

Ken Currie: Protest Defeat And Victory – Revd Jonathan Evens



3 March 2019 • Share —

lence is to be found everywhere and at all times, even where people pretend that it does not exist. That is the argument made by Jacques Ellul, French philosopher, sociologist, lay theologian, professor, and noted Christian anarchist. Ellul argues that we must understand violence clearly if we are to know what we are doing when we damn it. Societies, like ours, that call themselves civilized are only camouflaged violence by explaining and justifying it and putting a good face on it. Economic relations and class relations are nothing more than examples of the masked violence that is found at all levels of society.

These striking works, Currie further extends the rich and varied reach of a Scottish Realism – JE

Ken Currie was the most overtly political of the New Glasgow Boys, students of Sandy Moffatt, who emerged from the Glasgow School of Art in the 1980s. While a student Currie discovered the socially committed realist painting of Otto Dix, George Grosz, and Diego Rivera and adapted this style in paintings, including the Glasgow History Mural on the ceiling of the People's Palace, which depicts scenes of working-class struggle and protest, defeat and victory. As he has explained, 'It was the first years of Margaret Thatcher's government ... A lot of people lost their jobs and ... this was something that had to be militantly fought.'



Ken Currie Flowers London

Currie began his career by documenting the masked violence of economic and class relations but increasingly came to view violence as a disease infecting society as a whole. His works explore the extent to which violence pervades society and reveal the extent to which we live in a world, as Ellul suggests, 'with a constant fear that violence will rear its ugly head and disrupt the peace we have managed to achieve.'

Images such as 'Large Examination', 'Gown' and 'The Executioner' inhabit the boundary between healthcare and torture in such a way that they are unsure on which side of the line they sit. The techniques of one can easily inform the other. 'Bird People (after JM)', 'Basking Shark', 'Black Backed Gull' depict the violence towards other creatures that have for centuries enabled human survival within a natural world in which man is red in tooth and claw. 'Down in the woods' is a literal depiction of Ellul's belief that we live in constant fear that violence will rear its ugly head and disrupt our peace. On either side of the central Kafkaesque image of a monstrous stag beetle attacked a defenseless man are other examples of the masked nature of violence within our society with scenes of hidden flagellation and beatings.

'Red Ground' is a figure whose face and torso are covered by a sheet of slogans. 'Blind Red' is a similarly covered figure with a wholly red face. 'Study (Orestes)' and 'Study (Clytemnestra)' are naked figures hidden by white sheets. Clytemnestra and Orestes are characters with insight to break free of cycles of violence and who thereby perpetuate them. Currie's sheet-covered figures are all of us who do not see before we continue the masked violence that is found at all levels of society.

Currie is constantly astonished at people who come in and look at the work and say, 'I can't look at that – that's horrifying, that's horrendous' who will then go and watch a crime drama that night, 'and there are people being – having their heads chopped off and strangled, and they'll sit and watch that with a cup of tea.' In Currie's work art retains its ability to shock by means of the realism with which Currie unmasks our propensity to violence whilst rigorously eschewing its potential to entertain.

Currie has left the nightmare scenes of unruly crowds to Peter Howson, his fellow New Glasgow Boy, while increasingly focusing his own work on staged small groups or sole figures chillingly combining chaos and calm. Occasionally, as in 'Down in the woods', he embraces the rural reality that was the *raison d'être* of Steven Campbell. His focus on small groups and individuals has also meant a greater space in his work for the rural Scottish experience over that of the urban. Rooting his practice firmly in the expressive Scottish figurative imagery that was the *mark* in trade of John Bellamy (Moffatt's friend and fellow Scottish Realist), Currie creates powerfully emotive equivalents in 'Basking Shark' to the gutted fish displayed in the manner of the Crucifixion as depicted in Bellamy's 'Allegory' and in 'Bird People (after JM)' to the fisherfolk who feature in 'Kinlochbervie' or 'Bethel'.

