
Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

Kelcey, Rosemary [Rose] Finn-

(1945–2014)

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Kelcey, Rosemary [Rose] Finn- (1945–2014), artist, was born at the Barratt Maternity Home, Northampton, on 4 March 1945, the youngest daughter and third of four children of William Frank Finn-Kelcey (1901–1972), farmer, and his wife, Audrey Hilda, *née* Hodgson (1910–2002). She and her siblings, Andrew (*b. c.*1938), Susan (*b.* 1940), and Nigel (*b.* 1948), were brought up at Clifton Pastures, Clifton Reynes, near Olney, Buckinghamshire, as part of a large, conservative farming family. About 1957 she contracted polio. At school she showed early creative promise and after leaving went to study at Ravensbourne College of Art and Design then moved to London in 1968 to study at Chelsea School of Art. From her graduation until her death she supplemented her income as an artist by teaching art at Wolverhampton, Maidstone, Brighton, Chelsea School of Art and Design, and the Royal College of Art. She never married or had children, but from 1976 had a close personal and professional relationship with Harry Walton, her former student at Maidstone College of Art, with whom she discussed her work throughout her lifetime, and shared her house at 4 Archel Road, West Kensington, London, until she moved to Victoria Wharf in Bethnal Green in the early 2000s, where she lived for the remainder of her life. Finn-Kelcey's early work in the 1970s was predominantly performance-based. It was important to her that art should be seen by, and engage with, the life around it. Engagement implied that the artist should be involved with or should be a part of the work itself, and meant that her pieces from this period were often ephemeral. *One for Sorrow Two for Joy* (1976), for example, was a piece in which she 'performed' in the window of the Acme Gallery in Covent Garden accompanied by a pair of 'tame' magpies whose recorded calls were broadcast to onlookers in the street. The idea of involvement was often extended to the audience, particularly in the her series of 'flagworks'. Flags, which Finn-Kelcey also termed 'wind-dependent objects', were sculpted by intervention with the uncontrollable environmental variables they encountered, the position of the spectators, and their performative messages. *Here Is a Gale Warning* (1971) was flown from the top of Alexandra Palace and resulted in the BBC switchboard being jammed by worried callers.

As the critic Guy Brett wrote, Finn-Kelcey's 'socio-political aims were combined with avant-garde experimentation, which centred on the belief that a work of art could be made of anything' (*The Guardian*, 1 March 2014). This included forms such as performance, sculpture, flag-making, photography, sound, installation, steam, shimmer discs, LEDs, and paper cut-outs. In all of her pieces there were shared thematic threads and a meticulous working process, which remained largely hidden from public view. Brett also referred to her early work as a process of 'interactivity and change' (ibid.).

Finn-Kelcey was interested in the historically marginalized professional opportunities for women artists and both instigated and participated in initiatives to create a more visible position and recognition for female artists. She was a member of the Women Artists' Collective, and a founding member of the Women Artists' Slide Library. In the 1970s she organized, co-curated, and exhibited works of other artists alongside her own including those of Carlyle Reedy, Susan Hiller, and Tina Keane. Feminist empowerment for her 'did not preclude the feelings of vulnerability and lack of confidence to which everyone is prone' (*The Guardian*, 1 March 2014)—as is clear in *Book and Pillow* (1978), an interactive sound sculpture.

One of Finn-Kelcey's best-known works (in the Tate collection, purchased 2002), *The Restless Image: a Discrepancy between the Seen Position and the Felt Position* (1975), pictures the artist doing a handstand on a beach near Dungeness. Her photograph appears to enact an exuberant, impulsive gesture but the work's subtitle suggests a divergence between the experience of the subject and what is visible to the spectator. This inconsistency between internal experience and external observation is a theme that she continued to explore in the 1970s: the *seen* position appearing calm and controlled while the *felt* position might be self-conscious and anxious. She worked on creating precisely the right tension between the observer and the artist; developing an image where ultimately she herself became the sculpture in the work.

