

Robert Lenkiewicz (1941–2002)

The Diogenes Show

New Street Gallery, 38 new St, Plymouth PL1 2NA

23 Sep – 23 Oct 2016



www.robertlenkiewicz.org

It is arguable whether the title of greatest Muse to painter Robert Lenkiewicz (1941-2002) goes to his third wife, Mary, or the diminutive vagrant Edwin Mackenzie, known as Diogenes. Each inspired an entire 'Project' bearing their name – *The Painter with Mary*, *The Diogenes Con Show*, respectively – and both appeared frequently in other exhibitions.

Lenkiewicz first cast Diogenes as The Fool, the anarchic mocker of rationality and order, in his first major exhibition in the city – on the theme of *Vagrancy* – in 1973. In one of three enormous canvases in that exhibition visitors encountered *Mr. Edwin Mackenzie Flying Past the Salvation Army Hostel in King Street, Plymouth at Twelve Noon*, in which Diogenes appeared in a macabre Dance of Death. Lenkiewicz explained:

'Death makes a fool of life's joys or purposes, or at any rate appears to. ... The symbol of the Fool relates to Death in so far as both survive inevitably; they have something innately in common. In one sense death is merely change, a rearrangement; similarly, the Fool, unable to stabilise his situation or mood, reflects the vacillatory undertone of chaos and order, life and death.' (RL 1973)

Diogenes also featured extensively in Lenkiewicz's second Project on the theme of *Death & The Maiden*, shown in 1974 at his new gallery, called The Fool. The theme became, in Lenkiewicz's hands, a metaphor for the decay of relationships in which

'an intense aesthetic/personality interest in another person seems always to carry with it the inevitability of change. In this change we witness the death of love and the decay of our interest.'

The most striking image from the Project is a diptych called *The Putrefaction of Diogenes*, in which we see the vagrant decaying before our eyes.

Yet in 1975, Lenkiewicz lightened the tone with an ironic look at attitudes towards the monetary value of art. In *Paintings Designed to Make Money*, the artist created a mock 'masterpiece', complete with a biography of a dead painter (since work always appreciates after the artist's demise), and displayed in the best museum tradition behind a chain barrier approached via a red carpet. Around the masterpiece were dozens of images of Diogenes with titles like *This Study Took 27 Minutes*. This was *The Diogenes Con Show*, a wry look at 'art and commerce'. The paintings were chiefly head studies or showed Diogenes' hand clutching 'some tourist's 50p piece or a pound note'.

It is this show that partly inspired The Lenkiewicz Foundation's contribution to the Plymouth Art Weekender. Visitors can see Lenkiewicz's original designs for 'a masterpiece cake' and 'a tree that money grew on' and numerous studies of Diogenes. Rare archive photographs and Diogenes' press clippings help flesh out the portrait of the 'gentleman of the road' who died in 1984.

But that, as many people know, was not the end of the connection between painter and Muse. 'I never see relationships as ending, I only see them as changing' Lenkiewicz observed. 'As far as I'm concerned every relationship that I've had is still going on. ... The only thing that ends it is death and it has to be one's own death, because *their* death doesn't end the relationship'. Lenkiewicz may have been thinking of love relationships when he made that remark, but never has it seemed more apt than with respect to the strange afterlife of Edwin Mackenzie. For Lenkiewicz notoriously made an agreement with Diogenes that after his death, the painter should preserve the vagrant's corpse as the ultimate *memento mori* ('remember, you will die').

To Lenkiewicz, the embalmed remains of his friend were 'a thought-provoking artefact'; to local authorities the body was a health hazard and legal outrage. But Lenkiewicz was sure of his ground – although there is no possession in a corpse, there was no legal justification for the authorities to seize the mummified remains. As Lenkiewicz pointed out, 'there was a Palaeolithic man and two Egyptian mummies in the City Museum. Was the objection to mine simply because it was *new*?' And so Diogenes resided, until Lenkiewicz's own death in 2002, in the painter's library, in a secret drawer in the room devoted to the subject of Death. Officialdom made one final attempt to claim the body from the artist's executor, but in due course the care of Diogenes passed to The Lenkiewicz Foundation, which is duly licensed by the Human Tissue Authority to preserve this unique artefact.

Diogenes has made two public appearances in the past decade: at the Royal West of England Academy and at Torre Abbey in 2011. Surrounded by Lenkiewicz's paintings and drawings, and starring in a specially commissioned documentary film, Diogenes once more allowed people to reflect upon 'the total presence of the corpse, the total absence of the person', as Lenkiewicz put it.

During the Art Weekender he will, alas, be absent for practical reasons. Nevertheless, new digital technologies will allow visitors to experience 'the artefact' in novel ways. Scanned by a lidar (Light Detection and Ranging) laser device by Plymouth University's Dr Antony Knights, Diogenes will be entering the fourth decade of his second life as a digital construct, with his head and hands as 3D-printed artefacts. This time, however, the hands will not be seen in the familiar palm-up gesture.

Gallery Talks + Events

Please check our website or Facebook for dates and times of gallery talks and educational talks about the Diogenes artefact.

Open: Thurs–Sun, 11am–4pm

ADMISSION FREE

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