

THE MISSING ACT



MAX GIMSON

THE MISSING ACT

MAX GIBSON

Winner of

Jonathan Vickers Fine Art Award 2023/2024

Foundation Derbyshire

CONTENTS

Foundation Derbyshire's
Jonathan Vickers Fine Art Award 2023/2024
Supported by
Derby Museums
Mall Galleries
Rolls-Royce plc
The University of Derby

Published by Foundation Derbyshire
Derby Road, Belper
Derbyshire
DE56 1SW

ISBN: 978-0-9552231-6-7

Copyright the Artist and Authors

Designed by Daniel Bomah
Custom font created by Daniel Bomah
Photographs by Rick Tailby

Front cover
Bela Lugosi Between Performances by Max Gimson

Foreword by
Rachael Grime, Chief Executive of Foundation Derbyshire

Commentary and Paintings by
Max Gimson

Essay by
Will Eaves

FOREWORD BY RACHAEL GRIME

As the Jonathan Vickers Fine Art Award celebrates its 25th year, it does so as one of the largest art prizes in the UK and a shining example of just how creative community foundations can be, when helping donors to deliver their philanthropic objectives.

Our story began when the executors of the late Jonathan Vickers' estate asked Foundation Derbyshire (the community foundation for Derbyshire), to create an Art Award, as a fitting way to commemorate Jonathan's life and also his love of fine and decorative art.

A quarter of a century later and Max Gimson is the ninth emerging artist to have taken on the Vickers' mantle, creating a beautiful collection in response to the cultural heritage of our county.

Max's unlikely muse has been Derby Hippodrome, a large Grade II listed variety theatre that, from 1914 until 1959, showcased performances from international stars such as Gracie Fields, George Formby, Morecambe and Wise, Bela Lugosi, Tommy Cooper and Shirley Bassey but now stands partially demolished and derelict.

Inspired by the programmes, stills and posters from the Hippodrome's golden age, Max has created a body of work that, like the theatrical

world it reflects, is a spectacle; a riot of colour and caricature that entertains, uplifts, intrigues, challenges and, at times, disturbs.

The Award was created to be more than just an art prize, however, and education and community outreach have also been integral parts of Max's residency. In addition to sharing his insight as a practising artist with undergraduates at the University of Derby, Max has worked closely with Foundation Derbyshire and Derby Museums on an audio description project, to increase the accessibility of his upcoming exhibitions in Derby and London.

We are forever indebted to Peter Ashworth and John Nicholson, Trustees of the Jonathan Vickers Charitable Trust, whose vision and generosity made the Award a reality.

We are also extremely grateful to the members of our Award Committee and our partners, Derby Museums, the University of Derby, Rolls-Royce plc and Mall Galleries for their ongoing support and to Alistair Redgriff and Will Eaves for sharing their time, expertise and passion for the Arts.

COMMENTARY BY MAX GIMSON

The derelict Derby Hippodrome has been the location that I've been thinking about in the studio. Walking up Green Lane from town I noticed how imposing the building is, the vacant rooms, the boarded up entrance, the weeds growing from faded, colourful signage. I would walk past the car park on Crompton Street and look over the wooden boards into the wreckage of where the stage used to be and think of the things that occurred there; events soaked into the bricks and rubble like the 1972 BBC Two film 'The Stone Tape.' A hacking cough from a man in an audience, or the mild panic of a performer misplacing a wig, maybe Bela Lugosi sitting backstage reading a mediocre review in a newspaper, or Joan Regan applying too much make-up and appearing a bit more menacing than intended.

Between 2012-2015 I used to make paintings of interiors with objects and amorphous bin bags, I would think about them as sets for some kind of drama. Wooden floor boards, walls, fireplaces and things moving through the spaces. In a way, the paintings in 'The Missing Act' have been an examination of this earlier way of thinking. Viewing the canvasses as sets for comedies and tragedies to play out.

Old theatre programmes, archive photographs, and passages of writing have informed certain figurative elements in the paintings but

much like a performer learning lines, there's a distance between the lines and how they are delivered. Ideas and images float around while I'm painting but there's a level of unconsciousness that I'm trying to get to where I'm applying paint in a rhythmic or intuitive way, things go wrong over and over again, mistakes are made, almost willed on, then at the end of it the paintings need to feel like they have some strange autonomy, like they're out of my control. The paintings are figurative but I think about them more as set of relationships between space, colour, texture and form.

