

'In His Own Little World', A Memorial Exhibition, 2009. John Martin Gallery.

'In His Own Little World' was an imaginary exhibition title created by Fred Yates for a painting sent to the gallery shortly before his death last July (p.63). It depicts an eager Yates crowd straight off a 1950's Manchester tram arriving at 38 Albemarle Street: first in line is a woman Fred would have described as 'fashionably dressed', swinging a blue handbag, beside her a mother pushing a pram whilst one old man in a flat cap points with his stick at one of Fred's train paintings in the window. Greeted by a curious face peering out from behind a net curtain and an unlikely instruction to 'Wipe Your Feet', the guests invited to Fred's fantasy show were some of those stock characters that had peopled so many of his paintings over the last 35 years, from Marazion and Blackpool, to Cap Ferrat and Nice.

'In His Own Little World' is a good starting point to assess the achievements of a brilliant artist and, perhaps more importantly, to begin the resistance to the inevitable tide of clichés and sentimentality that might otherwise overwhelm our understanding of this fiercely independent and highly complex man. Though solitary Fred Yates was not a recluse and never painted solely for himself. At heart he was a performer and a performer longs for an audience and a stage. Yet with no exhibition until his fifties and no applause other than the silent sale of a picture, he was constantly filled with anxieties about his effectiveness and therefore his ability as an artist. Any measure of artistic success (the exhibitions, critical acclaim, museum purchases, publications, auction records that for artists have to be a poor substitute for the applause of an adoring audience) arrived so late in his career that by then this deep sense of doubt had become ingrained into his personality and part of his daily routine. It was the fear of failure that drove Fred to paint every day for forty years, that kept him constantly on the move from England to France and village to village, that brought on the about-turns as a painter and the determination to improve his work and to 'ring the changes'. Success would have spoiled everything. It was why he would cover his ears if he had a good review or refuse to discuss the results of an exhibition; it was why he remained resolutely frugal in his ways and why he increasingly avoided private views. His art was driven by a desire for critical acclaim whilst simultaneously creating for himself a strategy whereby it remained forever elusive.

Towards the end of his life he seemed to be tiring of his unattainable artistic struggle and at eighty-five wrote of retirement to a nice cottage in Somerset. It coincided with what was to be his last exhibition in the gallery and we all hoped that his first return to England in three years might give him reason to visit the private view of in early June. He refused to say whether he would come or not; he said he would see how he felt, but at six fifteen on the opening day he coyly poked his head around the door of the gallery. There was a large crowd and for nearly three hours he talked to the visitors: old friends, collectors who had never met him and those who had; all ages, all backgrounds. Afterwards we sat together at Paddington station waiting for the last train to Somerset. He was exhausted but very happy and celebrated with a hot chocolate and two chocolate muffins. As always he was oblivious to any sales of paintings; he was simply pleased to have had the chance to talk to so many people who loved his work.

For most of his life Fred had forced himself to keep his growing audience at arm's length. He had pictured them only in his imagination, locking them up in the silent indifference of post-war Manchester. An audience who never believed he would make it as an artist and for whom he had devoted his life to prove them wrong. Those same old men in their caps and fashionable ladies in cloche hats did not enter his paintings willingly. Fred dragged them onto his stage. He wanted to demonstrate to them how he had escaped from the dull life of an insurance clerk, that he had made it as an artist, with a West End gallery, an idyllic life in Cornwall, the Riviera and Provence.

The optimism of his paintings was really a show of strength, a fantasy masking the real doubts that drove him onwards. Of course his family and friends and the Aunties who told

him he could never be an artist were absolutely right. In the 'Fifties, 'Sixties, and 'Seventies very few artists could survive by their work alone. If they made it, it was because they had private means, or taught, or were prepared to starve. In 1968, when Fred quit teaching at the age of 46 he was taking an enormous risk. With some small savings he bought a cottage in Fowey, but other than mowing lawns and little line drawings of people's houses, he had no income. As an artist the prospects were even worse: he had no reputation, no collectors, no exhibitions, no contacts and no recognizable style. All he had was a determination to survive and to learn his craft, and for that he was prepared to adopt an almost monastic existence, living in solitude, poverty and working constantly until he made a breakthrough.

This exhibition offers an outline of his career. It is not large enough to do more than scratch the surface of his incredible output, nor wide enough to encompass the giant sweeps that transformed his style in the last decade of his life. My relationship with Fred spans the full length of the seventeen years I have been at 38 Albemarle Street, beginning when I was 23 and he was 70. Consequently this exhibition cannot escape being a very personal account of his work. Through the generosity of so many of his collectors we have attempted to put together a show that fills gaps in the catalogues that have already been published. It begins with the seductive charms of Madame Wee Wee, a painting that I saw before I even met Fred, the magnificent Heaven Boat that was used for the opening exhibition of the gallery in 1992, and the Sailor's Return, the centrepiece of Fred's very first exhibition in 1976. The first period of his life in Provence is left out, but I have included some landscapes from La Motte. The exhibition finishes with some of the last paintings including the Crucifixion and one of the extraordinary late self-portraits that are amongst his greatest achievements.

I am hugely grateful to Tara Whelan and Karen Sanig who have started The Fred Yates Society which will care for his legacy, as well as to Janine Yates, Cathy Sayer, Francis Mallet, Alan Veale, Mary Flint, Peter Geiringer and Nancy Hall for all their help support and advice both with this exhibition and over all the hurdles that have presented themselves since Fred's death. However, before the curtain falls, I am sure Fred would like to offer one final bow of gratitude to the audience that he loved so much. The collectors, friends, fans, writers and admirers who visited his shows, who came up to him in the street to watch him work, the auction addicts who monitored his progress in the sales, the people who wrote to him, who asked for his autograph, who saw his work on the Antiques Roadshow, those who bought his work and those who met him on a train and asked for a catalogue. They were the audience he craved but only at the end of his life was he finally prepared to discover that they were no longer a fiction. It came in the last letter he wrote:

*I still feel a failure as an artist that hasn't quite made it, a man who hasn't the guts to 'go modern', but after the June show I know now that I have phantom followers who are becoming real. I know that because some actually kissed me and they love me.*

John Martin,

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