

News

Step toe and Son explored through fine art: new exhibition at UAL CSM

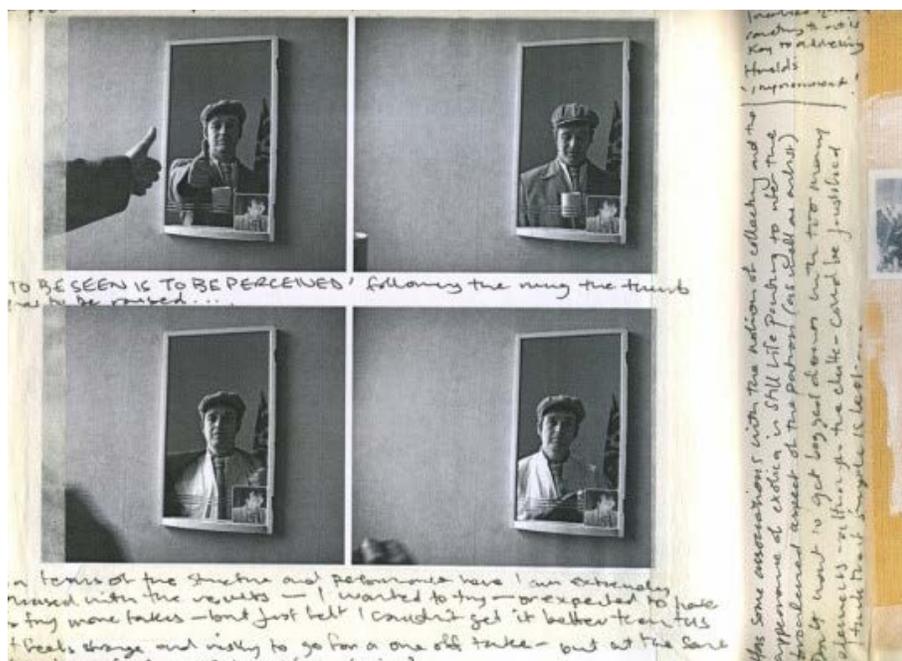
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University of Arts London PhD Fine Art graduate, Dean Kelland, explores masculinity in post-war British sitcom in a new free public exhibition at UAL Central Saint Martins this week. **Flawed Masculinities:**

“Rupturing” 1950s/60s/70s British TV Sitcom is on display in The Crossing, UAL Central Saint Martins Granary Square from 24-29 May 2016.

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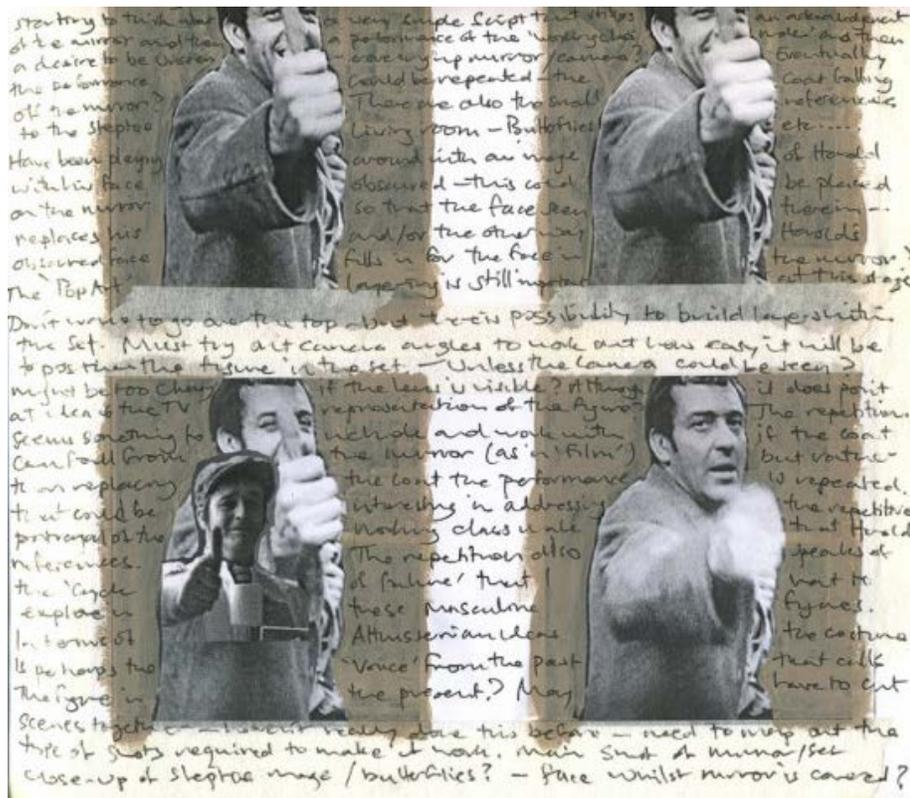


The Englishman's Panacea (Performance Film Still) – Dean Kelland

Much like Grayson Perry, UAL's Chancellor, in his recent show *All Man*, Dean Kelland, UAL graduate and Birmingham based artist, explores concepts of masculine identity. In this latest exhibition, his sketchbooks show how he explores failure as a central quality of male cultural icons from post-war British sitcoms using multi-media in his artwork. His work *The Englishman's Panacea* which features himself in character as Harold Steptoe from the comedy classic sitcom *Step toe and Son* will be screened as part of the exhibition.