'The Missing Act' is in reference to passages being omitted from a story or a play but it's also that moment during the painting process when thought and intention go out the window, steps taken that I can't retrace. The paintings in the exhibition aren't necessarily about accuracy, they're intended to evoke the atmosphere of a location.

ESSAY BY WILL EAVES

Many of the great variety acts of the pre- and post-Second World war eras, and even some Hollywood stars, played the Derby Hippodrome in Green Lane, built in 1914 to palatial specifications with a swagged-plaster dress circle and a bioscope for the projection of entr'acte films. On its broad stage Marie Lloyd serenaded the boy in the gallery, Max Miller traded one-liners in his flowery suits, Margaret Lockwood comforted the Lost Boys in *Peter Pan*, and Bela Lugosi reprised his most famous film role, hearkening to the children of the night, in a 1951 revival of Hamilton Deane's adaptation of *Dracula*. Then came TV, in the mid-50s, and regional variety never recovered. The Hippodrome closed in 1959 and three years later handed itself over to Mecca Bingo. The last pensioners filed out in 2006, since when the once-packed auditorium has been dark.

A kind of dereliction comes with the territory, however. A theatre, even a luminous palace of varieties, is mostly dark anyway. The lights go on and off, and the players and band are on limited engagements, as are we all in the sense to which the whole experience of being somewhere for so short and precious a time inevitably alludes. Nothing lasts, and it is to the frank inevitability of such transience, this "common enveloping atmosphere", in Mark Rothko's lovely phrase (used of the

way light sculpts objects in Renaissance painting), that the latest series of canvases by the young artist Max Gimson pays tribute.

These images are not obviously descriptive scenes or portraits. The famous artistes behind the indelicate mask of Gimson's technique (he painted most of these works quite quickly) are not there to promote their legacy. He has not tried to summon them for one last bow. Rather, they are traces of themselves, taken from dog-eared publicity stills, faded programmes and online archives, that the painter has subjected to a second round of defamiliarisation, even mild humiliation. Ken Dodd is crossed out by the wooden slats that cover his face, Lugosi is eyeless, listlessly smoking but unaware of a fire nearby, and two pairs of stand-up comedians grin hungrily at us from a large-scale double panel ("Comedy Duo") that doesn't even know who they are (though the couple on the right strongly recall Mike and Bernie Winters).

The element of grotesque anonymisation is deliberate and important. This is a quality that the passage of time confers. After a while, names no longer mean anything, and some of the routines and escapades of the past begin to look absurd. But being somewhat grotesque also unites the subject with its artistic treatment. A great deal of variety was

a glorification of the freakish and extreme – a trio of mysterious small paintings ("The Equilibrist", "The Equilibrist and Cigarette Holders", "The Equilibrist's Stool") considers the contortionist Eleanor Gunter, for example – and Gimson's natural inclination, also visible in an earlier series, Fire-Place Paintings (2018–19), is to "make things messy for the viewer"; to invite us to accept, and enter, a contorted reality. In the Fire-Place series, vast pillars of smoke spill across the picture plane (surely these carpets, rooms and streets can't *all* be on fire?), and in the present show the same hazy motif often smoulders in the background or attaches to images of burning planes falling from the sky ("The Backdrop of Genteel War").

That last double-panel painting, one of the most successful on a large scale, is worth a closer look. Its actual origins are in a theatrical poster for the 1928 film *Lilac Time*, a romance about aviators. The pictorial elements – the diving planes, the ingénues with parasols, the electric blue sky – are lifted from promotional imagery for the film, but repurposed, seemingly twice over. To the viewer, this scene is now either a depiction of a stage adaptation of *Lilac Time* (the bins to the left appear to be full of "sky" blue paint) or a more fantastic collision of elements: the girl repeated three times in the foreground on some

kind of platform could be a person caught on film watching an aerial catastrophe unfold. The three figures would then be the same person seen in different frames of the film: the painting becomes an enormous projection of a miniature recording. We have to choose what it is we're looking at. Is it the making of an illusion (a kind of genre painting) or a real nightmare, one that's complicatedly coming to life and being filmed, and then painted (so, returned to illusion)?

