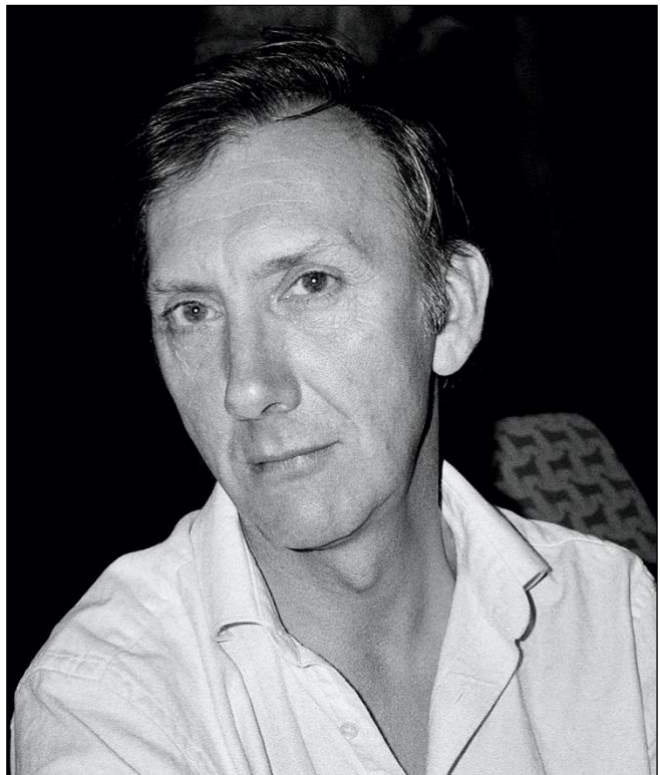


“You don’t want to preach to people...”

Keith Coventry interview

There is a saying that the more brilliant the idea, the more obvious it is in hindsight. With his Estate Paintings, Burnley artist Keith Coventry used the clean, precise, geometric idealism of the modernist movement to address the stark reality of late-20th century life in the tower blocks and council estates of South London. At first glance an homage to Malevich, the Estate Paintings revealed layers of ambiguous meaning: superficially light-hearted, but with unsettling undercurrents of misplaced hope and unforeseen consequences. It was a rich seam of artistic insight that he has continued to explore, to international acclaim. 2023 saw his latest exhibition at London’s Pace Gallery, just before which Keith talked to us about his Burnley upbringing and his ‘low voltage’ approach to the strange task of becoming a lifelong professional artist.



Whereabouts in Burnley did you grow up?

How would I describe it? I would say near the canal by Thompson Park, one of the big parks around that area. There was a local name for it – Hill Top, it used to be called – it wasn’t a particularly nice bit of town.

My Dad was a maintenance fitter, he repaired heavy plant machinery around the country, so he was moving around quite a lot. I was brought up by my grandparents. You get a lot of attention from grandparents, so I was quite happy. My mother didn’t live with us. She started building a little property ‘empire’ in Burnley – buying houses and running them as bed-and-breakfast-type places. For example, when the M65 was being built, a lot of Polish labourers were working on it. And she owned this big house, and, like something out of the early 20th century, these Polish workers used to rotate – as one finished the night-shift he got into the warm bed of the one who had just got up to do the day shift. Sounds bad, but that’s what it was. Some of the houses that she bought cost £50!

So where did you go to school?

St Theodore’s, it was the Roman Catholic school. It gave you that feeling of not fitting in. All the other religious schools around us were Protestant, and they used to bus people in from all around, from places like Bacup, just so that we could have a Catholic school. So we were in a minority, and they told us that it was important to excel – to beat the Protestants! We had to beat them at sport, we had to beat them academically, and, also, we had to try and beat other Catholic schools like Stonyhurst as well, at sport and academically.

But we had a lot of teachers who had been to minor public schools and they came in to the profession on the 'comprehensive experiment', so we had some interesting teachers, with different levels of discipline. There was one guy who wore two ties! So you had to be careful with eccentric teachers like that!

