

## Ke Francis: A View from Europe

### *Fish out of water*

Four years ago, Ke Francis gave his first short story reading in Britain. As Visiting Professor at the Edinburgh College of Art Summer School he chose to throw light on his work as a visual artist by reading his short story 'The Walking Catfish'. Published in the collection Jug Line in 1992, this is a whimsical, tragi-comic narrative about a landed catfish that learns to walk, believes itself to be a dog, ultimately returns to water and most unexpectedly drowns. Quirky and amusing, Ke Francis's narrative is based on a traditional Southern version of a Persian folk tale with all the compelling quality of any story that has stood the test of time. The listener suspends disbelief, lulled by the rich, musical cadences of the Southern accent (captivatingly exotic to the European ear), and absorbed by the fabulous details of this dog/fish's picaresque adventures. Lurking furtively under the shed, emerging to fetch sticks, chase cars and bark, the dog/fish undergoes a metamorphosis to rival any fabricated by Ovid.

Caught up in the story, and the black comedy of its tragic conclusion, the listener also realises that Francis's homespun tale reaches the status of an Aesop's Fable. Francis sees himself primarily as a communicator, rather than an 'artist' interested in visual aesthetics, and what the Mississippi folk tales and ballads offer is communication at a profound level. The Walking Catfish is a parable about the universally understood phenomenon of alienation and wrongful occupation conveyed in the phrase 'a fish out of water', and the unsettling truth that 'you can't go home again'. For a European, understanding the cultural place of this narrative is the key to unlocking the significance of Francis's work that achieves a synthesis between the activity of the folk artist (a now almost vanished breed in Britain) and the cultural explorer and commentator whose concerns are to extract the everyday and the universal from what Baudelaire called the 'envelope of poetry' that surrounds daily existence.

The book Penumbra incorporates a CD of the artist reading his work, a use of modern technological resources which underlies the fact that for Francis, art manifests itself not just as visual sensation, but as felt experience and, in the case of the musicality of his own readings, something the audience can hear. Gauguin's sentiment about the 'sound' of Brittany is familiar enough. Writing in 1888 he declared that 'When my clogs ring out on this granite soil, I hear the dull, muted, powerful tone which I seek in my painting.' For a European, Francis's Mississippi parallels Gauguin's Brittany – geographically and culturally remote from an acknowledged 'centre', but with a folk culture rich in inspiration, metaphor and story. For a European, therefore, not recognising the cultural heritage of Mississippi as a distinct entity would be like not addressing the cultural heritage of Flanders, for example, or Scotland in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Mississippian writer Eudora Welty defined the 'sense of place' in fiction in a lecture in Cambridge, England, in 1954. She observed that 'the art that speaks most clearly, explicitly, directly and passionately from its own place of origin will remain the longest understood'. One of the first things a European learns from Southerners is the survival of a sense of a lived past rooted not in the ethnic origins of Europe, but in the South itself. Other American communities have their own stories to tell, but the

porch-sitting climate of Mississippi, the impetus from the oral histories of the immigrant Irish and Scots who settled west of the Appalachians, the story telling and blues traditions of the southern black, result in a living heritage of narrative. This may not always be comfortable, as the bruises of the Civil War, the traumas of more recent histories of economics, politics and race may lie tender on the surface, but it is compelling.

### *A Symbol for the South*

In the opening statement for *Possibilities*, “An Occasional Review” published in New York in the winter of 1947/8 Robert Motherwell and Harold Rosenberg, establishing that ‘the question of what will emerge is left open’ declared ‘This is a magazine of artists and writers who ‘practice’ in their own work their own experience without seeking to transcend it in academic, group or political formulas.’ The great dominant post-war style of Abstraction, however, never really took hold in the South. And when two Southern artists – Rauschenberg and Johns – made their way to New York from Texas and Georgia respectively – they took with them the aesthetically invigorating and legible American icons of quilt and flag.

Having graduated from the Cleveland Art Insutute in Ohio, Francis then returned from a dominant north to this same South where he was able to make unrestricted by membership of any group or adherence to a ‘style’. Indeed, he would be sympathetic to all those who view with caution any artistic or philosophical system that has to be spelt with a capital letter: Post-Modernism, Structuralism, Deconstruction, even perhaps ‘Abstraction’ itself. He is more likely to agree with the art historian EH Gombrich who believed there is no such thing as ‘Art’, only artists, making work. He recalls the tutor at Cleveland who took him out of class one day to tell him that he would never be an aesthete, but was already an artist; the observation was acute, the analysis accurate, and the lesson learned.