The same disconcerting uncertainty is at work in "Marie Lloyd Between Dandelions", whose subject might be in front of a backdrop, or sandwiched between weeds. Here, too, the effects of scale on claims to reality give us pause: if the dandelions coming out of the grey hard standing at the bottom of the painting are "real", then either Marie Lloyd is tiny, a chirruping homunculus, or she is the right size and the Triffids have taken over.

It is not necessary, in our imaginative encounter with *The Missing Act*, to make a final decision about this – to choose between the different levels of reality on display. But it is surely instructive to be aware of them, because that awareness deepens our experience of an already remarkable series of images. As Baudelaire said of Goya's

Los Caprichos, “the juncture between the real and the fantastic [in them] is impossible to detect.” Baudelaire saw the joint handling of representation and distortion as a defining condition of caricature, and it’s certainly true that some of Gimson’s figures (the Winters brothers, for instance) border on the cartoonish. Yet the French poet-critic also acknowledged that caricature can be thought of in other ways, as a “monstrous kind of verisimilitude” where “the contortions, the bestial faces, the diabolical grimaces, all remain imbued with humanity.”

That second species of caricature, where extraordinary types and their features are “strangely animalised by circumstances”, without losing some essential condition of humanity, is what this painter has found in his theatrical subject and brought to a raw, material finish. When the show is over, what remains of the illusion is a trail of breadcrumbs with no gingerbread house at the end of it – bits of wood, make-up, a stool, broken stage properties, umbrellas, and actors out of costume, paid off at the end of the week.

The mid-century abstractionists turned useful pots and pans back into forms without function, and in a similar fashion Max Gimson’s figures are made to shed their fame and context. They’re a bit like the line of

kings that Banquo’s ghost shows to Macbeth: we know what they are, but not who, exactly. And yet Gimson remains sensuously aware of their identity *in paint* – their gaudiness, their hair, their gestures, their smell – even as the world that made them famous goes up in flames, even as the bills of performance disintegrate and the roof of the Hippodrome falls in. It is as if he were slowly deleting the captions of history, removing the *dramatis personae* from the title page, anonymising the archive in order to release a more fundamental awareness of creaturely variety. Stripped of their claim on posterity, their faces half-hidden or turned away, these former personalities become our forebears, the partly inaccessible people they – and we – have always been.



