JEFF KEEN

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Jeff Keen: Shoot the Wrx

Brighton Museum and Art Gallery

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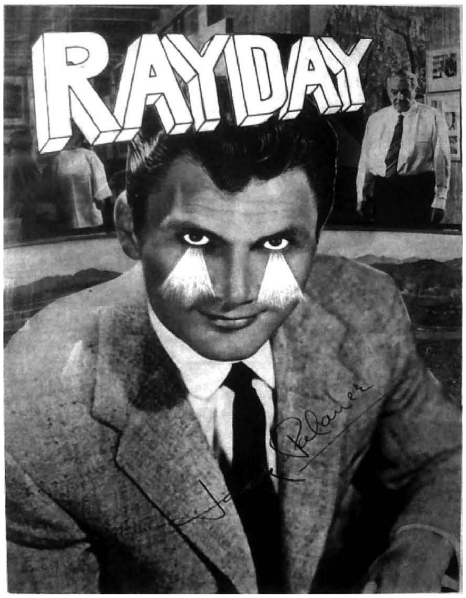
Does art history favour the polymath, or are branches of a multifaceted practice customarily trimmed to suit the specialisms of those in charge of posthumous retrospection? Following the death of Wiltshire born, Brighton-based poet, painter, sculptor, performance artist and filmmaker Jeff Keen (1923-2012), a narrow analysis of his multidisciplinary oeuvre seemed to suggest it was the latter. Although myriad obituaries, profiles and republished articles paid lip-service to Keen's status as a jack-of-all-arts, they quickly homed in on him being a master of one: filmmaking. This was perhaps understandable given the nature of his most prominent institutional patrons: the British Film Institute and, most recently, Tate's film department and it appeared that Keen was being primed for neat insertion into the dusty cabinet of British art history, filed under 'postwar Avant Garde', subsection 'experimental film', index card 'expanded cinema'. The negative effect of this narrow-but-deep focus on Keen's films is that it occludes a fuller understanding of his art. It also restricts interpretation to an established celluloid-specific discourse. Thankfully Brighton Museum and Art Gallery's impressive retrospective sidesteps that pitfall. 'Shoot the Wrx' displays a dizzying collection – covering a mid-career period from the late 1940s to 80s – of Keen's drawings, sculptures, paintings and poetry.

The first thing to say about Keen is that he was a Futurist, but not of the Italian, gunpowder and gasoline variety. Keen's Futurism was born of the atomic age: that postwar epoch in which the possibilities of science and invention furnished a social imaginary consisting of robots, time-travel, nuclear physics, radiation, super villains, Martians, and the wonders of bakelite and rayon. But it wasn't always so. The early drawings, dating from the late 1940s up until the 60s, are displayed in a series of vitrines lining the walls of the first room. They show Keen's interest in exploring and sometimes parodying Picasso's many abstractions and the Art Brut of Jean Dubuffet. *Street Scene With Nutrex Sign*, 1946, a noirish collection of contorted characters executed in cubist style, and *Organic Landscape*, 1950, a blue ink drawing in which the insides of a split head pour out to create an amorphous bio-topography, both show Keen was in complete control of his influences at this point. Rather than being burdened by the legacy of high modernism, Keen wrests it from its perch and puts it to work as a tool to illustrate the fantastic universe he was beginning to form. What thrills about these works is that they show the last art-historical ledge at which he dallied before diving headfirst into the world of blatz – Keen's catchall term to describe the characteristic mode of his new aesthetic.

In the centre of the room a large vitrine contains front covers from *AmazingRayday*, the publication begun in 1962, created and described by Keen as 'an occasional poetry broadsheet'. In the frenetic collages on each page comprising cut-out glamour queens, robots, onomatopoeia in 3D text and junk shop miscellany, the blatz world really begins to emerge – as do characters that feature in Keen's 8mm and 16mm films, like the maniacal Dr Gaz. But what is blatz? It can be characterised as an attitude, aesthetic or approach; in this instance it serves as another word for collage. But where



Jeff Keen
Rayday c1960-61

collage denotes a perhaps stagnant traditional technique, blatz goes further and encompasses the unrelenting energy and speed of the comic-book splash page – the term in comic argot used to describe an action-packed full-page drawing. In fact the language of comics, in terms of both words used and the methodology of how images are put together to create meaning, has had a profound influence on the content, aesthetic and vocabulary of Keen's output. The superhero splash page offers an explosion of meaning, temporalities and velocities that one can see echoed in classic Keen films like *Marvo Movie*, 1967, and *Meatdaze*, 1968.

The second room functions as a kind of intermezzo space. Cardboard panels covered in wild paint splats line the walls, and three vitrines contain mixed-media assemblages and customised objects. These are all – for want of a better word – props used in Keen's films. The helmet Keen wore in *Marvo Movie* emblazoned with the DC Comics' character Hawkman is mounted in one vitrine, as are various effects of Vulvana, a reccurring femme fatale cum sorceress played by Keen's wife Jackie. But it is the last room, a space dedicated to Keen's paintings, which contains the exhibition's biggest surprise. Works including *Laff*, 1966, and *Sincerely Dr Gaz*, 1975, both vibrantly colourful mutations of profiles amid Googie-esque surroundings, bear a striking resemblance to the output of a group of postwar US artists (whose members also cite Dubuffet as an influence) known as the Chicago Imagists. In particular there is a marked affinity between Keen and Imagists Jim Nutt and Karl Wirsum. All three produce cartoonish figurative abstractions that reveal a shared influence: US illustrator Chester Gould, creator of the violent guns, gals and gangsters comic book *Dick Tracy* (1931-77). How interesting would it have been if these artists realised they were mining the same field? Would Keen have taken a trip to Chicago and recognised a kindred spirit in fellow Futurist and visionary Sun Ra? It is a tantalising possibility.

Gary Stevens
Now and Again: Westgate, Southampton 2012

'Shoot the Wrx', then, provides an intoxicating glimpse into the seldom seen environs of one of the UK's most original and important 20th-century artists. By counteracting posthumous reductionism, curator Jenny Lund and the artist's daughter Stella Keen have ensured that he still remains – for the time being at least – beyond the Martin Margiela-clad clutches of the dreaded institutional embrace. In short, 'Shoot the Wrx' is my pick for solo show of the year – don't miss it. ▮

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