In these striking works, Currie further extends the rich and varied reach of a Scottish Realism which ruthlessly and relentlessly removes the many and varied masks we fashion for the violence which pervades our civilisation. Like Ellul, he does so in order to understand the laws of violence, as we need to know what we are doing when we damn violence.

1 Currie: Red Ground – Flowers, London Kingsland Road – until 27 April

FINE ART

The Carefully Choreographed Chaos of Ken Currie

3 July 2024

Charlotte Riordan



Ken Currie's 'The Cripples' (1984) and 'The Embattled City', offered in our 13 August auction of *Contemporary Art*, are complex, theatrical compositions in which Currie brings his newly honed directorial eye to illustrate his fascination with recording the reverberations of Europe's turbulent political history.

CONTEMPORARY ART

Explore our 13 August auction, taking place live in Edinburgh & online.

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The current work was executed on hand-made paper created by Ken Currie and his friend Keith McIntyre who shared a studio on East Campbell Street in Glasgow, opposite the famous Barrowland Ballroom. McIntyre utilised pulped hospital bed sheets as the base material for this paper which lends this gritty image an extra dimension.

Ken Currie's early work is celebrated as a remarkable, modern interpretation of 19th century history painting fused with the revolutionary dynamism of pivotal twentieth century artistic movements. Currie studied at the Glasgow School of Art in the late 1970s and early '80s. Living in a city in the grip of immense poverty and decay, ruptured by sectarian violence and in an era which was witnessing the rise of a 'New Right', he turned to the figurative tradition to address the sense of existential crisis and undercurrent of brutality he perceived around him.

Currie's urge to record this zeitgeist produced its greatest results when he simultaneously imbued his art with his passion for community engagement.



'It was only through contact with my tutor, Alexander Moffat, that my work did not descend into the most mindless kind of nihilism... his belief in the centrality of the European figurative tradition provided essential support, putting me, along with other students* in touch with the vital moments of

twentieth century painting... and that whole dynamic, revolutionary European culture that flourished between the wars.'

”

The Artist Comments



THE CRIPPLES - 1989

Signed and inscribed with title and dated 1989 verso, conte, pencil and charcoal

95cm x 163cm (37.5in x 64in)

[VIEW THE LOT](#)



THE EMBATTLED CITY - 1984

Signed and inscribed with title and dated 1984 verso, conte and charcoal on



paper

114cm x 93cm (44.75in x
36.5in)

VIEW THE LOT



1984, the year the two artworks offered here for sale were produced, was also the year he received a significant grant to make a film called 'Glasgow 1984' with a group of unemployed youth from the Cranhill Arts Project, using professional equipment. Currie was intensely engaged with filmmaking at this point, a medium which afforded him the perfect vehicle with which to produce community-engaged art. He had temporarily almost wholly abandoned painting at this point, finding filmmaking both hugely powerful but also an all-consuming endurance test. After the film was finally completed, he felt drawn to return to the looser medium of charcoal, "...retracing my steps stylistically to a time perhaps in my third year at art school".

In works such as 'The Cripples' (1984) and 'The Embattled City', the parallels with Weimar-era artists such as Backmann, Grosz, Dix and Kollwitz are clear to see. Visions of destruction, of war and annihilation, of malformity and insanity are shown unflinchingly. They are complex, theatrical compositions – a carefully choreographed chaos in which Currie brings his newly honed directorial eye to illustrate his fascination with recording the reverberations of Europe's turbulent political history, past and present.

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KEN CURRIE

By Darren Jones

Scottish artist Ken Currie emerged in the 1980s as one of four figurative painters dubbed the “New Glasgow Boys,” alongside Steven Campbell, Peter Howson, and Adrian Wiszniewski. He became known for his harrowing scenes of that city’s industrial street life, as well as images of bodily degradation which conveyed his concerns over political and civil deprivation. In this exhibition Currie presents 13 oil paintings that place his unsettling expressions of corporeal decay against the futility of status-seeking and narcissistic social ambition. Drawing on the courtly settings of Diego Velázquez and Francisco de Goya, with a lean toward the darkness of Goya’s later output, the most startling works are portraits of individuals who, while often traditionally dressed and posed, putrefy before the viewer. As these ghastly characters melt toward death others lie in funeral repose, having already crossed over. It is difficult to look at these lurid images, but harder to look away.