Behind Francis’s artist’s books lies an interest in a literary output that applies the inflections, cadences, rhythms and vocabularies of America’s regions to the English language. He responds, for example, to William Faulkner for his ability to, as Francis puts it, ‘take a small corner of the world and show how the microcosm can become the macrocosm’. He also cites Robert Frost, a poet who deployed the plain spoken language of the people when America was in thrall to the more decorated and elaborate forms of Victorian English. Francis’s task is to communicate in the shared language of the South and For a European, the search to locate in Francis’s work that telling ‘symbol of the south’ that the art educator Ellsworth Woodward spoke of in 1935 may well come to rest first on one of his series of artist’s books, The Dixie Compass, made in 1994 in an edition of 60. The book’s 30 pages are contoured to an oak plywood and walnut box with brass hinges, configured in the form of a compass whose cardinal points all indicate ‘south’. Through this economical and witty device, Francis indicates the centrality of the home state of his childhood and maturity, where all roads lead from the implied Rome of a wider world back to a locale whose rich inheritance of language and culture can support the attempt to extract the epic, mythical and universal that underpins Francis’s work.

The Dixie Compass was one of three works by Francis included in **Breaking Barriers: Recent American Craft** at the American Craft Museum in New York in

1995. One of only 17 artists selected nationally his presence announced two things. Firstly, that on a national and an international stage his art could, in some way, ‘speak for’ the American craft tradition. Secondly, that his was an art that could cross boundaries between academic, art school-trained high art, and applied art and ‘craft’ with their closer affinities with a folk artist’s traditions and aims.

Introducing the exhibition Seattle-based critic and curator Matthew Kangas focussed on Francis’s work as a story teller, an artist able to find within the cultural landscape of Tupelo, Mississippi, meanings that allow him to ‘insist on the power of the subjective personal vision, fighting the culturally predetermined explanations of why we make art, as well as the attitude that cultural practice is a social construction of conditioning and education’. The results of the conditioning and education may, not infrequently, turn out to be art wearing the Emperor’s Clothes. This may account, also not infrequently, for the suspicion with which much art practice throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been viewed by the broader public who should constitute the intended audience.

This leads to an understanding of Francis’s own definition of himself as a folk artist – one that makes art to, for, by, with and from the folk who inspire it. From the narrative tradition come the stories, and with the stories come the inventive forms of the artist’s books. The books are exquisitely crafted, featuring an extraordinarily wide range of solutions to the problems of binding and presentation. Cloth covered slip cases stamped in gold, handmade end papers, the impression of the type face on paper whose weight and texture are all carefully gauged, as is the use of pure colour and an inventive use of typography operating within a Modernist tradition going back to Mallarme, Apollinaire or Sonia Delaunay.

The decorative arrangement of words on the page sets up a dynamic and expressive tension between language, meaning and expressive form and, in one case, there is an edition of a book featuring a meticulous re-writing by hand in inks and crayons of the entire text. This creates a seductive visual effect of a naturally decorative calligraphy and rich colour, and the sense of the artist’s hand, repeatedly tracing the same marks from book to book, in the manner of a traditional story teller who derives and gives pleasure in the inventive re-telling of the same story. The ‘objectness’ of the work is then emphasised by the binding, a leather cover with tiny metal hinges that recalls the preciousness of books as objects in the great chained libraries of medieval Europe.

*The massiveness of experience, the concreteness of life*

Robert Penn Warren remarked on the Southerner’s perception of ‘the massiveness of experience, the concreteness of life’ (p.321) In aligning himself with the tradition of the folk artist, Francis makes a sharp distinction – uncomfortable for the lazy thinker who may confuse the two – between the folk artist and the naïve artist. In a real, unapologetic way, the naïve artist is by definition unaware of what he or she may be doing. Working from memory, imagination, or a ready made reference such as a postcard or snapshot, the naïve and untrained artist may make images of a direct and often compelling simplicity of meaning, even though the form may be richly intricate and ‘busy’, saturated with often whimsical detail. The folk artist, on the other hand, is visually and culturally literate, aware of a common vocabulary, making knowing

references to those aspects of a shared common culture that have real significance for the intended audience.

For those outside the charmed circle of shared meaning, however, the message of the folk artist isn't 'too bad, but this isn't for you'. On the contrary, the folk artist is fully conscious that the themes, means and methods stretch back beyond art theory, beyond the flickering fashions of the art school regime, beyond the conventions of the high art tradition, to explore universal themes whose significance is understood in any culture.