Was the Catholicism something your grandparents were keen for you to pick up?

Yes, it was my grandparents. Irish!

Was it the sort of school where you were encouraged to pursue art?

Yeah, the Art teacher was a very big character. I remember one time, when we were in the sixth form, he asked us what we wanted to pursue as a career, and I was thinking to myself, 'What's the toughest job in the world?' so I facetiously said, "I think I'll be a North Sea trawlerman." And the next thing I knew I was on the ground – he'd smacked me across the head, like he was knocking some sense into me. So, that was good!

But my interest in the Arts began, actually, in junior school. I went to St Mary's where we were taught by nuns, and they encouraged art. We were doing some drawings one day, and they said that my drawing was very good. And it was like – wow! A compliment! And so I just carried on doing it. Just getting those positive comments from someone, you start to believe that you can do it even if you can't.

When I was nine years old, we had this teacher, Mr Summers, who had written children's books and had one of them read by some actor on 'Jackanory'. With Mr Summers, for a whole year we didn't do any normal activities, we just did Art, Drama, and lots of walks around Burnley as a group. And when you returned, you had to either make a painting or write a poem, or act something out. And that lasted for an entire year, with total freedom to leave the classroom and go into the church to draw the stained-glass windows, and just do things without being watched. That was pretty formative. I can't really remember the other years of junior school, but that one year, I can remember so much about it.

And also, one of the nuns had this cupboard that was full of Mars bars and various other things. At the time with the nationalisations that were going on, there were loads of educational pamphlets being pumped out about electricity, coal mines and so on. And we did these projects where we would take these pamphlets, chop them up and make these books with them, where you'd put your own ideas in. Anyway, whoever did the most or whoever did the best – the keys came out, the cupboard was opened and out came the Marathons and the Mars bars! And one of the nuns gave a daily monetary reward for the best drawing. So that became a very competitive thing. They say that competition is a bad thing for children, but I was brought up on extreme competition!

How much was Burnley FC a part of your life growing up?

I went to a number of games, of course, but I didn't go *all* the time. We used to go along to see Ralph Coates play, we used to love the way his hair flapped around as he made a run down the wing. I used to make these big scrapbooks as well. We used to do that thing when we'd wait outside the gates and go in for the last 20 minutes. Sometimes, a lot would happen in the last 20 minutes! I'm going back for a school reunion in a couple of months and it's being held at Turf Moor, so I'm looking forward to that.

I was actually in Burnley last week, as my Dad had died. We got the undertakers round, the Co-op,

and they said, "There's no chance of getting him into Burnley crematorium for some time, but we could get him into Accrington." And my Dad's partner said [sharp intake of breath] "Ooh, no, we can't have that. We'll wait. Embalm him!" But this is because he's getting cremated in his Burnley shirt. So the last thing he wants is to be at Accrington Crematorium!

When did you start to think about taking Art seriously, as a possible career?

Well, I once saw my Dad struggling with some kind of tax form, and I did think, even then, that I wanted to find something to do in life that avoided responsibility! And I thought that if I was an artist then I wouldn't have to deal with any of that. But obviously, I've come to learn that you do.

I did Art A level at St Theodore's, and then I went to Burnley Technical College to do their Art Foundation course. That was great. There was a teacher there, he used to come in with his own canvas, lay it down at the front of the room, give everyone some kind of project and then just get on with his own work. It was a foundation course, so, you know, we felt that he should be teaching us. So sometimes we'd approach him and say: "You're using this place as your own studio. What about us?" And he just said: "If you don't like it, put your brush down and go home. If you want to do it, you'll do it. If you don't want to do it, don't do it." It was a good lesson.



Keith (centre) with two fellow students on the Art Foundation course at Burnley College

How did you end up on the Fine Arts degree at Brighton Polytechnic?

