



Barbican boys

THANKS TO...

The Lenkiewicz Foundation, The Novas group, Hartlepool City Museum, the Executor of the Lenkiewicz Estate and all those who have lent work.

at the edge

WORKS BY

R.O. LENKIEWICZ

1941-2002





R.O. LENKIEWICZ

WORKS BY

ROBERT LENKIEWICZ

1941-2002

WORDS BY ANNIE HILL-SMITH

29TH SEPTEMBER – 18TH NOVEMBER 2007
HARTLEPOOL ART GALLERY

29TH NOVEMBER – 25TH JANUARY 2008
NOVAS GALLERY, LONDON



Death Bed

"We can all remember a time when the sense of being alone was uppermost in one's mind for whatever reason."

Lenkiewicz

"We know and recognise those moments when our lives feel more enriched and when we feel our sensitivities heightened. Nature, human relationships and arts, are our only defence against the unspeakable terror of individual isolation..."

Lenkiewicz

"... there may be another order of things operating under our noses."

Lenkiewicz

INTRODUCTION

The ideas that underlie this exhibition ... at the edge ... stretch back to the late 1960's and to the themed exhibitions that Robert Lenkiewicz began to organise in Plymouth in 1973.

We are seeking to show work that we hope will demonstrate Lenkiewicz's skill and humanity but will also - when seen together - create within you an aesthetic response that will have staying power. This is a themed show, in the Lenkiewicz 'mold' but is not of course an original Lenkiewicz theme. We hope this exhibition will stretch the imagination of those attending in a way that Lenkiewicz himself would have hoped to do.

This is a new project; we can't reconstruct one of the original collections (which he called projects) so we are generating the first post-Lenkiewicz project showing work from several of the original projects but all touching on one of his 'meta-themes', that of social enquiry. We think that this is a legitimate 'stretch' from his mode of presenting his work because he himself moved work between related themes, putting the same piece in different projects if he felt like it. We could explore any of the many aspects within his work but we have chosen this orientation, because we feel it resonates with his objectives.

We want to "provoke

thought" (a favourite Lenkiewicz's expression and undoubtedly one of his objectives) and have sought to select pieces that collectively and individually will achieve this.

Why 'at the edge'? We wanted to illuminate Lenkiewicz's over-arching interest in people who are in extremis, or at critical moments in life, or suffering acute degrees of isolation for one reason or another. At such times human beings may feel very alive but may also be near to death or very excluded from the world that surrounds them. A paradox.

Lenkiewicz didn't see the projects as tools of social change but in a sense they were. As a figurative



Mr Fisher With Bottle Of Strongbow



R.O. LENKIEWICZ



Bearded Man

painter of social themes, an accessible even obsessive chronicler in a time of change, Lenkiewicz in far away Plymouth has a lot to show us about the tectonic shifts that have occurred in our social fabric. Not oblivious to the tide of conceptual work that has engulfed the art world since he left London, but not swayed by it either; he used traditional painterly skills to open the eyes of the onlooker.



The Bishop Started

ROBERT LENKIEWICZ

BACKGROUND

Robert Lenkiewicz was born in north London in 1941. His parents fled to England from Germany just before the war. They met and married in London. As with many other German Jews who came as refugees to London, few members of their extended family survived the war.

They set up a small hotel in Cricklewood. The three Lenkiewicz boys grew up there, surrounded by elderly Jewish residents of the hotel, some of whom were themselves refugees from the holocaust. Lenkiewicz's early memories were of the often elderly and distressed, sometimes demented people who made their home at the hotel. Thus he experienced at first hand and at a young and impressionable age the impact

that dispossession and violent prejudice could have on people. Did his compassion and patience with the 'excluded' start here? Maybe.

From his own account, he had a difficult relationship with his mother who doted on him but was also very controlling. As soon as he could, he lived most of his life privately, either in his room or out in the streets. He began to paint at an early age - encouraged by his mother - and, when his precocity was recognized, he was sent to the Christopher Wren School aged 13 or 14. From there he went to St. Martins in London and then to The Royal Academy School.

From the outset, Lenkiewicz "painted a thing to look like a thing". He proceeded along a

pathway of figurative painting, looking sideways, as he says, at "all the other stuff that was going on" but somehow not attracted to it for himself ... no matter how interested he was in it. Really he was an autodidact with regard to painting, despite the art school training. Similarly, although he was attracted to knowledge and profoundly respected scholarship he didn't benefit much from being taught directly. His teachers, he says, were the paintings in The National Gallery & the books in his library. Plymouth University awarded him an Honorary Doctorate in 2000.

Parallel with his painting life, and from an early age, Lenkiewicz began to undertake private study & research and to collect the

books that he needed to satisfy his incessant curiosity and his obsessive bibliophilia. The two deep loves, painting and the creation of the library that together so profoundly formed his life, were deeply rooted within him by the time he was 17. He was of course by that time also very preoccupied with women.

