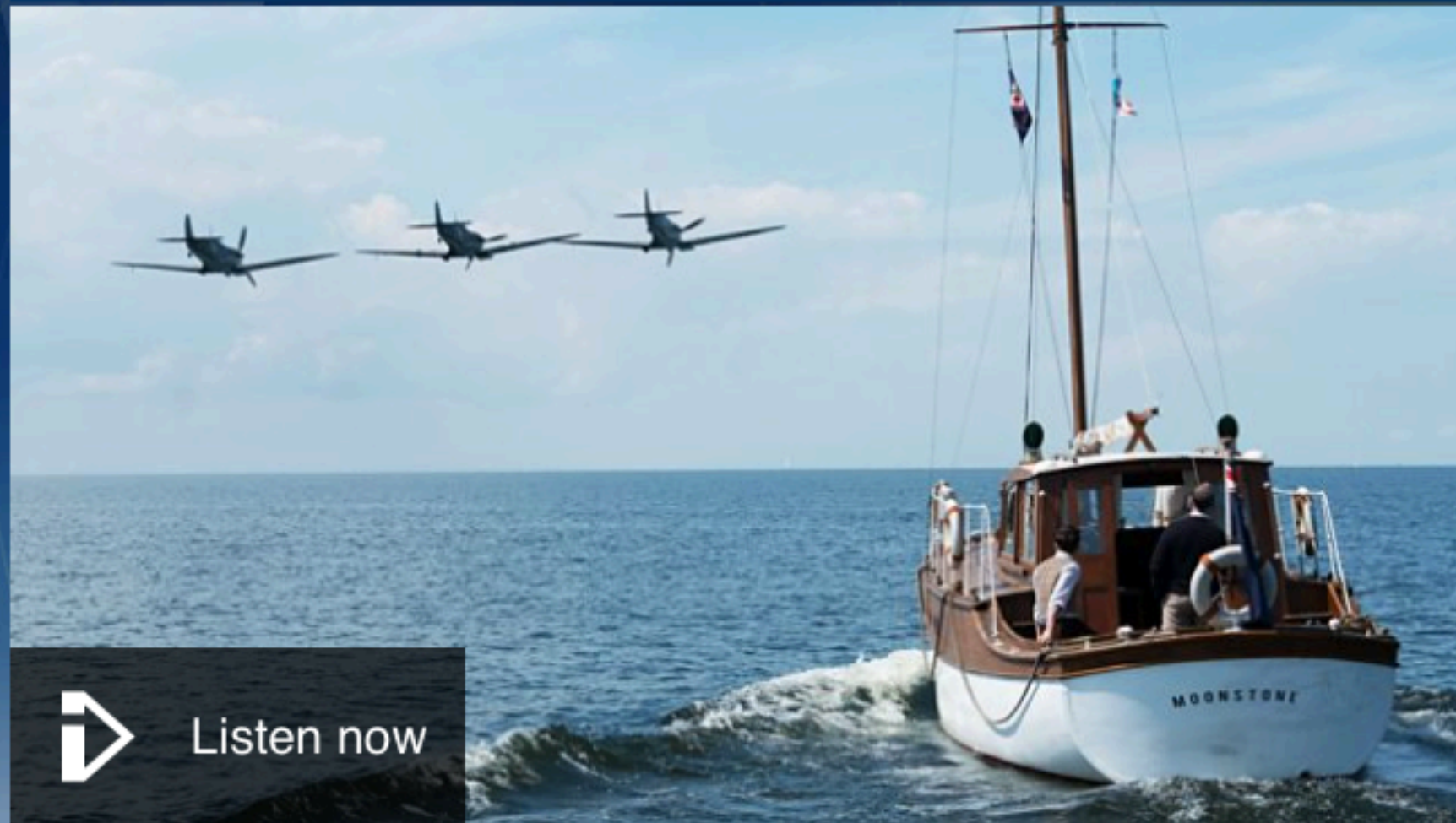
scene so that nobody takes any of the artwork's value, as it were, away.

Some of her work only exists now in photographic record – her famous performance with two magpies, for instance, in which the birds respond with wild variety to her curious attentions. But this show includes a film of *Glory*, a war enacted using shadow puppets at the Serpentine Gallery in 1983. The puppets are magnificently made out of paper – medieval jousts, cowboys, soldiers, nuclear blasts represented as comedy explosions: ignorant armies clashing by night. It's some time before you realise that the puppeteer in the darkness is Finn-Kelcey herself, modestly edging out.

Her aim was for 'a public art form that is neither pompous, interfering nor condescending'

The Restless Image, as the handstand photograph is called, has a telling subtitle: *a discrepancy between the felt position and the seen position*. This should give any viewer pause for thought. And it turns out that much of her work is about this inner/outer disparity, which is, after all, the condition of every human existence.

Some of her lightest and wittiest pieces centre on herself, such as the little sponge into which she might squeeze her own exasperating ego. But sharpest of all is *Book and Pillow*. The eponymous book lies open on the pillow, but caught within its transparent pages, like the proverbial fly in amber, is a strange little being. The artist had imagined the most anxious and unimpressive side of herself and described it to a model-maker, who produced this tiny scarlet homunculus. Intrigued, you take up the magnifying glass hanging on the wall to examine this critter and find your head on the pillow, which activates a sound – the infuriating buzz of a fly.