Well, I applied to go to Chelsea Art College, but I messed that interview up. It was quite a risk going for Brighton as my second choice, because Brighton was a 'first-choice' kind of place, it was

a good course. But I got in, and it was a long way from Burnley, which I think was a positive thing. I didn't want to go to somewhere like Manchester. A lot of my friends from school did things like Politics at Manchester, and you knew they'd be nipping home at weekends, that they couldn't quite sever the tie. And down in Brighton, you'd be meeting people who came from everywhere. But, in the same way, when I finished the degree, in 1981, I knew I wanted to get away from Brighton. So yeah, I wanted to break from Burnley, but I also wanted to get out of Brighton to come here.

Here being London – on the MA course at Chelsea?

Yes, on the MA you were tucked away off the New King's Road, down towards Sands End, by the gasworks, with Wandsworth Bridge to the southwest. So the facilities were quite isolated, and in 1981 there were empty council estates nearby that were full of travellers' encampments. So a lot of people on the course, especially women, got off at Fulham Broadway and took a cab to the art school because it was just too scary to walk down there. At Chelsea you were given a studio space and you just got on with it. You worked straight through for a year.

So you graduate from Chelsea in 1982, and your first solo commercial exhibition is in 1992. What were those ten years like?

Basically, painting and decorating, gardening, you know, any old jobs. But always being very particular about never wanting to get involved in a job that could take over my life. I wanted these kind of jobs so that I could always continue being an artist.

For accommodation I lived in squats. Squatting a building was legal once you'd changed the lock and you had your own lock on, but in those moments of changing the lock you were vulnerable to being arrested. Well, there used to be an organisation called SNOW [Squatters Network Of Walworth]. And for a pound, you could buy a skeleton key which would get you into any boarded-up property in Southwark. So if an estate caretaker called the police, the police could see that we'd inflicted no damage to the property. I'd just say: "It was open when I got here." And the caretaker would be looking on incredulously: "No it wasn't, you bloody liar!" We ended up getting a bit fussy – opening them up and going "Meh, not really, let's have a look at the next one!" It was quite a bit of fun, actually, knowing that nothing could be done.

How did you living this kind of life go down with your family?

Well, they didn't really know anything about it, to be honest. That was one of the things about my Dad – he never insisted on me doing anything. He didn't want me joining the Army or working for a bank, those were the two no-nos. I could do anything else. I was quite free. And at no time did I think of doing anything but the art.

In 1988, you opened City Racing in Kennington, an artist-run gallery in a disused betting shop. Was this simply you putting the squatting/DIY ethos into practice, or was it also about your ambition, about making something happen?

No, it was just doing it for yourself because you couldn't get an opportunity to exhibit somewhere else. But I had been involved in a gallery called 'Do It Yourself' inside the Elephant & Castle shopping centre. It was short-lived, Land Securities let us use the space for four or five months. But the City Racing place was great – it was a studio plus another eight rooms. I was there for about 10 years. I did an exhibition there with a friend from Chelsea Art College right at the

beginning, then another one a bit later, and that's when five of us got together and started putting on exhibitions – 50 exhibitions in 10 years.

And some of the artists who had their first exhibitions at City Racing went on to become very successful.

Yes, some of them did: Sarah Lucas, Gillian Wearing, Mark Wallinger, Michael Landy...

...and so I was wondering whether you knew these artists already, or were you trying to sniff out the most exciting talents, in more of a curator role?

Well, I kind-of knew them. I knew Mark Wallinger, and the whole reason I had a bit of success in the art world is because of the cricket. We were right next to the Oval, so we used to go up onto the roof, stand on the parapet and watch the cricket. And Mark Wallinger brought Michael Landy round, who loved cricket, and so for two or three days we went up to the roof, drank some beer and watched the Ashes. And Michael Landy saw my studio, and he'd been asked to curate a group show for Karsten Schubert's gallery. And that was my way in.