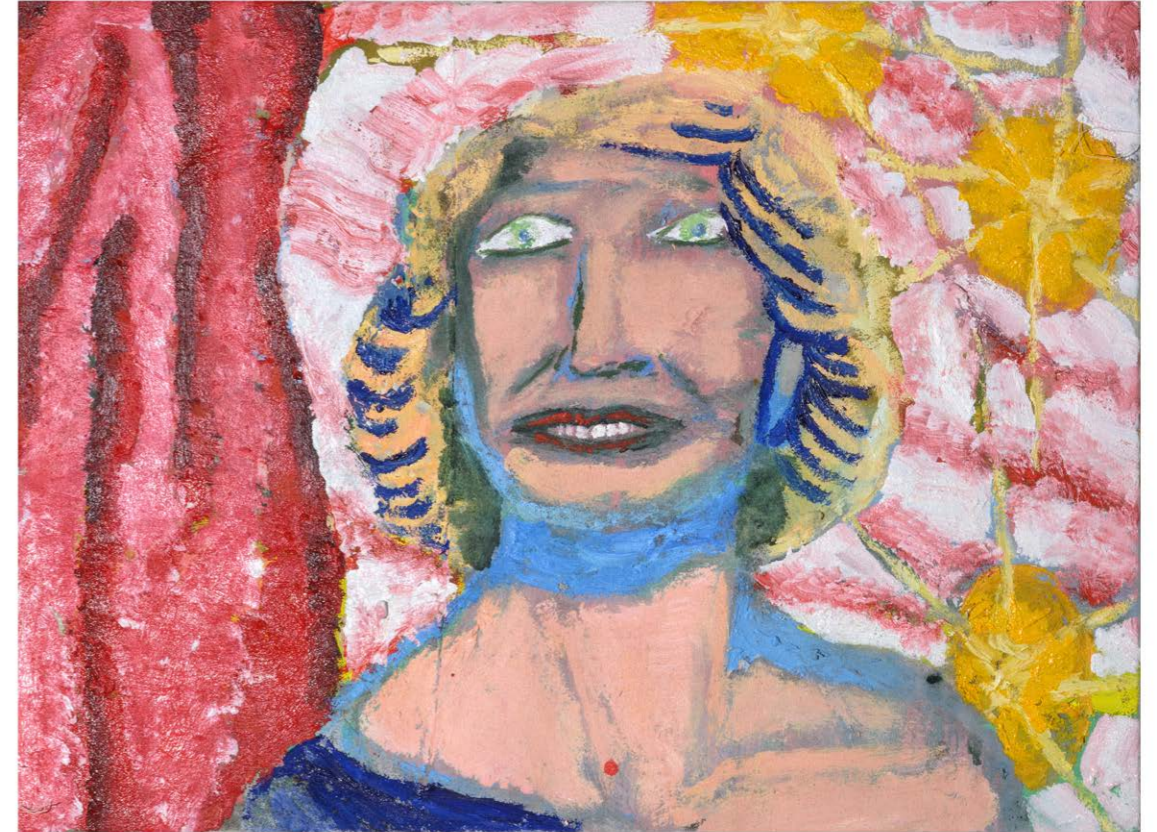
The Ghosts of an Audience

Oil on Canvas
30cm x 30cm



Marie Lloyd Between Dandelions

Oil on Canvas
127cm x 132cm



Star Turn

Oil on Canvas and Cement
40cm x 50cm



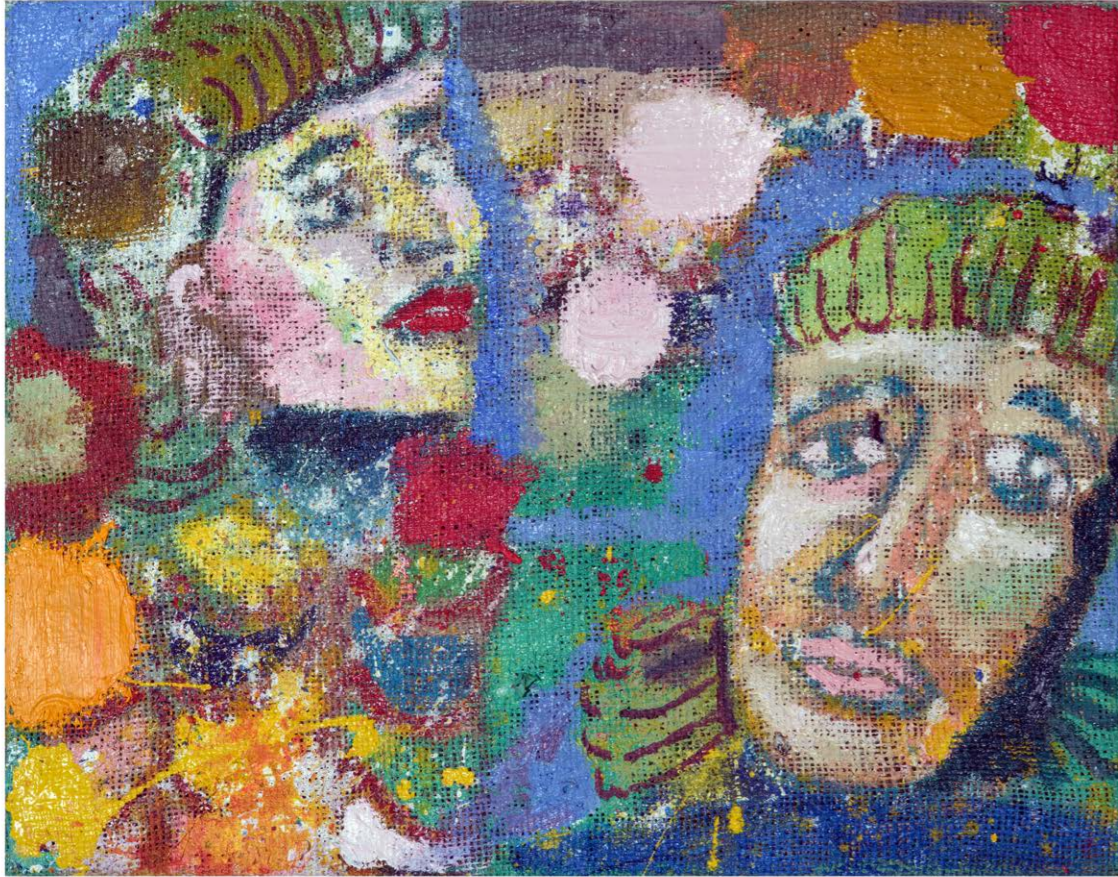
Margaret Lockwood Reading to the Lost Boys