In Managing Monsters, the British cultural historian Marina Warner examines 'six myths of our time'. Although profoundly influenced by some of the leading European writers on both myth and psychoanalysis, she asserts an independent view that 'the meanings of rituals and images change in relation to the social structure with which they interact'. For an artist such as Ke Francis this may be taken to mean that the work of art can, in fact, be and do two things at once: it can address a universally understood theme, but articulate this in accents rooted in place, culture and identity.

Warner believes in the power of 'newly told stories [that] can sew and weave and knit different patterns into the social fabric and that this is a continuous enterprise for everyone to take part in'. Her choice of imagery is tactile and physical, transforming the telling of tales into a dense, concrete act in which idea and form mesh to result in a tangible product – and this is the case in Ke Francis's art.

One of the most significant of these mythical epic themes in Ke Francis's work is the Tornado, subject of a large body of work consisting of paintings, drawings, photographs, prints and constructions. They become in his hands signifiers for local, regional experience affected by conditions and phenomena of cataclysmic proportions that have their equivalent in cultures all over the globe. This roots Francis's perceptions in the specifics of geography and climate; as Patti Carr Black pointed out in her study Art in Mississippi 1720-1980, 'the great evolution in Mississippi art is in the artist's perception of Mississippi as subject'.

Francis's constructions draw for their forms on other folk art constructions – the kinetic inventions of the whirligig, the intricate manufacture of a rabbit trap. On to these is overlaid a sophisticated understanding of the abstract language of form, the decorative use of colour to enliven surfaces, the aesthetic principles of balance and proportion. These are reconciled into complex arrangements of descriptive elements including tiny houses, weather vanes, ladders, displaced animals, all shaken up into wild disarray by the irresistible force of the tornado.

Francis frequently presents black and white photographs of the tornado shelters created in an attempt to ensure survival by the ingenious inhabitants of Tupelo. These are a complement to the Tornado paintings, and an explanation of the underlying folk meaning of the fantastical, technicoloured, mobile creations that are immediately accessible to any European viewer who has seen The Wizard of Oz. Shown on British TV over holiday periods every year for a generation this is a defining movie that transports its audience from the black and white of reality to the glorious colour and imagined landscape of an invented life 'over the rainbow'. Francis's Tornado works are immediately legible to a European as a reworking of this great American myth.

## *Max Beckmann and the European Quest*

Ke Francis's 1991 Beulah Land project, shown at the University of Memphis, focussed on 'the universal quest for reconciliation of body and soul, nature and spirit'. Drawing on the shared imagery of the Prophet Isaiah, John Bunyan's Pilgrim of 1678 and a popular hymn, Francis identifies Beulah Land, on the borders of the Celestial City, as that object of man's quest, the garden of perfect harmony between nature, man and God. The search, quest, Odyssey or crusade are the fundamental themes of European literature, as in many other cultures, and focus on the search for meaning not as a self-evident given, but as something half glimpsed and elusive. Max Beckmann, an artist Ke Francis admires, focussed on the quest central to his art:

I believe that everything that matters in art, from Ur of the Chaldees, Tel Halaf and Crete to the present day, has always sprung from a deep feeling for the mystery of being. All insubstantial souls aspire to possess an identity of their own, and it is that identity that I seek in my life and in my work. The purpose of art is knowledge – not diversion, pastime or transfiguration. The quest for our own identity – this is the way that lies before us and that we are bound to tread. There may of course be other ways to the goal – philosophy, literature or music – but mine is painting.'

Speaking in 1938, Beckmann analysed the importance to him of the physicality of the paintings that objectified the reality of experience. He evoked lyrically the ways in which his studio in Amsterdam became peopled by those unreal phantoms given life in paintings such as the majestic triptychs. Francis's canvases and prints are similarly people by figures engaged in a heroic and defiant struggle at the extreme edges of human experience: the drowning figures struggling to keep their heads above water, the battered individual with a length of pipe or metal blown through his head. These are the South's survivors, and they inhabit Francis' works with a vitality and resistance that comes from the energy of the mark making, the weight of line, reminiscent of Beckmann's, that Francis has described as 'a line too heavy to be real'. This element of unreality is what makes the images art, rather than description. Francis knows, as Beckmann knew, that art isn't 'real'; art is invention and artifice. The artist's trick is to persuade you that what you see is 'real', to create a visual equivalent for real experience and shared understanding. Story telling is about the reconstruction of reality. In Max Beckmann's work, the weight of the line 'still renders believable form', according to Francis, deployed to build his own world and make it communicate.

