

Art, money, fame — and a bit of fun

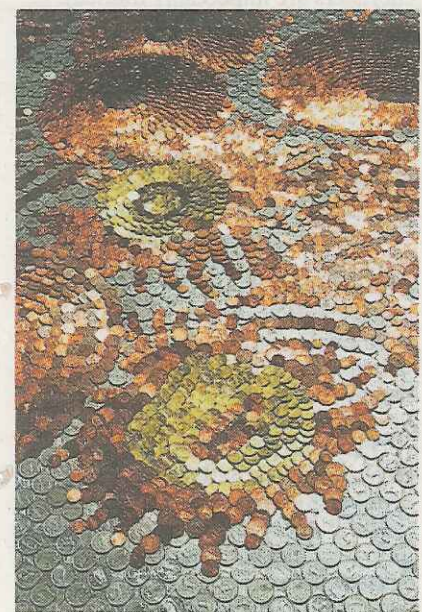


Rose Finn-Kelcey's works are spiritual and reflective, but most of all they're witty, discovers **Rachel Campbell-Johnston**

On March 30, 1987, a Van Gogh painting of a jar of sunflowers made newspaper headlines across the globe. The picture — *Still Life: Vase with 15 Sunflowers* — had been sold by Christie's in London for £24.75 million; a price that, tripling previous records, was to prove to be a defining cultural moment. As booming financial markets (six months before the Black Monday crash) combined with what can be described as the “sanctification” of modern art, they created a flourishing new trade that still sets not just the art world's economic agenda but its tastes also.

The British avant-garde artist Rose Finn-Kelcey responded. In that year she made what has become one of her best-known pieces. *Bureau de Change* is a replica of Van Gogh's iconic canvas, created out of coins.

This is the first thing visitors see as they enter the only survey show of Finn-Kelcey's work to be staged in this country since her death three years ago, at the age of 68, from motor neurone disease. It shimmers enticingly as you walk towards it — its 1,100 components (ranging from pennies to pound coins) laid down like fish scales, glittering and winking under the gallery lights.



On the simplest level, it works as a wittily deft one-liner. Art is money, it says. It has become a currency just as surely as this installation which, when broken up, will re-enter our economy. But the ramifications of Finn-Kelcey's ideas always run deeper and wider. At the same time as she speaks of that fusion of art, fame and money, she pays homage to Van Gogh and the alluring beauty of his paintings and alludes also, perhaps, to his yearning to “transubstantiate” the physical, to conjure the transcendent by creating a sunburst of light.

This sharp blend of ironic humour and profound seriousness is about the only thing that the selection of art works at Modern Art Oxford have in common. No two Finn-Kelcey works are alike. Rather, each subject she

“**In God's Bog, a giant porcelain shell is given a loo seat**

approaches is seen as a fresh challenge. At one moment you are looking at photos of the huge slogan-painted flags that she hung, fluttering, from public buildings. At the next you are peering at the most intricately scissored cut-out.

Finn-Kelcey's range — as the subtitle of this show, *Life, Belief and Beyond*, might suggest — was extremely wide. Although predominantly a performance artist, she worked also with sculpture. She used photography and film, collage and cut paper. Anything from magpies to a matador might inspire her. That so many of her pieces were ephemeral, that they could not be owned (and hence traded), makes them all the harder to pin down.

Curators at Modern Art Oxford set out to help by grouping the works by theme. Through doing so they emphasise, for instance, her strongly feminist stance, or highlight her fascination with spiritual beliefs. And yet, the longer you look, the more you will discover echoes and reflections, resonances and developments between one piece and the next.



In her innovative 1976 performance, *One for Sorrow, Two for Joy* — documented in this show by photos, writings and a stuffed bird (she did the taxidermy herself) — she followed in the footsteps of Joseph Beuys (who spent three days locked in a room with a wild coyote) and shared a gallery space over two evenings with a pair of magpies. Finn-Kelcey saw these birds as her alter ego. She was drawn to their mischievously rebellious spirit. She liked their instinct to hoard. But where Beuys wanted to proclaim his troubled relationship with American politics, Finn-Kelcey approached the subject of human relationships more subtly. Feeling that the voices of women were not sufficiently heard in mainstream culture, she made a piece about attempts at communication, about trying to speak other languages and creating a forum in which they could be understood.

Her magpie love of all things that glitter can be spotted throughout her work. It is reflected in her use of coins, pixels, Lurex, LED technology and

Top: The artist as a matador (1986). Above: The Restless Image (1975). Left: detail of Bureau de Change

sequined matador suits. But beneath the shiny surface lies something deeper. In 1978 she made *Book and Pillow*. She wanted to speak about what she often imagined as the “small being” inside her: a tiny but naggingly persistent embodiment of inner character that made her unconfident, uncertain and awkward.

Commissioning a Natural History Museum model maker, she presents an effigy of this inner creature, a tiny red homunculus mounted in the pages of a Perspex “book”, which she lays on a pillow with a magnifying glass beside it. The sound of a buzzing fly fills the space with its irritating hum. Only when visitors lay their head on the pillow is this noise silenced. Then they can use the glass to gaze at the tiny, huddled figure.

Finn-Kelcey asks us to look inside ourselves and see what we find. She is one of the few artists of her era directly to address the spiritual. What does God mean today? Where can he be found? She responds to such questions with a mixture of reverence and the ridiculous. *God's Bog* is a 2001 work in which a giant porcelain shell is given a loo seat. Her 1999 *It Pays to Pray* was created for the Millennium Dome. A customised vending machine dispenses not bars of chocolate but prayers. Instead of a sugar hit, Finn-Kelcey offers a spiritual rush.

Curators of this survey show are keen to stress how carefully she planned her performances. Preparatory plans are on display. They are only for the anoraks. For the rest of us the show is fun — but with a dash of philosophy thrown in. **Rose Finn-Kelcey: Life, Belief and Beyond** is at Modern Art Oxford, 01865 722733, to October 15