

THEY HAD FOUR YEARS

K. feels his agenda was firmly in place as soon as he arrived at art school, fresh from 25 years spent in Kelty and The School of Life. So it's his formative beginnings we must look to in order to shed light on subsequent artistic development.

At High School, K. elects for Sciences and avoids Art. On leaving, he undertakes an apprenticeship as mechanical fitter. A 'grease monkey' on nuclear submarines, he crawls up torpedo tubes. After X years, K. signs the Official Secrets Act on departure. Periods of employment follow, most memorably a prolonged stint as fire sentry in a dockyard, watching welders weld. The first seeds of inspiration to attend art college come from fellow Kelty man J. who experienced four years as an art student. With a growing realisation that here, people could get away with things without facing ridicule, K. realises that art school could be the platform he needs to get the madness out of his head.

For the first six months he wants to leave, but his turning point happens in life class when a tutor praises him for his bold application of paint straight from the tube. K. now can see he has something to offer. Later work finds him drawn repeatedly to certain television male role models he remembers from his youth. His benevolent guardians are MR. T, Barry Sheen and Eddie Kidd. All are linked by their essence of humanity and humility in the face of towering danger and sheer bad luck. So K. creates his own personas to help him show others the beauty in odd moments of comedy and tragedy inherent in popular culture and life itself. It is during this rich period that Harry Butler is born and a new strength radiates from within K. As Harry, K. can feel himself change. He walks taller and acts stronger. From his four years at art school K. gets more than he could have hoped for - a network of friends, a girlfriend, confidence. And as Harry gives him the courage to do what he wants, K. feels like the lion in 'The Wizard of Oz'. He continues to live his life according to a saying of Harry's: "If you dinnae like it - tough. As long as you're not hurting anyone in the process".

C. believes that art schools are for developing creativity.

She graduates straight from Auchmuty High School, Glenrothes, to art school; with an unshakeable conviction she has held from early school days that it will be the coolest place ever. A place to meet loads of open-minded people and experience a whole way of life rather than just work. A place where clothes, music and what you feel really matter. Most importantly everyone will be way-out and mad. With this in mind she dyes her hair that has been pink for several years back to brown, believing that she can only stand out from this spectacular crowd by looking ordinary. C. clearly remembers her first week at art college - everyone has retained their natural hair colour and everyone neatly falls into two categories - those who have come directly from high school versus those who have not. As allegiances develop the cliques become even clearer. C. belongs to the group that makes work which will never sell. Others form the group that is technically gifted and excels in Life Drawing. A turning point for C. occurs in Third Year where her earliest romantic notion of art school becomes a reality. Working in a small studio that is separate from the main art school building, she captures the real feeling of what it is like to be an artist and be free. In this microcosm she can express herself intuitively - anything and everything is possible and the ideas flow.

Then the time comes for C. to leave art school and she hates it - this has been all she ever wanted to do. So it feels like an end rather than a beginning. But after enforced time back in Glenrothes C. acclimatises to her new situation and moves back to Dundee. Here she has a network of like-minded people and a local artist-led organisation to get involved with. She carries on making her own work from her flat and supplements this with various part-time work - an assistant in 'Patricia Forbes Dress Shop', a portraiture model for a small group of adventurous older ladies in Invergowrie and a freelance worker at the Rep Theatre. C. is so excited about the show at GENERATORprojects she cannot get to sleep at night, as her head is full of ideas.

A. understands that art school is simply a place where if you want to know something you can find out about it - from how to make a stretcher to the History of Art.

His early trajectory is from a Foundation Course in Leith to First Year of a Joint Honours in Painting and Philosophy in Reading. Yet the balance is not right. He sheds Philosophy and concentrates on Painting. Allowing colour into his work A. throws away the darkness, joining second year at DJCAD. It would be too rigid to say that A. wants to be part of a tradition but he finds himself needing to be aware of where he is in relation to what has been. Influenced from artists ranging from William Morris to Chris Ofili, A. begins to discover a language he wants to work in. He develops a process in which he can 'mechanise' himself - setting rules to follow that can only be broken if the painting requires it. His percentage of time spent at art school is 70% thinking and 30% actively applying the paint.

Whilst others feel great about leaving, A. does not want to give up this way of life where he gets up in the morning and paints all day. Moving back to his home turf of Edinburgh he finds full-time employment in 'Stems'

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Florists but feels he is stagnating. So he reduces his hours, takes on a studio, participates in group shows and feels almost like he did when he was a student. He does not fully understand how his work is changing out of art college but gives himself the space to naturally develop. Rather than build a shrine to one idea, A. stands back and tries not to intellectualise too much.

S. classes it a luxury to spend a selfish four years concentrating on herself and what she wants to say.

She applies to art college from Balwearie High School, Kirkcaldy, but doesn't get in first time so takes a year's Portfolio Preparation course at the local technical college and enjoys learning the basic skills of her craft. After arriving at art school it takes S. until the end of Third Year to be truly happy in making her own work. Borrowing from the formula of the 1970s disaster movie S. makes it her own - a caravan disaster film shot on location in her parents' small static in Kinghorn, Fife. With no budget S. is all four characters. Early rushes from the initial ambitious storyboard show promise but S. calls it a day when special effects including an exploding bomb in a fridge and the finale of the caravan falling off a cliff prove too much. But the important thing is that S. finds her muse in an unlikely form - the leading man Jeronimo Blezzard. Although on the outside a chauvinistic, sleaze mongering pig, S. intuitively knows there is a soft heart concealed beneath unattractive layers. As they work together many more times, she finds it a privilege to know the real man. It is interesting to note that S. symbolically kills him off during her own finale of her art school career - The Degree Show. In the last two minutes of the show reel that follows her main feature 'Bad Habit', the story of a singing nun who makes it in the karaoke bars of Las Vegas, Jeronimo's flame is extinguished and the audience are left to contemplate a great man, a great actor, a great lover.

After college, S. moves to Glasgow where she and her boyfriend launch a video production and web design business called M.A.S.S. (Media, Arts and Services Scotland) whose acronym, as their first client points out, could inadvertently alienate Protestants. For her personal film work to be realised over a lifetime, she hopes to emulate John Waters example of making all films from the one place - for him Baltimore, for her a small island that lies off Kinghorn whose tales in real life include being the site of a social experiment where a mute nun is left with seven babies to see what language the children will speak.

E. enthuses that art school can change life itself.

As a pupil at Harris Academy, Dundee, she makes trips to the Open Days at art colleges and is astonished to find that it is the one on her own doorstep she is most keen to attend. It may not have the heady atmosphere of tradition and architecture that the other institutions possess, yet she is drawn to the openness of its people and a thriving community spirit. Once there, E. gravitates towards the inconsequential gesture writ large, and finds inspiration in key artist works she stumbles upon - the black 12 inch balloons in Martin Creed's 'Half the Air in a Given Space'; the tiny coloured glass beads in a Liza Lou installation that cover every surface of a kitchen. In Second Year E. completes a sequence of coloured dots on an A4 lined page that she calls 'No Pointillism'. The thought process behind it - denying functional objects their own functionality - paves the way for an ongoing investigation.

Art Education has given E. a lot and she is happy to leave after her four years, with the belief that all artists can always work better. Her master plan may not be fully-fledged and her manifesto half-written, but as things improve, E. lives a serene post-graduate existence of openings and artwork.

Jenny Brownrigg
Curator, University of Dundee Exhibitions Department
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On the occasion of the exhibition 'They Had Four Years' at GeneratorProjects, Dundee. This exhibition was 5 2002 graduates from Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, Dundee.