ON VIEW

Flowers Gallery

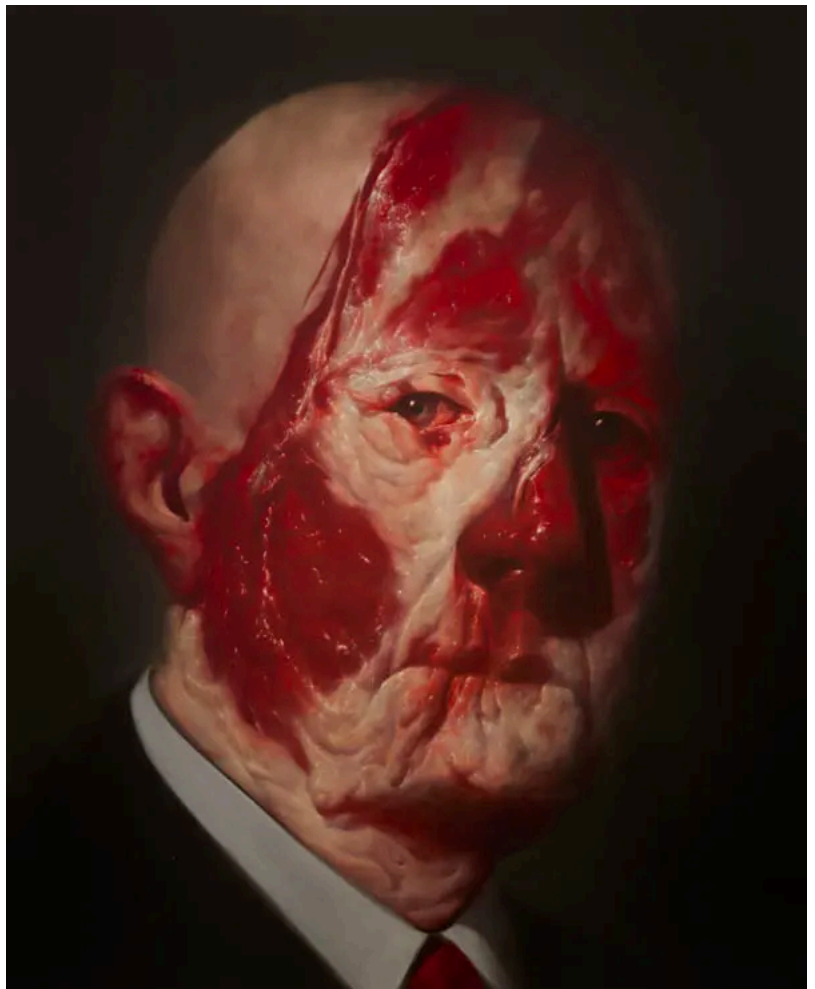
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“Transfigurations 1” (2013) is among the largest of Currie’s bloodier works. The scale, coupled with its central position upon entering the gallery, makes for a gruesome first impression. A man in a neat shirt and tie gazes steadily out at the viewer, the skin flayed off his face to reveal the glistening crimson gore beneath. Currie has painted the background dark and gloomy, focusing all the picture’s light on the subject, an approach Currie employs often in this exhibition. The juxtaposition between the sitter’s calm demeanor and his bodily demise is hideously alluring. Portraits are

intended to preserve and aggrandize and this one fulfills that role, except it is the human’s destruction that is preserved, not his living perpetuity.



Ken Currie, "Transfigurations 1," 2013. Oil on linen, 66 1/8 × 54 1/8".
Courtesy of the artist and Flowers, London/New York.