Oil on Canvas
127cm x 254cm

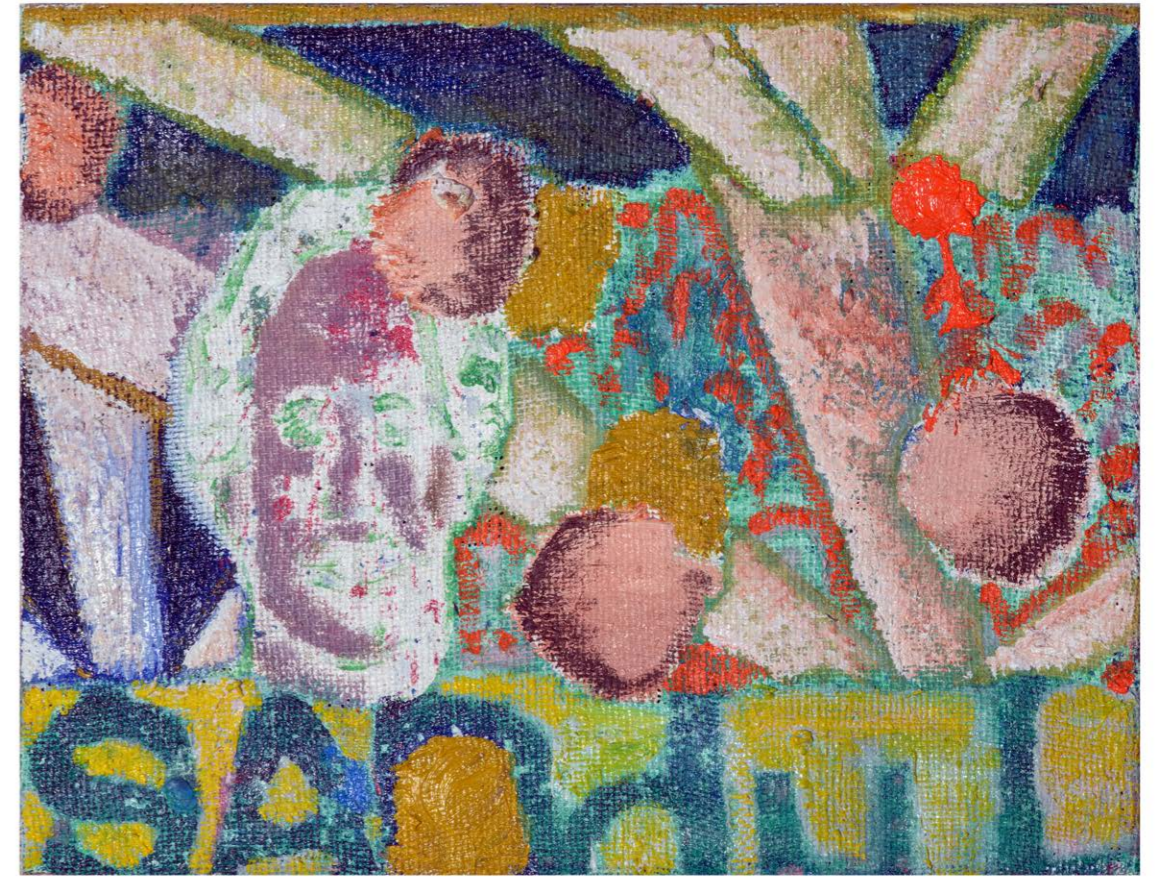


Knave Stealing the Queen's Tarts

Oil on Canvas
152cm x 157cm



Joan Regan Twice
Oil on Jute
20cm x 30cm



Sandy Lane
Oil on Jute
20cm x 30cm



Cinderella
Oil on Canvas
212cm x 254cm



Pull My Finger, Marenka
Oil on Canvas