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Dunkirk, Much Ado at London's Globe, Sarah Winman, Rose Finn-Kelcey at Modern Art Oxford, Against The Law

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Modern Art Oxford Oxford, 15 July – 15 October

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This first posthumous exhibition of the late British artist Rose Finn-Kelcey, who died in 2014, covers her practice from the 1970s to the end of her life. Kelcey moved freely between media and materials, covering collage, photography and conceptual art. The themes in her work varied widely too. She tackled power and politics in works such as *Power for the People* (1972), in which flags bearing those words were hung from Battersea Power Station in London, and *Bureau de Change* (1987), a reproduction of Vincent Van Gogh's *Still life: Vase with Fifteen Sunflowers* (1888), created in response to the sale of Van Gogh's painting for a multi-million figure fee. Kelcey was also highly influenced by feminism and spirituality, and these currents can be seen in works here that explore individual empowerment and identity.



Rose Finn-Kelcey, *The Restless Image*, 1975.

Tate Collection, courtesy of the Estate of Rose Finn-Kelcey.

In pictures: the W* photography desk's daily digest of visual inspiration

ART / 26 JUL 2017



Best of British

14 July

9 OF 141

British artist Rose Finn-Kelcey, who passed away in 2014, is revered for her socio-politically engaged work, in an array of media including performance, sculpture and photography. Finn-Kelcey's highly experimental style is captured in 'Life, Belief and Beyond', the first posthumous exhibition of her work, on display from tomorrow at Modern Art Oxford (<http://https://www.modernartoxford.org.uk>). The show collates photography spanning her near 50-year career. Finn-Kelcey was a highly inventive artist with her formative installation work influencing Young British Artists of the 1990s, her work remains an inspiration to a new generation of British artists today. Until 15 October.

Rose Finn-Kelcey: Forging The Future Of Feminist Art By Paul Black

20 July 2017 /

Modern Art Oxford is currently presenting the first posthumous exhibition of works by Rose Finn-Kelcey (1945–2014). The artist was highly acclaimed among her peers – yet lesser known to a wider audience – even though Finn-Kelcey had exhibited at numerous galleries in the UK including The Royal Academy of Art, Whitechapel Gallery, the Hayward Gallery, the Saatchi Gallery and Tate Britain – during a long and illustrious career.

As is often the case in death; the artist's work has been the subject of increasing attention of late, not least due to very contemporary themes including feminism, spirituality, commodification, and individual empowerment – and a political modus operandi that would have seen her dismissed at certain points in her career, by what was still a highly patriarchal art establishment.

As is often the case in death; the artist's work has been the subject of increasing attention

Upon the artist's death in 2014 at the age of 69, Finn-Kelcey could easily have slipped from the minds of the art collective consciousness; both political and feminist, yet the artist had spent the last few years of her life assembling a monograph of her work, enabling the viewer upon posthumous reflection, to explore and appreciate the range and complexity of her practice.

In fact, Finn-Kelcey approached each work of art from an entirely unique perspective and a practice that was ever-evolving, permanently employing new skills ranging from bullfighting and flamenco

movements to the manipulation of steam, and the use of taxidermy – these were acts of continual reinvention, and shifting identity.

Focusing largely on performance for a ten year period between 1975 and 1985, the viewer is left with a large collection of artifacts from these often complex works, now only existing as videos or photographs, possibly losing some of the depth and intensity of the artist's original performances; now ephemeral slices of history.

Yet a striking addition to the show at Modern Art is the artist's recreation of Van Gogh's Sunflowers; a work that had sold at auction for the record price of £24.5 million, ironically a painting that Van Gogh had entirely failed to sell for a minuscule fraction of that price.

Here we return to the nature of posthumous value, and an act by the artist that was inspired by the dramatic change in the status of a work of art – and hence the artist. With 'Bureau de Change', 1987, Finn-Kelcey quite literally transformed the picture into money – even though with further irony: the artist could not afford the £1,100 of loose change needed to create the work at the time – which now with a sense of the artist's own humour – could be seen as additional dialogue regarding the artist's 'value' to society – especially that of any female artist.

The work is here arranged in two layers on a slightly raised floor, out of an assortment of silver and copper; old ten pence pieces, shillings and so forth, here recreate Van Gogh's work, with the added performative element of a security guard and camera watching over the now-highly 'valued' piece.

The viewer also becomes an integral part of this installational universe by mounting a set of stairs to a platform reminiscent of an auctioneer's podium, the work is a reflection of all elements of Finn-Kelcey's practice, incorporating installation, sculpture, video, and performance – with a wry knowing wit.

'Divided Self (Speaker's Corner)', 1974 is a black and white photograph of the artist sitting on a park bench – talking to herself. It's Speaker's Corner and no one else is listening. It may be easy to forget that the work was created in a time when many female artists felt almost entirely ignored by the establishment and society, that their concepts, perception and sociocultural voices remained mute – or in a cyclical dialogue with itself – reflected here in the artist's work.

This was a closed loop of isolation that Finn-Kelcey fought against throughout her career, and now – ironically not unlike the sunflowers – her work has taken on greater value and poignancy with her passing. And with that let us hope we are not destined to repeat the socio-cultural mistakes of our past.

About the artist:

Born in Northampton, 1945, Rose Finn-Kelcey studied at Ravensbourne College and then at Chelsea College of Art, later becoming a major figure in the contemporary British art scene for over four decades. She continued to live and work in London from 1968 until her death in 2014.

Finn-Kelcey's engagement with questions of power and agency was a driving force behind her decision to stage works within the public institutions that shape our civic realm. Such interventions included her striking flag works, such as *Fog*, flown from Alexandra Palace in 1971, and *Power for the People*, hoisted briefly at Battersea Power Station in 1972.

Lead image: Rose Finn-Kelcey, *Divided Self (Speakers' Corner)*, 1974

Words: Paul Black @Artjourno Photos: P A Black © 2017



Image: Rose Finn-Kelcey, *Bureau de Change*, 1987, Photo: P A Black © 2017