“Transfigurations 1,” along with three smaller portraits in the same vein—including the wickedly titled “General Franco as a Gigot of Lamb” (2012) recall the work of Francis Bacon, a steadfast influence on Currie. Bacon’s “Figure with Meat” (1954), which was based on Velázquez’s portrait of Pope Innocent X, also depicts a disintegrating individual. There is a certain trajectory that begins with Velázquez’s opulent preservation of the papacy’s glory, passes through Bacon’s violent expression of corruption and decay, and culminates in Currie’s cadaverous figures, where the question of exaltation is turned towards deteriorating muscle fibers and tissue, exposing our inevitable physical dissolution that no constructed likeness can prevent.

Elsewhere, three large paintings show attempts at ceremonial and bodily preservation after death. In “Effigy” (2013), a pope, swathed in elaborate

costume of silk, fur, and ruby slippers, lies prostrate on luxurious red pillows, his serene face somewhere between flesh and mask. This sumptuous portrait hints that the office of the Holy See could be viewed as an embodiment of power, extravagance, and self-ennoblement, utilized here to highlight our delusive pursuits of cultural prestige and even immortality. This vicar of Christ is conserved for posterity, but only as the richly decorated husk of a perishable man.

“Plaster the Death” and “Study (Plaster Setting)” (both 2012), depict naked male bodies—perhaps the same Pope—laid out on a table, wearing a death mask. “Plaster the Death” includes a mourning woman standing at the man’s slippered feet and a pair of ghostly hands or gloves resting on a pot below his head. The scene is reflected in a large mirror that is part of the expensive yet austere environment. In “Study (Plaster Setting)” the room is blackened, showing only the body, the drapes of the table, and wax dripping from the head into a bucket. Again, a mysterious hand hovers in the dark nearby. In these two works the light is ghoulish, the flesh grey, and the newly formed masks seem only to reflect the hopelessness of trying to retain the essence of life when it has gone.

Back in the land of the living, an optically complex painting, “The Viewing” (2013) makes for an incisive critique on contemporary displays of pretension and mass visibility. Dressed for a formal gathering, foreground figures with their backs to us look at a painting in which further individuals stare directly out at us, seemingly more conscious of those who would observe them than those who make up their company. The figures’ outfits may be dated, but the work’s sentiment is oddly familiar. Today, jockeying for attention online is a ubiquitous part of how we define ourselves. And it is a constant effort due to the speed at which a photograph slips down the newsfeed. Perhaps the desire to show an audience that we exist, that we matter, is an unrelenting aspect of being human? Even the background characters in the painting within this painting seem to strain for their share of attention. But what is everyone looking at? Many are facing the viewer, but if the title of the work is read as a reference to a funeral wake, then they may be gazing upon the deceased. The viewer of “The Viewing” then stands in for the deceased. It is a painting that brings together many threads of the exhibition, brilliantly blurring the line between the observer and the observed.

Art

New Ken Currie exhibition opens at Glasgow Print Studio

By John Devlin



Published 6th Oct 2022, 16:47 BST

Glasgow Print Studio is pleased to present Chunnacas na mairbh beo (The Dead Have Been Seen Alive), an exhibition of new monoprints by renowned Scottish artist Ken Currie

Glasgow Print Studio First Floor Gallery

Ken Currie: Chunnacas na mairbh beo (The Dead Have Been Seen Alive)

Exhibition runs: 07 October - 26 November 2022



Portrait of Ken Currie at his solo exhibition. Ken Currie: Chunnacas na mairbh beo (The Dead Have Been Seen Alive)

The title of the exhibition is taken from Sorley MacLean's 'Hallaig', which is a poetic response to the Clearances on the Isle of Raasay. It is a mysterious and haunting line which is open to speculation and has a certain poetic evocation.

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Seven years since his last solo exhibition at Glasgow Print Studio, Ken Currie has been developing this new body of work ever since. Inspired and propelled by the printmaking techniques which Currie studied and began to master in 2015, this exhibition is composed of a series of figures influenced by Egyptian funerary portraits from AD 40-250 .