152cm x 212cm



Show Girls
Oil on Canvas
152cm x 212cm



The Backdrop of Genteel War
Oil on Canvas
152cm x 212cm



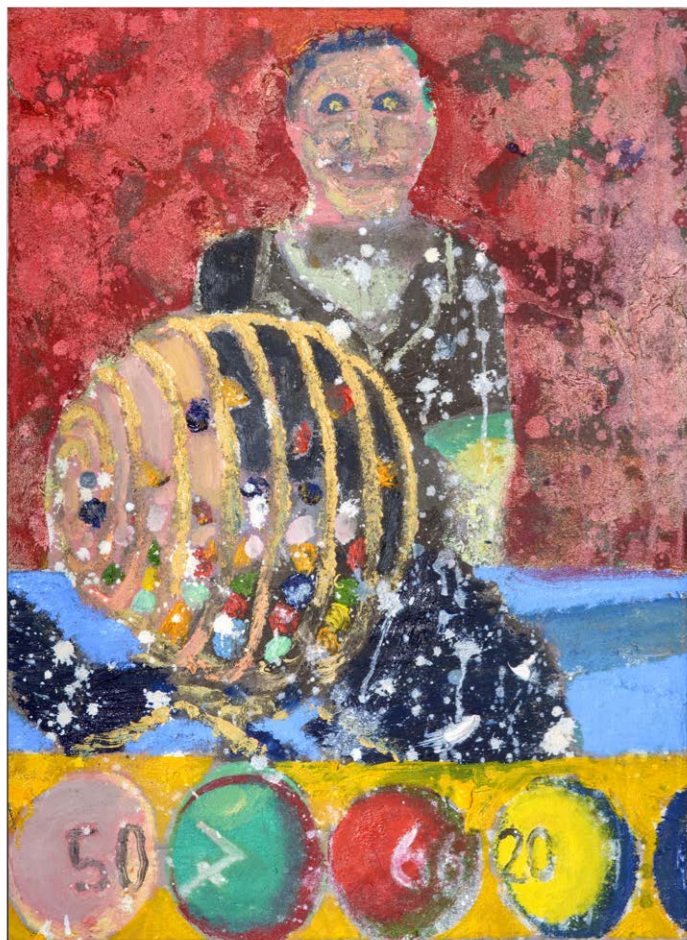
Romance

Oil on Canvas
212cm x 254cm



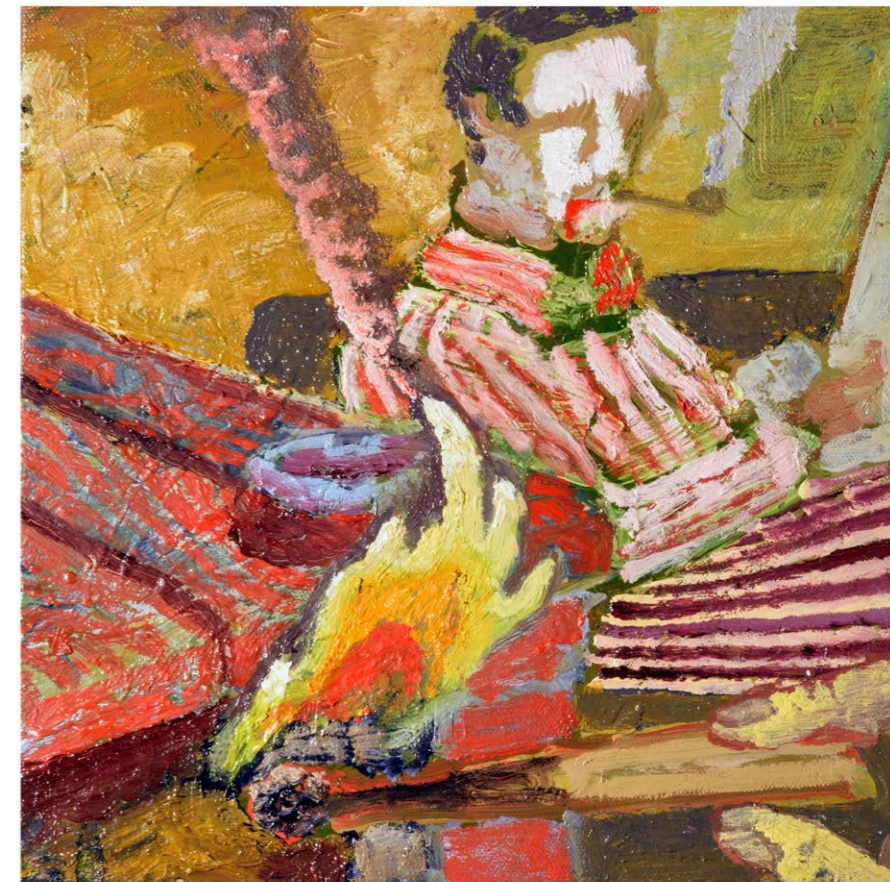
Comedy Duo

Oil on Canvas
127cm x 106cm, (each canvas)