I became a friend of Michael Landy's and through him I got to know Sarah Lucas and Gillian Wearing and others from Goldsmith's College. And then Michael actually got me a studio by Lambeth Bridge. Somehow they'd managed to get hold of a really beautiful old school, Archbishop Tennyson's School by Lambeth Walk, and he said, you know, have a couple of rooms in there. And so even though I was ten years older, I became part of the Goldsmith's thing, a little.

Can I ask about the Estate Paintings, where you hit upon the idea of using modernism to address late-20th century problems? Did you know instinctively that you were onto something with that?

Well, I felt it, yeah. Going back to Burnley here and the Trafalgar Flats – wasn't that an attempt or a bid to boost the population a bit to get some kind of status for the town? So they brought all these people from Scotland down and shoved them into these Trafalgar Flats, and it eventually became quite a notorious place, didn't it? And so I probably always had that in my mind. But as well as that, I used to have a lurcher, Jack, and with this dog I would wander through all the South London estates, as far south as Catford, places like that. And before the days of mobile phones, I'd have to take out a note book and do a sketch of the plan from one of the boards showing a map of the estate.

Because I had seen the work of Malevich and I knew all about the promise of modernism and the lit straight line, how he'd thought that it was a solution to the problem of the masses – those 'arkhitektons' that he made, buildings that that might be a mile-wide but have one doorway in the middle, that utopian vision. So walking the dog became work, but it benefited the dog in that I'd walk further and further and further looking for more and more estate maps!

But why? What was it about the idea that made you pursue it?

Well, I loved the Malevich paintings and it seemed a way of, I suppose, just formulating in me this idea of recording or wanting to document how society is through what we can see. And, of course, as you enter into these estates, you see lots of other things as well. So the council estate becomes like a container for all these other things, all these social ills. And so from that comes, or branches off it, lots of other avenues for me to explore.

This was like a revelation, because before that – in the early 80s – there was a lot of whimsical art around, and, I suppose, I followed that and did a lot of fantasy-type stuff. I feel embarrassed that I did, but you know, I was just looking at what was being made and liking some of it. But then something happened – I started to think about what was around me more. It was like I grew up.

And then you followed this with the White Paintings that were snapped up by Charles Saatchi and exhibited internationally. I take it that things changed for you from this point?

Well, my life did change around that time because I got married when I did those paintings. The family I married into was very traditional. So I thought, ‘Hmm, maybe I’ll make some paintings that are of incredibly traditional subjects, but I’ll do them in white and see what they think.’ So I made some art they could relate to, but that was still a little bit tricky and difficult, too. Anyway, one of them went up to Scotland for Boxing Day or something, and when he got there, somebody said to him: “Oh, have you seen these? Isn’t he your brother-in-law?” And he said [in dismissive tone] “Yeah.” He’d seen them – they had a catalogue and everything – but he had no interest in them at all, he wasn’t at all impressed. You know... there’s no changing some people.

But in terms of now being widely exhibited – how much of that filtered back into your life?

Well, I don’t really have many exhibitions. They’re quite few and far between. And when I set out in 1992 with Karsten Schubert Gallery, I had this idea of being like a low-watt light bulb. I wanted to be able to carry on – burn dimly – but be able to carry on. Some artists around that time got a lot of attention, but now they are gone. I didn’t want that, I thought: ‘If I’m going to do this, I want to do it for the rest of my life.’ I didn’t do anything sensational or attention-grabbing, I just did fairly solid, traditional artworks but with a little twist to them.

Hmm, I thought ‘Spectrum Jesus’ was attention-grabbing...

...yeah, although not many people liked that! But still, it was a nice, simple idea.

A lot of art critics talk about the humour in your work, but I wondered whether you agree with them, given the serious and intractable social issues you deal with?