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Frozen in time like photographs, these ancient and remarkable images are unique, extraordinarily beautiful artefacts which have, for many years, fascinated and haunted Currie. Created as portraits of the deceased, funerary portraits provide us with various socio-economic details about the individual depicted, whilst helping to uncover facets of early Egyptian culture, especially in relation to the empire's trade, economic, and social structure.

Here, Currie invites the viewer to draw their own conclusions about who the figures in his monoprints might be, what their backgrounds are, and how they came to be depicted here.



Portrait of Ken Currie at his solo exhibition. Ken Currie: Chunnacas na mairbh beo (The Dead Have Been Seen Alive)

Like the funerary portraits of 50 AD, the heads and figures in Currie's monoprints appear ghostly and distressed. Currie attempts to achieve this through the particular technique he has employed. Currie paints quickly and broadly onto a copper plate, building up layers onto his paper, with each layer taking several weeks to dry. The first print (or 'pull' in printmaking terms) is usually disregarded or scrapped, it is the second or third in which he achieves the desired effect, these are known as 'ghosts'.

“I allow a maximum of three imprints from one plate - an initial imprint, a ghost, or cognate, and a second ghost. These are usually imprinted on grounds that have been built up over a period of weeks in different layers. Each imprint can be worked on and manipulated after printing but only up to a point as too much of this will make it cease to be a monotype and more like a painting.

Knowing when to stop can be difficult. The important thing is that after the three imprints are taken the painted image on the plate is wiped away with turps so it ceases to exist except as a series of unique imprints on paper. The failure rate is very high but when it all comes together the results can be wonderful."



Art

● This article is more than 7 years old

Review

Ken Currie: Rictus review - grisly art games with a serious moral purpose

★★★★☆

Flowers Gallery, London

True shock value is rare these days, but these gruesome yet skilled paintings of Hiroshima victims and macabre medical experiments will give you the shudders



Jonathan Jones

Wed 8 Nov 2017 16.44 GMT

It is getting hard for artists to shock anyone. Provocateurs such as Jake and Dinos Chapman seem sadly adrift in today's deeply strange world when a [sculpture of a suicide vest](#) elicits only a brief shrug among the much more surreal stuff reality keeps chucking at us. Ken Currie deserves credit for breaking through this moribund mood with grotesque new paintings that genuinely nauseate. You'd have to be a stone to see these without a few shudders, and anyone with a weak stomach should avoid them like the plague - and I mean a plague that causes bubbling pustules bursting out of dead flesh.

Two colossal canvases, each more than four metres wide, face each other across a fairly small space. The *Flensers* (2016) is a nightmarish vision of the whaling industry 100 years ago, except it is more timeless than that. Flensing is the bloody work of skinning and gutting a whale to get at its commercially valuable blubber. Gigantic pink and purple intestines swarm like foul invertebrate creatures at the centre of Currie's painting, while workers with horribly sharp and bizarrely shaped (but authentic) flensing tools go about their gruesome task. Vast strips of flayed whale skin, showing marbled red and white insides, hang above the meaty labourers as they wade among shiny guts.



📷 The Flensers, 2016. Photograph: Ken Currie/Courtesy of Flowers Gallery London and New York

This is in no sense a realist painting. One man's legs have turned into tentacles as if infected by the snaky intestines. A huge dead eye looks more like a shark's than that of a whale. The space created by the theatrical tableau of suspended skin is eerily artificial, the poses of the flensers exaggeratedly formal. They stand heroically like people in an 18th-century history painting by Jacques-Louis David or [Benjamin West](#). In the distance, a shadowy row of factory sheds is the most oddly haunting aspect of the entire morbid vision.