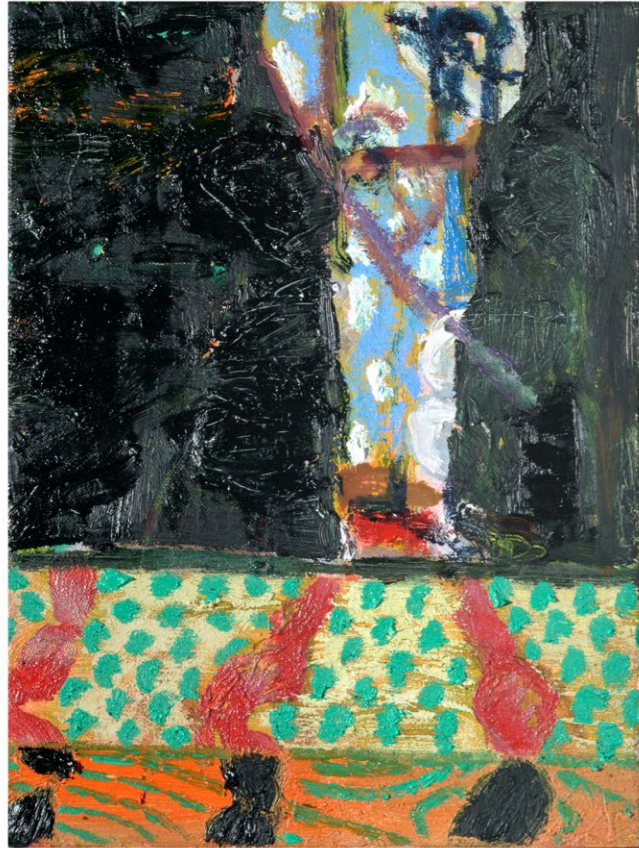
Bingo Caller

Oil on Canvas and cement
50cm x 40cm



Bela Lugosi Between Performances

Oil on Canvas
30cm x 30cm



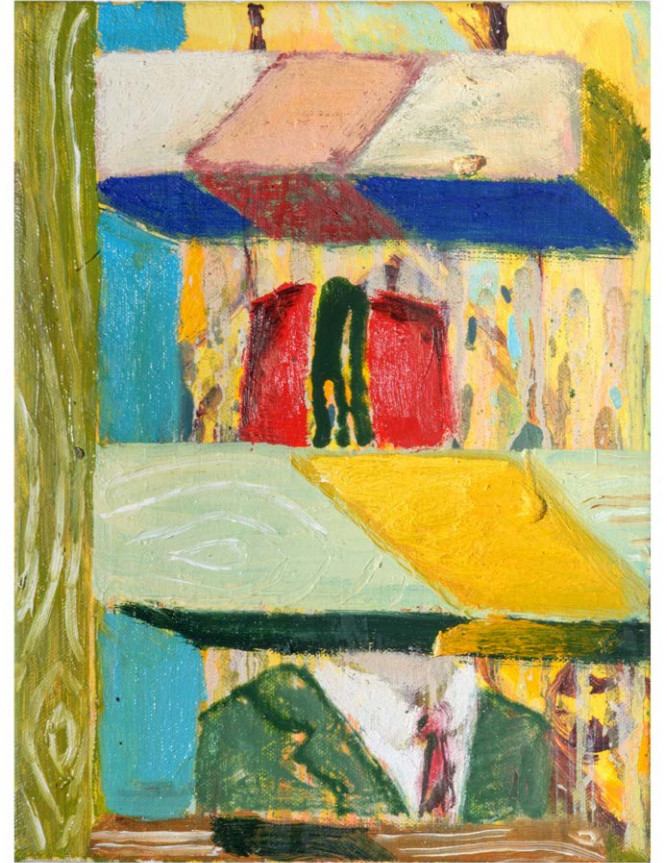
Max Miller Giving Space for Laughter

Oil on Canvas
30cm x 20cm



Ken Dodd Behind a Stud Wall

Oil on Canvas
25cm x 20cm

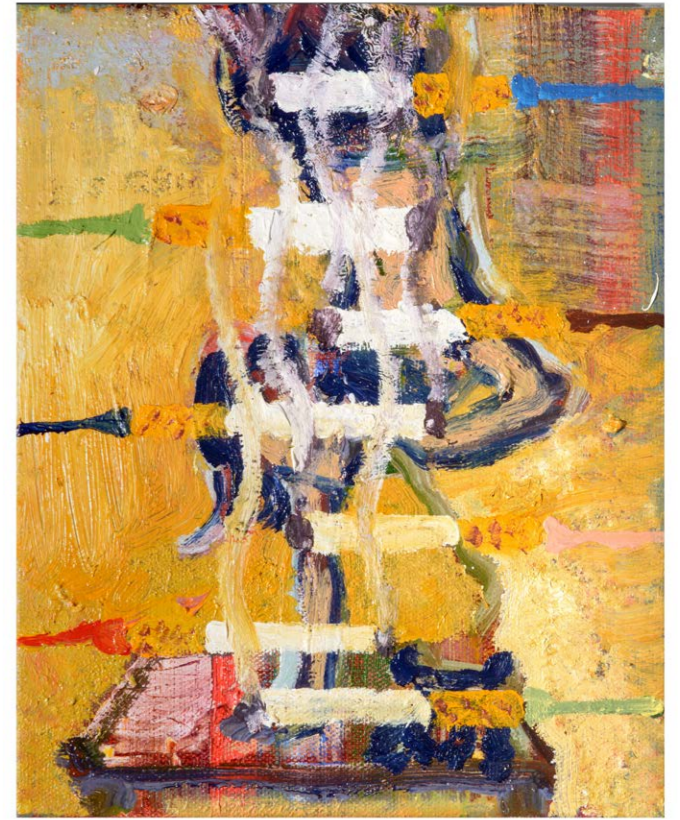


Some Wood in front of Tommy Cooper

Oil on Canvas
30cm x 20cm



