



Rose Finn-Kelcey, *Bureau de Change*, 1987 (Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* recreated out of loose change). Tate. Image courtesy the Estate of Rose Finn-Kelcey

Serious, witty art by a great artist who makes it all look easy

July 19, 2017 | [Jen Pawsey](#)

Head up the stairs and you come face to face with not one but two Rose Finn-Kelceys, looking at herself from a park bench somewhere in the 1970s. *Divided Self* (*Speakers' Corner*) is an arresting image, for its smart, funny content (not aggressive, but perhaps challenging in her stare) and its technical wizardry: this is photoshopping long before Photoshop.

Divided Self, early both in Finn-Kelcey's chronology, and in the order of the exhibition, sets up a number of themes. The work starts with an idea, tempered by wit, and the title gives a different dimension to the piece. The craftsmanship is very fine, and the result beautiful.

This pattern is repeated, in an astonishing variety of media. *Bureau de Change*, a comment on the financial security of artists, consists of Van Gogh's *14 Sunflowers* depicted in £1000 worth of loose change, complete with a security guard to oversee it. Again the idea is important, the artwork at once accessible and rich in layers of meaning, funny, and appealing. It is important that Finn-Kelcey was a generous artist, who regarded the viewer as part of the artwork - this is not the

narcissistic onanism of some modern art - and in this case since Rose Finn-Kelcey died in 2014 the artwork has also had to be assembled by someone other than her, someone who had to scour photos to recreate lost charts and purchase additional old 10ps on Ebay.

An even more interactive artwork is *It Pays To Pray*, a repurposed Cadbury's vending machine into which you put 20p. You can then pick from a number of chocolate-related genres, and an animated prayer is displayed for you in LEDs. They're secular, and speak of the thoughts when we are at our wits' end or the secret thanks we offer up in every day situations. And then you get your 20p back!

This is the first solo show of Finn-Kelcey's work since her death. She might have frowned on the inclusion of preparatory shots, notes, works in progress. But they give a useful insight into works which are otherwise distilled into one perfect photo, as well as allowing representation of performance pieces which were never recorded (such as *One For Sorrow, Two For Joy*, a piece for artist and two live female magpies in the window of a gallery).

Bringing a large body of work together, it is inevitable that themes emerge. As the exhibition title suggests, Finn-Kelcey's Catholic upbringing means religion pops up repeatedly. Her view of God is largely benign if lacking in reverence. Normal human frailty is another strand: the unquiet mind on show in *Book and Pillow*, and *Ego/Non-Ego*. Finn-Kelcey said that she wasn't explicitly trying to create feminist art, but inevitably she highlights differences between men and women in terms of power and communication, through her political works such as *Glory* (a sort of circus of exquisitely made shadow puppets, with which she acts out The Falklands War) and the sinister *Dictators' Hole* series (paper cutouts showing the hiding places of some well-known Enemies of The West). And then there's the love of shiny things which drew her to the magpies, and later to LED artwork.

Perhaps the most intriguing and perfect piece is *The Restless Image: a discrepancy between the seen position and the felt position*. It is an image of a woman doing a handstand on the beach. It is definitely a whole constellation of ideas parcelled up in one deceptively simple photo. It recreates a photo from her mother's youth, a woman who must once have been lively and merry, not the ground down mother Rose remembered. The preparatory photos show the work that went into making that shot - testing different coloured shoes, practising her handstand, watching how the skirt fell, timing her camera shot, all for one picture - an iconic photo that belies the thought and physical mastery behind it.

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Unaffected by popular trends in modern art, Rose Finn-Kelcey puts the meaning of her work first. The fame of this artist is not proportionate to the strong impact her work has exerted on fellow artists. The ephemeral nature of her performances meant it was not easy to promote, record or document. Her work is powerfully of the moment. This has resulted in Rose Finn-Kelcey not being the household name she deserves to be.

It is inspiring to see that her uncompromising approach to making work is still avant garde today.

After an injury slowed down her practice she found a way to respond to a record-breaking auction bid - \$39.9 million was paid for Van Gogh's painting of 'Sunflowers'. In 1987 using £1000 in coins she created a mosaic replica of the piece and called it 'Bureau de Change'.

The ambitious projects on display shows Finn-Kelcey found a way to make the art she needed to.

This is the first posthumous exhibition of works. A full retrospective of Rose Finn Kelcey's work would have filled this gallery many times over.

This capsule exhibition is insightfully curated. The selection of pieces on show demonstrate the integrity with which the artist developed her work. A strain of vulnerability runs through her art and each piece of work in Modern Art Oxford tells a different story about this theme.

A single magpie stands in a cabinet with reference to England's pagan past.

The video work 'Glory' shows cut out figures being vulnerable as she controls their movement about the space like a croupier moving chips.

The humour is strong, with 'God's Bog' showing as a white shell with a loo seat on top.

Viewer interaction is up close and personal in 'It Pays to Pray' where a 20p coin buys you a prayer from an adapted chocolate vending machine. The words that are displayed have a powerful impact. During Finn-Kelcey's career she received significant commissions. The machine that delivers the prayers was one of many that lined the river walk towards the Millenium Dome.

Whilst the meaning of her work is not on the surface Finn-Kelcey's unique connection to humanity is always present. Her self-portrait photographs are deeply intimate. Taken from her image are two sketches of the artist's eyes are drawn. They are blisteringly honest.

Through her personally truthful work, Rose Finn-Kelcey's creative personality fills the upstairs gallery of Modern Art Oxford many times over.