Well, just picking up a subject like Eastern European prostitution in London, or crack cocaine, yes, it’s all serious stuff, but how else can you deal with it? It has to be a little bit playful or jokey, because, you know, you don’t want to preach to people. So you have to be able to draw them in a little, to give them a second or two to think about it. It’s a lure into things. And I’m serious about the making of it, I care about every little colour and edge, and the whole construction of the picture. Sometimes there is a tiny bit of that Young British Artist ‘shock’ element, but really minimal.

Yes – the ‘History’ pieces that namecheck the notorious football hooligans...

Yeah, that was an opportunity to display the fact that I’d read all those books – Thucydides and Herodotus, all that kind of stuff!

But it was making a point about the manufacturing of history and historical myths.

That’s right – how someone on a football terrace can take on a lot of people single-handedly, like the Harry ‘Mad Dog’ Trick character, and then you’ve got Cynegirus, brother of Aeschylus, at the Battle of Marathon, who had his hand chopped off after grabbing a rope to try and stop the Persians from fleeing – he wanted to inflict even more carnage on the fleeing Persians! Because

one is in a classical text and the other is reported in the *Sun*, they've got different values attached to them, but they're both displaying the same kind of insanity.

That interested me, and it was just a way of slipping it into contemporary life. But at the same time – and I've always said this – I'm ambivalent about the subject matter in my artwork, neither for it or against it. The *Hackney Gazette* did a front cover years ago that was about a brothel that had been raided and a number of women had been released from it, but the people actually running this brothel were two other women. I went on Google and searched for 'prostitution services' and it came up with loads of acronyms representing different kinds of services offered, and so I did these pieces of work where I painted those acronyms in the colours of different Eastern European countries, and called the series 'White Slaves', because that was the idea I was trying to get across.

Looking back now – those paintings were done in around 2007 – it's a *bit* embarrassing, and some people asked me how I could even think about doing something like that, but there it was – right in front of me, some place that was raided, right on my doorstep. Obviously, 'white slaves' might sound a bit jokey, but that's what they were. It did amuse me that I could use these acronyms, which stood for some pretty filthy things, and present them in the colours of national flags: Russia, Poland, Bulgaria. Obviously it's a serious subject, but I was also having a bit of fun.

Sticking to the theme of ambiguity with your upcoming show – pieces like *Community Party Table*, is that a lament for lost community values, or something more confrontational?

Well, actually I enjoyed the fact that it was all messed up! I went out about six o'clock in the morning for a drive with a friend to go to one of those places where you could find what I thought was 'old' London, because it's so gentrified and monocultured around here. So we went off to Woolwich, and by the King George V station, right by the river, we found these tables alongside these old pieces of river machinery that were presented as sculptures. The idea was that you could sit there and enjoy the history of the area, but instead they had just become wrecked. And so I thought, 'I'll go back and get one of those tables.' But when I went back in the afternoon, this turned out to be impossible as there was this massive party going on, so I had to go back in the early morning.



Community Party Table, 2023 (detail)

© Keith Coventry courtesy of Pace Gallery

Photo: Damian Griffiths

The tops had gone from these tables, they were all smashed up, and the metal legs had been upturned with these vodka bottle jammed into them all. So that's why I called it 'party table'. And just like I had done when I did the 'Bench' sculpture years ago, I looked at this table, and with repeated looking as I kept walking past it, I thought it looked a bit like a Giacometti figure. There was something about this simple form that had a reference to 1950s abstract sculpture. So there's always this thing that when I look at something, I see something from the history of art in it that then makes it interesting for me to work with. It's got to have social relevance and also echo some aspect of the history of art and of modernism.

I mean – how long do people look at pictures? If you're lucky, you might get someone looking at a painting for 20 seconds. That's quite a long time, actually. So if something looks a bit like art already, if you make it attractive or slightly familiar in some way, you hope that people will be drawn into your art and give it a little bit of thought afterwards. But I'm not telling them what to think, not at all. Just: here it is. Think what you like.

Thanks to Keith for his time and to Rebecca Riegelhaupt at Pace Gallery.

Phil Whalley