

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 (Speaker's 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.

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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.

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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

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

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'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.

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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

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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