

Robert Lenkiewicz (1941-2002): Selected Works

Curated by The Lenkiewicz Foundation

Green Hill Arts, Moretonhampstead. 28 April – 23 June 2018



With the first official biography of painter Robert Lenkiewicz (1941-2002) in preparation, Green Hill Arts presents an exhibition of works marking the most significant waypoints, both painterly and biographical, in Lenkiewicz's career. Curated by The Lenkiewicz Foundation, the charity which preserves the painter's legacy, each work has been chosen to show the development of Lenkiewicz's style and subject matter through the years, but also to place him at key moments in the remarkably colourful life. For instance, a large self-portrait from February 1981 portrays the artist in front of salmon-pink drapes at the stately home of his friend and patron, the Earl of St Germans, on the very day that Lenkiewicz's first 'obituary' appeared in *The Times* newspaper. In the midst of a serious artistic study of the social practices surrounding death, Lenkiewicz thought it would be instructive to observe the effects of news of his demise: *'I could not know what it was like to be dead, but I could know what it was like to be thought dead'*.

After study at St Martin's and the Royal Academy, Robert Lenkiewicz moved to the city of Plymouth in the late 1960s, and set up studio space in the historic Barbican area, where he became a part of the local community. Lenkiewicz drew inspiration from the people of the city, using them as models in his large public murals and reflecting their lives in exhibitions or 'Projects' on social issues, which uncovered taboo themes such as 'vagrancy', 'mental handicap', old age and death. Charismatic, and with a flair for the dramatic gesture, Lenkiewicz exhibited his work directly to the public at his own studios, by-passing the prevailing fashions in art and the attentions of the art world. A naturally gifted communicator, Lenkiewicz's work spoke directly to ordinary people about the human condition, finding a broad audience no matter how challenging his subject matter.

The earliest work in this show, the ink on paper study *Mrs Plotnik Dying*, shows that the young artist's preoccupation with human mortality was already stirring at the age of fourteen, as the elderly resident of the kosher hotel run by his parents, the Hotel Shem Tov in Cricklewood, lay dying. The adjacent self-portrait, painted at fifteen, shows us for the first time the face of the young man preparing himself to look dispassionately at human suffering. The *Study of the Painter's Dead Mother*, made in 1977 from notebook sketches made at the hospital morgue where his mother's body was kept, seems as revealing of the artist as the contemporary self-portraits which flank it.

Although the name of Robert Lenkiewicz is synonymous with large easel paintings and huge public murals, he also produced an extraordinary archive of works on paper. Lenkiewicz was a prolific maker of notes. Some seen here are biographical additions to studies of street alcoholics – the so-called vagrants that appear in works throughout the 1970s – whom Lenkiewicz famously championed as walking reminders of human folly, mocking civilized pretence, noting of his most famous sitter, the tramp Edwin MacKenzie, otherwise known as Diogenes: *'One clear distinction between the 'image' of Diogenes, philosopher-rogue, and Diogenes, Edwin MacKenzie in the real world, is that the 'image' of him is far more acceptable in the average household than the man himself.'* Diogenes and Lenkiewicz appear together in Fool's garb in *Fragment of The Hoe Theatre Mural, from Commedia dell'arte Theme*, a section of a large mural casually destroyed by his adopted city with no thought for posterity.

The rest of the annotated works are otherwise known as 'aesthetic notes'. For these startling pictures, usually mixed media, Lenkiewicz reserved some of his most extraordinary insights and accomplished painting, which were sometimes bound into themed notebooks relating to his major Projects. They are characterised by handwritten notes, which range from philosophical observations to private revelations, but also record relevant material garnered from Lenkiewicz's research in his private 20,000 volume library. In *First Contact*, dated 12

December 1978, the painter records the first tender embrace in the library with Mary, at that time reluctant even to be painted by the artist but who would become his third wife and the subject of an entire Project – *The Painter with Mary: a Study in Obsessional Behaviour*. The aesthetic note's text quotes Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, anticipating his partner's response to the embrace: 'To be gazed at is one danger; to be manhandled is another' and concludes with the painter's own feeling of disorientation in the charged moment: 'Peculiar anti-gravity sensation – cutting off the world and absorbing it simultaneously'.

We encounter the artist's unflinching gaze in the face of mortality for the last time in the final works in the show, that deal with the pain and isolation following the heart surgery undergone in the mid-1990s. The watercolour *St Bartholomew or St Jerome in Piero di Cosimo's Desert* is a typically elaborate art historical reference to the long tradition of the representation of physical suffering, in this case of the self-inflicted kind thought to nourish the soul of early Christian saints. For Lenkiewicz, this theme was rich in ironic associations. He wrote: 'This house of pain is self-inflicted gluttony. Joe Prete's café ... chip shops – the innocent purveyors of this iniquitous slime, this corrosive agony. Joe you fool, it was your own food that took you away... But who can be the bigger fool than he that pays for the poison to kill himself?' In the last self-portrait in this show, recently discovered in the painter's library in an otherwise empty diary from 1998, the artist notes 'I think of Artaud's rage against organs. The time has come for more oxygen – the machine whispers – an endless exhalation from a universe's lung'.

