

The Sequence Ken Kiff

THE SEQUENCE CONSISTS OF almost 200 startling and enigmatic paintings made over a thirty year period – begun in March 1971 when Ken was 35 years-old and made up until the time of his death in 2001. Some remain unfinished. I regard *The Sequence* as one work. A life's work. Tantamount to an autobiography.

"I'm never quite sure where my thoughts will take me, I just have to follow them."
Michel de Montaigne.

I've decided to avoid using the word 'series' to describe *The Sequence*. This is because it's inappropriate. I believe that *The Sequence* as a body of work defies the conventional purposes of series; which includes the diaristic, any notion of narrative or the thematic.

What unifies them is the painter, his anxieties, his fractured sense of self and his place in the world. *The Sequence* is an ambitious and disparate group of acrylic paintings on stretched paper that are distinguished from the rest of Ken Kiff's work by the fact of their being numbered in consecutive order. This deceptively modest device lends the paintings something more than continuity – a sense of the cinematic.



The Poet Mayakovsky sequence – 164

The paintings that constitute *The Sequence* are simultaneously fantastic, delightful and disturbing. As waves gently break on some Arcadian shore, the poet Mayakovsky blows his brains out in his Moscow apartment.

The Sequence has the emotional range and power which permits the paintings to simultaneously appear both joyful and oppressive.

Whilst the style may remain fixed the pitch is constantly changing. Once grasped, the ambition and vision of the project can be genuinely exhilarating.

"If you wish, I shall grow irreproachably tender: not a man, but a cloud in trousers."

Vladimir Mayakovsky.

The Sequence is as close as any painter has come to harnessing the perpetual, involuntary and random maelstrom that is the inner voice. The internalised chatter; the running commentaries that 'occupy' our quieter moments. The stories we tell ourselves. Ken attempts to nail his stories and share them.



Talking with a psycho-analyst: night sky sequence – 113

The Sequence embraces a multitude of subjects. From such epic paintings as 'Talking with a psycho-analyst: night sky' No.113 – one of the most significant British paintings of the 1970s – to unabashed scatological one-liners like 'Excrement' No. 57, via Rococo bravura in the form of 'Arrival: horse and landscape' No. 26, a strangely inelegant, but exuberant painting that references the serene and ghostly work of the French 19th century symbolist, Puvis de Chavannes.

"I dream for a living." **Stephen Spielberg.**

Jungian archetypes abound and jostle each other in a sometimes sunny upland or a taupe coloured swamp. They watch, they touch, they converse, they reflect and occasionally they vomit. Their behaviour appears involuntary, bereft of any direct sense of narrative. The social appears as stable as it is frayed.

It's behaviour; neither good nor bad. A society in which harmony and understanding coexists with incomprehension and isolation.

"The greatest barrier to consciousness is the belief that one is conscious."

P D Ouspensky.

But what of the world as it appears in *The Sequence*? It's an invariably sensual and often sexualised place. A world in which pain and pleasure feature prominently. A mix of mythical worlds, part Parnassus, part Garden of Eden, part Ambridge and just a glance towards A E Housman's '*...blue remembered hills*'.

An understanding of anthropomorphism is essential to any appreciation of *The Sequence*. It's a world in which inanimate objects are anything but inert. It's the kind of world where dogs speak, trees wander about and rivers run uphill. Like the brush strokes, the place is animated – it is landscape as a state of mind. A playful yet fragile psyche married to Ovid's *Metamorphosis*.

It's to Ken's credit that some of his paintings may look incomplete or unresolved – the fact that his uncertainty is undisguised is a strength. It gives the work a sense of authenticity.

This is clearly evident in the wonderfully bleak '*Desolation*', No.101. This painting not only attempts to depict desolation but is itself fractured, dissipated and almost abandoned. Desolate. This is one of Ken's finest paintings because, as an object, it is synonymous with the subject matter. It's this sense of fallibility that lends Ken's work it's humanity.

"There's something about flying a kite at night that's so unwholesome."

Marge Simpson.



Excrement sequence – 57



Arrival: horse and landscape' No. 26

Ken's *Sequence* is a parallel world that conflates the symbolic, the psychological, the poetic and the political. A simultaneously delightful and perplexing mix of the Arcadian and the dystopian has come to epitomise his work.

Any awareness of technology seems absent. Modernity is usurped by an eternal, archetypal rich,

internalised world of signs and symbols. A site of drama and reflection.

Colour plays a critical role in Ken's work. His is a world where colour might become calcified, like some distant memory. At other times, a world in which colour would appear saturated and occasionally threatening – unpredictable and sometimes volatile.

"In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself within a dark wood where the straight way was lost." **Dante Alighieri.**

He has had many imitators but his was an almost unique act. One that relied upon a precarious mix of insight and self doubt. Something his many imitators could never emulate.

I knew Ken and got the impression that the reason he was so respected was because he was the sort of artist who 'needed' to paint – someone who had discovered something precious that he had to share. A synthesis between the painterly and the poetic.

Ken's work was never hampered by the literalism that undermines so much allegorical or symbolic painting. The surface of his paintings always remained malleable, maintaining the potential to be transformative and multifarious.

"Only through art can we emerge from ourselves and know what another person sees." **Marcel Proust.**

Ken belonged to a tradition of painters that believed in the power of art to raise consciousness. That doesn't necessarily mean making us better people, but more reflective and more empathic. These were ideas that prevailed in the 1960s, fuelled by a precarious mix of esotericism and existentialism.

It's something of that ethos that has made him the highly respected figure in British painting that he is today.

Graham Crowley 2017.