Dean Kelland commented: *"Step toe was one the many male figures that were part of a cyclical pattern of failure, where the root of the comedy came from. I wanted to explore this notion and what it means for masculinity."*

In this work, Kelland stands before a mirror in what is seemingly his morning ritual. Referencing Samuel Beckett's plays *Waiting for Godot* and *Film*, the action is repeated with each new manifestation taking us further into the identity of Steptoe whilst simultaneously investigating the mechanics of performance and portraits of masculinity.



The Englishman's Panacea (Performance Film Still) by Dean Kelland. Image courtesy of the artist.

Born in Great Barr in Birmingham in the 1970's, Dean Kelland reflects on his experiences growing up in the midst of changing social mobility, politics and identity which inform his artwork:

"Television was always there for me when I was growing up. I now see these shows like a mirror that reflected the cultural shifts exquisitely back to its audiences. Sitcoms and comedians may be overlooked academically, although that is changing, but for me they say it better than anyone did and I wanted to highlight that through my artwork."

From Birmingham to London via Fine Art and Comedy – An interview with Dean Kelland:

Sitcoms aren't often the subject of Fine Art – what influenced you to explore sitcoms?

I get quite defensive about comedy and in particular sitcom because it is often regarded as a lesser or perhaps more superficial area of popular culture. The writer Andy Medhurst once said that if you want to know what is hurting society at any given point in history then look at what people are laughing at – that sums it up for me – sitcoms are as good as any other art form when it comes to measuring temperature of the times.

When did your interest in Sitcoms begin?

My interest in situation comedy started in my childhood when at the age of six I was given an old black and white portable television by my older sister. Sunday afternoons on BBC2 were a rich source of 'repeat' episodes of sitcoms featuring the programmes selected for this research project as well as *The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin*, *Butterflies*, *Rising Damp*, *Open All Hours*, and *Porridge*. The world that opened up to me through that small screen provided something that at an early age I couldn't fully identify or articulate.

How did this develop over your career?

Fast-forwarding to adult life, my journey through arts education saw me trained in Fine Art before moving on to specialise in photography. I showed work at a range of national venues before developing a career as a lecturer in art and design, and I've enjoyed developing the skills I would later use for this PhD. My broad

experiences took in everything from sculpture, painting and graphic design to interior design, textiles and fashion. I returned once more to Fine Art to study for my Masters degree, and utilised these multiple disciplines to develop a cross-disciplinary practice approach to conceptual representations of – of all things – the British landscape.

Upon completion of my MA I decided to throw this approach away...I asked myself why, as someone who had grown up in a working class suburb of Birmingham, I was spending time interrogating rural spaces and the conceptual minutiae of British landscape traditions. Why had I spent so long developing a practice that was on the fringes of my own personal experiences and a subject area that was alien to my own sense of identity? This crisis sowed the seeds of my PhD project: Write what you know, that oft-quoted adage was the starting point; and what I knew was the British sitcom.

This exhibition highlights masculine gender stereotypes in post-war British Sitcoms – what motivated you to focus on this area?

I was able to combine my knowledge of sitcoms with methodologies associated to writing and performing but crucially the question that developed related to why I felt drawn to these figures – soon the idea that these characters were trapped in a cycle of failure developed and what that meant in terms of how British masculinity was laid bare in these comedies started to inform the work. I started to see comedy like a skin with a familiar surface (humour) and a more challenging bloody, visceral underside, (the cycle of failure) I like the idea that the performance films I make attempt to reveal both sides simultaneously.

I was lucky enough to spend time talking to Susannah Corbett (Harry H. Corbett's daughter) about Step toe and Son and her father's working methods. Remarkably I was then offered the opportunity to spend a day with Galton and Simpson talking about their work and my work – the practice definitely went up a level at that point. I was able to combine my knowledge of sitcoms with methodologies associated to writing and performing but crucially the question that developed related to why I felt drawn to these figures – soon the idea that these characters were trapped in a cycle of failure developed and what that meant in terms of how British masculinity was laid bare in these comedies started to inform the work. I started to see comedy like a skin with a familiar surface (humour) and a more challenging bloody, visceral underside, (the cycle of failure) I like the idea that the performance films I make attempt to reveal both sides simultaneously.

Why did you choose UAL Central Saint Martins to do your PhD research?

Central St Martins has provided me with the most incredible experience. The working environment is vibrant and exciting and the level of support from the amazing staff and fellow PhD students settled me in and gave me the confidence to take risks with my work and really drive ideas on. I couldn't have asked for a more supportive team and I count myself very lucky to have found them and to have had this experience at Central St Martins. The pride I have in being able to say that I have studied at CSM is immeasurable but most importantly my practice is stronger and my ideas are sharper as a result of studying here.

When I applied to study here I genuinely didn't expect to be offered a place to study my PhD, in truth I was excited to be given an interview because I thought it would be great to have a walk around and see what the inside of St Martins was like! I grew up in a part of Birmingham where art was not really considered as a serious option for a career, I persevered and studied at a regional college and university but the thought of Central St Martins was always so far away from where I was and who I was – it definitely felt like it was something that happened to other people. When I got here I was welcomed so positively and my work respected and taken seriously and that helped me shed that baggage.

What advice would you give to budding art students and anyone thinking of doing a PhD?

I can only talk from my own experiences and I worked harder than I've ever worked before and I tried to be the best I could be. I trusted my supervisors and they repaid that trust with a commitment to support my practice and guide my progress. PhDs test you in ways that you may not have expected and there are times when you will question whether you can keep going – be the best you can be and keep on keepin' on!

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