In 1980 Finn-Kelcey introduced the idea of a 'vacated performance' in an effort to express a desire to be both inside and yet objectively outside a work, as epitomized by *Mind the Gap* (1980, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London), *Glory*, a reaction to the Falklands War (1983, Serpentine Gallery, London), and *Black and Blue* (1984, Matt's Gallery, London). For her, art was part of life, morally as well as artistically, and her response when Van Gogh's painting *Still Life: Vase with Fifteen Sunflowers* was sold for £22.5 million to a Japanese corporation was to create one of her best-known works, *Bureau de Change* (1987, Matt's Gallery, London), which replicated the original painting using £1000 of loose change. In the early 1990s she challenged the material and spiritual limits of the built environment with works such as her room-sized block of steam held in place by cold air curtains, *Steam Installation* (1992, Chisenhale Gallery, London)—a work of technical genius which visually dramatized tensions between opposing forces, holding nature in suspension.

Life, death, and spirituality were recurrent themes in Finn-Kelcey's practice. She 'was one of the few contemporary artists to tackle the issue of religion in their art' (*The Guardian*, 1 March 2014). *God Kennel—a Tabernacle* (1992, Documenta IX, Kassel, Germany); *Pearly Gate*, *Souls*, and *Jolly God* (all 1997, Camden Arts Centre); *God's Bog* (unfinished, 2001); *It Pays To Pray* (1999, mounted outside the Millennium Dome), and *Angel* (2004, St Paul's Church, Bow Common, London) all explored this theme. *It Pays To Pray* consisted of four chocolate-vending machines that were adapted to dispense electronic prayers in animated graphics on a built-in LED screen, and to return the 'purchaser's' coin after use. The prayers, based on the names of chocolate bars available at the time—Mars, Bounty, Drifter, Flyte, Time Out, for example—'project[ed] an ethos of intense, self-absorbed emotions: gratification, egotistical boastfulness, neediness, sloth, lack of confidence, loss of direction ... [and] reflect[ed] back to the buyer an atomised individuality' (Brett, 'Here, now and beyond', in Finn-Kelcey, 116). In *God Kennel—a Tabernacle* she hung a fabricated, oversized kennel upside down from the ceiling. As Brett commented, the piece 'makes us look up to heaven but there we see only the little abode of man's best friend' (ibid., 117).

Finn-Kelcey's output was extensive, despite consisting of a series of major works that were meticulously researched, impeccable in every detail, and often enormously challenging in the technical adeptness required to achieve them. She wished the final pieces she exhibited to appear seamless, as if produced with an ease that belied the skill and effort required to create them: 'working at the intersection of the visible and invisible, [her] art work calls on multiple senses, reveals the normal hidden qualities of the environment, and invites interrogation through her work as a catalysing force' (Roberts, 402). Despite her considerable achievements, she was comparatively undervalued during her lifetime by the major public art institutions. Perhaps this was due in part to her reluctance to be commercially represented. Hence, her work often remained on the margin, shown in 'alternative' contexts (such as churches, public spaces, and medium-scale non-commercial public art institutions). After her death the Tate acquired several major pieces, and her archive. Her work can also be found in the Arts Council and British Council collections, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Bernard Starkman collection. In 2013 she produced a comprehensive book on her work, *Rose Finn-Kelcey*, with texts by Brett, Sarah Kent, and Michael Stanley.

Rose Finn-Kelcey was described by Brett as 'one of the most imaginative and inventive artists of her generation ... An acute blend of ironic humour and deep seriousness informed her work, whether it was a performance, a gallery installation or a public commission' (*The Guardian*, 1 March 2014). The themes throughout her career were richly diverse: from religion to the weather. Her work was 'conceptually powerful and profound, characterised by a dry wit that belies the formidable intelligence and deep humanity that drove her practice' ('Rose Finn-Kelcey: Life, belief and beyond'). In person she was a delightful, stimulating, and candid friend. In July 2013 (shortly after the publication of her book) she developed motor

neurone disease, from which she died on 13 February 2014 at her home in Bethnal Green. Her funeral service was held at Bow Church, and was attended by over 500 members of the art world and her extended family. Her body was cremated and the ashes cast to sea from the coast at Littlestone, near Dungeness in Kent, where once she had inverted her *Restless Image*.

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