Lenkiewicz had left home by the time he was 18 (after a final row with his mother) and was living in a series of chaotic lodgings and studios around Hampstead. He was by now living pretty much at the edge himself: often penniless, painting gigantic canvasses on odd canvasses, getting slung out of various rooms by landlords and mixing with difficult people. Life was hard but very stimulating and he

was supported mostly by his mother and by girlfriends.

Then, in 1965, quite abruptly, he left London with his young wife and their baby daughter and went to the West Country where he eventually settled in Plymouth. A new stage in his life was about to begin.

In Plymouth, Lenkiewicz lived a life that, by all accounts, remained impoverished and chaotic. He was still intensively involved with people who the world would describe as 'down and outs'. He had no means to support himself & his dependants. Knowing the value of antiquarian books, he took some from the City Library's Cottonian Collection and sold them in order to raise money. He was arrested in 1970 for stealing books



R.O. LENKIEWICZ

and imprisoned briefly. This experience may well have been some sort of a trigger for him; he would have been confronted with the need to change.

By then a large collection of paintings was accumulating in his small Barbican studio and his multi-layered ideas about the people he was painting suddenly crystallised into the notion of having a huge exhibition.

Lenkiewicz would frequently say that he had "no interest in issues of high art" and he would completely deary any altruistic impulses. His motives in setting up this first major exhibition were complex. He certainly wanted to draw attention to these people (who he called Vagrants) and to issues that confronted

them ... but he would not have been unaware of the possibilities for attracting attention to the work itself, and to the possibility of selling it. He described the Vagrancy Exhibition as a sociological survey rather than an exhibition of paintings and wanted the works to be seen 'en masse' rather than as individual pieces. He dismissed the idea of 'art', preferring to cloak himself in the role of researcher.

The Vagrancy exhibition, held in Plymouth in 1973, attracted no critical attention but did have a significant impact in Plymouth. It also made him realize that he had found a way of creating a lot of interest and provoking thought, albeit only locally. He had discovered that he

could run a large attractive exhibition that ordinary people would visit and he saw that commentators & critics from the 'high art world' would not. He realized he should control the whole presentation process himself, show the work in his own premises and go his own way.

The idea of making work for specific projects took shape; the projects became very much about "presenting information" and also, crucially, he saw the exhibition as an entity i.e. the individual pieces were subordinate to the whole. This began to impact on the way he painted and on the things he painted and his work became increasingly driven by the ideas contained within the research areas. Similarly

"the projects", as he was now calling them, began to impact on his book collecting. This recursive relationship took root and people who knew him and discussed his ideas

with him will have heard him expounding on this many times. This way of being, as painter/researcher, was to shape the rest of his life.



Diogenes And Belle At Prayer

THE WORK

Lenkiewicz was a master draughtsman and, as a painter, was also profoundly involved with the people he painted. You need only

to look at 'Kevin Gasson' (below) to see Lenkiewicz as painter and humanist.

The work that you see below was part of the



Kevin Gasson

'Mental Handicap' project that included more than a hundred studies that Lenkiewicz made between 1974 & 1976 and exhibited in a major exhibition in 1976. Never forget when looking at each piece that it is a part of a whole. He



Diogenes And Harmonica Jim.
Back Studies

wanted projects to be seen in their entirety and for the visitor to feel provoked by the mass of pieces that collectively created the impact he wanted.

As a draughtsman, Lenkiewicz's particular mastery of portraiture is evident from the paintings and drawings that you see here. He often asks us to concentrate on the head, sometimes even right in on the gaze but he provides us with enough scaffolding in the way he shapes the body and sets the context so that we can be aware of the focus of the piece in its entirety. His assured

touch with the human body, evident particularly in the exquisitely sensitive drawings such as the study on the previous page, astonish the eye and always make us aware of the subtleties of the form he has created.

When considering his remarkable technical abilities – he describes himself as "the best bad painter I know" - it is tempting



Two Ladies In An Old
People's Home



ROBERT LENKIEWICZ

to dismiss the work as facile but the distinctive Lenkiewicz style that connects painter to sitter to viewer in a sweep of emotional intensity and a flurry of painterly strokes belies this judgment.

The large paintings are truly extraordinary. Very few painters have the ability to handle large groups quite as convincingly as Robert Lenkiewicz and it's not an easy thing to do. These paintings can masquerade as narrative pieces or even as morality tales but this is to misread them. They are often focal points for a project and as such comprise part of the whole but they are always foci for the painter himself ... to relish the pleasure

of creating a large feast of paint.

His use of colour is remarkable; it never distracts us from form but enhances our understanding. Sometimes we are drawn in by it, experiencing the close proximity of the sitter. Sometimes a muting of tones provides what feels like space to reflect. In this exhibition you can see his palette changing through the decades and you can see his handling of paint making us aware of the humanity of the person who is being portrayed.

The work in 'at the edge' crosses six Lenkiewicz projects, three decades, a variety of media and a medley of styles. We

hope, nonetheless, that we have successfully made a selection of pieces that will move you, illuminate ideas and provoke thought in a way that parallels the painter's practice.



Les in the Bola