In certain works, Francis's marks sweep and dart and edge across the canvas or paper with uncommon energy and attack, the lines themselves not deployed to model an illusionistic third dimension but carrying a visual equivalent of the artist's invented reality. In the more recent canvases, the picture space is organised by means of large blocks of flat colour, a two dimensional compositional device borrowed from Modernism, then overlaid with the mythical images that constitute Francis's vocabulary of signifiers threaded through the chaos of the twister: the mythical fish, the magical crystal with its myriad facets, the funnel as the channelling ordered opposite of the disruptive tornado, and weaving through again, magically, a fish, a serpent, or the winged figure of Nike, goddess of Victory. Nike's epic presence, now corporeal, now a shadow, now an absence, suggest survival, revival, and optimism in

the face of the lessons of experience and all reasonable expectation. A recent feature, the tuning forks often seen in pairs further suggest the possibilities of dissonance and assonance, the potential of a call to order achievable once the cultural and psychophysical whirlwind embodied by the tornado has subsided.

This 'dust yourself down' mentality, a necessary concomitant of life in the South where the tornado is a fact of life, gives rise to folk tales then discernible in the paintings and photographs. The old timer who believed the tornado had (somehow) whipped him around in his pants; the widow whose persistent, obsessive search for her lost wedding ring was finally rewarded when she found it, lodged in a tree, seven miles from her home: Francis values such narratives as encapsulations of the humour, determination and resilience of the South and of the people for whom, ultimately, the work is intended. Wit and whimsy are significant, for Francis is funny, understanding human frailty and folly and seeing in the outlandish post-tornado 'tall tales' the elements of the human spirit vital for survival. For Europeans, coming to terms with the impact of global warming, floods, hurricanes, landslides are still unanticipated natural disasters that arrive without warning and wreak total havoc. For the survivors of the South, they are a challenge to be met. The Tornado series works are a monument to that.

*You can go home again*

When Warner talks of telling tales and making meaning, she is not talking of the first, heady rush of water-cooler gossip that may constitute 'stories' in urban culture, but of the ways in which narrative beds down into the consciousness from which it first arose, taking new and enriched meanings on the way, creating a cycle of narrative, hearing, absorption and re-telling.

In his most recent work, Francis moves towards a form of resolution in which he is frequently re-telling his own stories, but in a transformed register. After the hectic, 'up and at 'em', optimistic, 'massive experience' of the work of the 1980s and 1990s, the recent work offers synthesis and stability. This translates into etchings and woodcuts, such as Rain Beaker, or Deep Space Compass Nike Muse in which a new refinement is distilled from the earlier imagery, selecting some images - the Nike, the battered head, the fish - for another whirl on the plate spinner's pole. But if the plate-spinner's touch is as assured as before, the pace is less frantic, the atmosphere more reflective. A mid-career artist who has recently accepted an appointment as Chair of a creatively highly charged art department may well find the possibility of a new sense of order in his studio work deeply seductive. Perhaps his arrival on the personal savannah of his creative practice of the early millennium is coincidental. But a number of the prints, particularly, achieve a coherence and control that draw together the themes from the earlier body of work. Taken together, they suggest that in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is possible for a Southern artist to know his America, with its traditions, memories and shared practices, and to make these speak not simply to an artistic 'inner circle' but to those people from whom the narrative springs.

Francis shares with Beckmann the concern for the individual and the quest for the self and the individual that Beckmann summarised in his question 'What are you, and what am I? - these are the questions that pursue and torment me, but which also

perhaps help to make me an artist'. To a European eye observing Francis pose the same questions, in the rich accents of the south offers a cultural experience that is penetrating and illuminating, optimistic and compelling.

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Geraldine Prince has lectured at the universities of Edinburgh, Glasgow and Dundee and is currently the Director of the Centre for Continuing Studies at Edinburgh College of Art, Scotland. She has carried out interpretive work on exhibitions for a number of British galleries and organisations, including the Arts Council of Great Britain, and the South Bank Centre, London. Her published works include catalogue essays for exhibitions at the Fruitmarket Gallery and City Art Centre, Edinburgh, the Glasgow and Edinburgh Printmaker's Workshops, and the Aberdenn Art Gallery and Museum. She has lectured throughout Scotland on aspects of contemporary art and design.