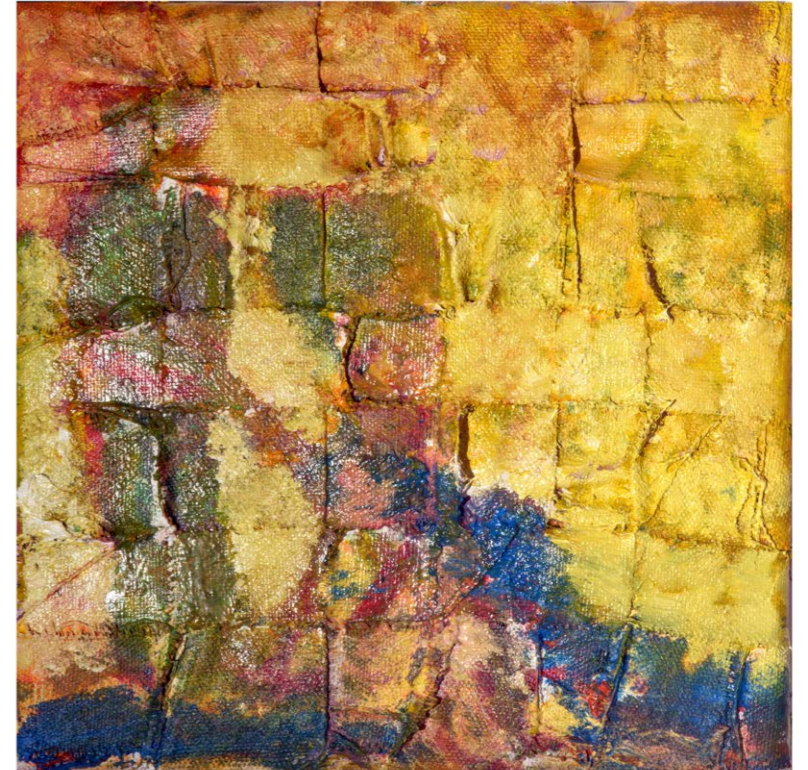
The Equilibrist's Stool
Oil and Couscous on Canvas
30cm x 30cm



Eleanor Gunter and Cigarette Holders
Oil on Canvas
25cm x 20cm



The Equilibrist
Oil on Canvas
30cm x 30cm



Army Man Hosing Someone Down
Oil on Canvas Strips
20cm x 20cm

CONTRIBUTORS

**mall
galleries**



Foundation
Derbyshire

Enabling Giving. Putting Generosity to Work.





Jonathan Vickers
Fine Art Award