Showing diary notes, preparatory sketches, and finished canvasses, this show intends to provide a thought-provoking insight into the ideas and inspiration behind his work and reveal a side of the artist's creativity that is seldom seen. The works are drawn chiefly from the collection of The Lenkiewicz Foundation, together with works on loan to the exhibition.

Events

Painting Demonstration and talk by LOUISE COURTNELL, painter

Sat 26th May Parish Hall, Fore Street, 2pm – 4pm

There will be a demonstration of tonal painting by Louise Courtnell, artist and former student of Lenkiewicz. Louise Courtnell will show Lenkiewicz's renowned technique for teaching aspiring artists the essential methods of figurative painting. 'The tone of the tone, the shape of the shape, the colour of the colour', as the artist used to call his approach. www.louisecourtnell.co.uk

'Reading Lenkiewicz' a talk by Dr MARK PRICE, author

8th June - Main Gallery, 6.30pm - 8.30pm

The first official biography of Robert Lenkiewicz is under preparation and author Dr Mark Price will be giving a presentation of this work in progress. The illustrated talk will draw upon research in Lenkiewicz' personal diaries, together with hundreds of hours of interviews with family, friends and companions of the artist.

Places are limited so please book via: www.greenhillarts.co.uk/calender/

Some of the original works in this exhibition are for sale: please enquire.

LIST OF WORKS

Death of Mrs Plotnik at Hotel Shem Tov. *c.*1955

29 x 21 cm. Pencil on paper.

Non-Project

Self-Portrait. *c.*1956

21 x 16 cm. Oil on board.

Non-Project

'Mouse' with Wool – Interior. *c.*1965

188 x 203 cm. Oil on canvas.

Non-Project

Preparatory Sketches for Mouse with Wool. 1960-1965

Non-Project

Cider Ryder in the Pram Factory. 1996

97 x 146 cm. Oil on sail cloth. Restored fragment.

Project 1 – Vagrancy

Charles Thomas McNaughton. 1976

42 x 29 cm. Pen on paper.

Non-Project

Study of Bishop (with £5 magistrate's fine). 1972

24 x 17 cm / 15 x 25 cm. Pencil on paper.

Non-Project

Self-Portrait in Pierrot Costume with Diogenes (History of The Harlequinade). *c.*1970

84 x 77 cm. Emulsion on prepared plaster.

Fragment of The New Hoe Summer Theatre

Self-Portrait (after Franz Xaver Messerschmidt). 1976

51 x 45 cm. Oil on canvas.

Project 3 – Mental Handicap

Study of the Painter's Dead Mother. 1977

29 x 24 cm. Cryla on wood panel.

Non-Project

Self-Portrait. 1978

40 x 28 cm. Cryla on board.

Project 10 – Self-Portrait

Self-Portrait with Myriam. 1979.

85 x 63 cm. Oil on canvas.

Project 10 – Self-Portrait

I Shall Always Have Her Heart. 1977

64 x 76 cm. Cryla on canvas board.

Inscribed: "Figure 'carries' resemblance to Marcel Duchamp."

Project 8 – Jealousy

Suicide. 1980

41 x 28 cm. Aesthetic Note. Watercolour and bodycolour.

Project 12 – Suicide

Man in a knot by the straight back of a woman. 1980

41 x 51 cm. Aesthetic Note. Watercolour and bodycolour on paper.

Project 12 – Suicide

Man Killing Himself. 1980

56 x 64 cm. Oil on board.

Project 12 – Suicide

Aesthetic Note for 'Man Killing Himself'. 1980

42 x 30 cm. Mixed media on paper.

Project 12 – Suicide

Tuesday 12 December 1978. 'First Contact.' 1978

38 x 53 cm. Aesthetic Note. Mixed media.

Project 14 – The Painter with Mary: a study in obsessional behaviour

The Resurrection of Mary: she kisses herself farewell. 1981

41 x 41 cm. Aesthetic Note. Mixed media.

Project 14 – The Painter with Mary: a study in obsessional behaviour

The Father Eats the Son. 1982

84 x 66 cm. Cryla on paper laid on board.

Project 15 – Death

Self-Portrait whilst 'dead' at Port Eliot. 1981

159 cm x 92 cm. Oil on Canvas.

Non-Project

'How heavy is a childhood load?' 1990

51 x 42 cm. Aesthetic Note. Pen, ink and watercolour.

Non-Project

The Painter with Benedikte. St. Antony Theme. 1989

180 x 122 cm. Oil on canvas.

Project 18 – The Painter with Women: Observations on the Theme of the Double

Silver Lake, Mudbank, autumn. 1995

46 x 58 cm. Oil on board.

Project 19 – Landscape

Beech tree in the Painter's garden, Lower Compton (with Anna's lily).

27 x 59 cm. Oil on board.

Project 19 – Landscape

St Bartholomew or St Jerome in Piero di Cosimo's Desert. 4.35 a.m. Thursday 27th September. 1995

39 x 28 cm. Watercolour & ink on paper.

Project 19 – Landscape

'I think of Artaud's rage against organs'. 11.35pm. 24 September – Thursday, 1998.

27 x 22 cm. Mixed media.

Non-Project