

PURE JUNK

KEITH COVENTRY

REFLEX AMSTERDAM

KEITH COVENTRY: IS HE A CAT? OR IS HE A RABBIT?

The seemingly calm quiet pictures/ paintings of Keith Coventry have buried within each and every one of them an amazingly complex dialectically opposing set of meanings that within his very particularly evolved pictorial language carries a very particular form of resolution. How else can one describe in words, images that on the one hand are able to evoke the history of abstraction that starts with no less a giant of pictorial innovation than Kasimir Malevich, whose transcendental modern icons are suffused with spirituality and on the other hand simultaneously allow the banalities of contemporary design, epitomised by the cultural nastiness of the universally recognisable McDonalds logo, to rear their ugly heads. It is rather like the simple art trick made famous by Sir Ernst Gombrich in his classic book “Art and Illusion” – “Is it a cat or is it a rabbit?’ depending on which way you choose to perceive the drawing. Or if you are very clever you the viewer can see both simultaneously. Where Keith Coventry scores so successfully is that he wishes and is able with the greatest nonchalant ease to introduce a moral dimension into his

gently painted yet deliberately expressive imagery. Keith - as I will choose to call him from now on in this little introduction to this 2018 exhibition in Amsterdam - a city renowned for its acute sensibility towards modernist design - is also a master of grisaille or rather monochrome, often white but by no means always, that allows for the tactile - almost sculptural quality of Keith’s own particular quality of careful and considered painting to gently assert itself.

Keith has always been a “political” painter. But unlike his predecessors already invoked such as Malevich or Mondrian, he has no intension through painting to idealistically transmute the world into some kind of unachievable utopian dream state. He is rather a wry commentator as he sees witty parallels between the perfect sublime and then the banal in contemporary life and visual culture. It’s just kind of funny, even for myself, when in the once ancient city of Cologne, now largely horribly rebuilt, yet looking at the voluminous spires of its darkly wondrous cathedral, and at the same time taking in the eye the horribly fluorescent yellow and red ubiquitous

signals of that hamburger chain that wants to profiteer by happily feeding the world with junk food hamburgers. Keith is always asking where lie the boundaries between the image and the thinking. Thinking usually implies language, but not necessarily. There is no reason why painting need involve dogmatic assertions - either on behalf of myth or political realities. It can rather through use of ambiguity open up possibility for thinking. This was always true, and can be true today. Paintings with religious or classical subject matter were there for the viewer also reflect on an imaginary but still very real past and if they had “quality in their execution” - to use a very loaded phrase, then they were all the more effective and powerful for the viewer. Keith has always paid close attention to the quality and expressive refinement of his painterly surfaces. He was never, maybe for that reason – when I first came across his work in the mid- late nineteen eighties quite a fully paid up member of the YBA’s of the Hirst circle of artists yet his work had also a kind of affinity, in that it along with those boys and girls, it seemed Keith also took a punkishly critical stand against the world of Margaret Thatcher’s Britain. First, for Keith’s admirers came wonderful paintings that on first regard really looked like Malevich, but with titles that referenced post – war London even by then depressed social housing estates, and were indeed based on precise ground plans

of often cheaply built brutalist housing estates. And for all their seductive abstract beauty, the ubiquitous and painful survival of their subject matter, today the paintings seem as topical as ever even, though executed now maybe three decades ago.

The excellent British art writer Michael Bracewell describes Keith ‘s works as representing more or less, “A philosophical position, a social; commentary and a cultural class war – although no one is saying what side they are on” He speaks of their “curious grandeur”. I would rather speak of their English grandeur – like William Hogarth or an outstanding English Post- Impressionist painter, much too little known outside his own country, Walther Richard Sickert, without whom the art of both Bacon and Freud would be unthinkable. Equally Keith’s art, like that of Hogarth and Sickert is always earthy, wry in its commentary on art, as well as life itself as it is lived by all sections of society, high and low. Keith is a rare artist in that he keeps, in his individually very recognisable and refined way, those traditions of British painting at its best going - no mean feat in these eclectically and electronically demanding times.

But if you must, enjoy your next Big Mac!

Norman Rosenthal, London

PLATES

PURE JUNK I



PURE JUNK II



PURE JUNK III



PURE JUNK IV



PURE JUNK V



PURE JUNK VI



PURE JUNK VII



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PURE JUNK XIV



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