■ *Patients and doctors enact rituals that have little to do with real healing*

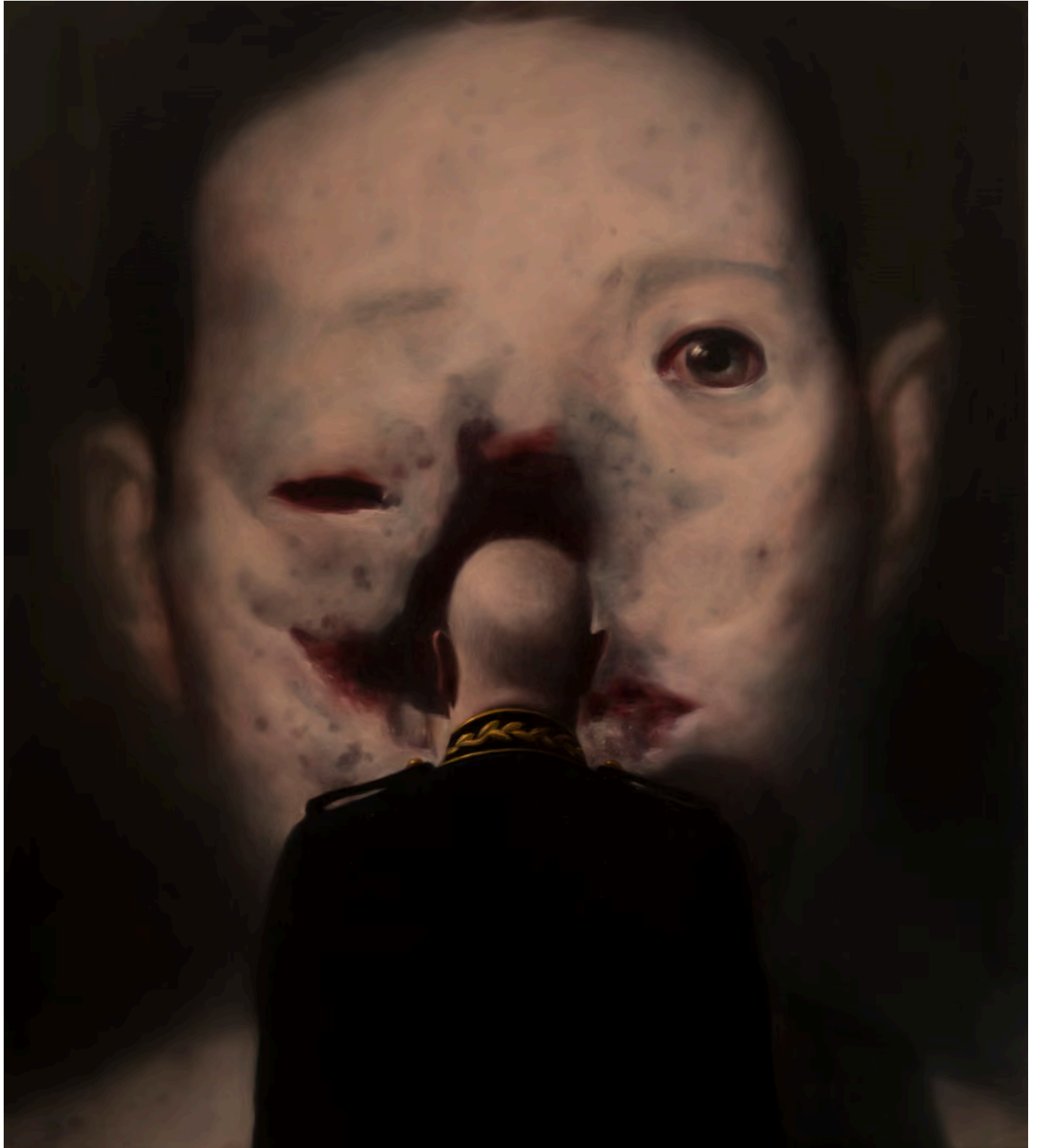
Krankenhaus (2016) on the facing wall is, if anything, even more horrific. In a nightmare version of a first world war hospital, patients and doctors enact rituals that have little to do with real healing. A man with an antique prosthetic arm is cutting up meat. A doctor looks into the mouth of a naked male patient, who has sagging female breasts like the “withered dugs” of Tiresias in TS Eliot’s [The Waste Land](#), using a spoon and candle to light his investigation. The face of the doctor is compassionate and sensitive, his gaze caringly intent, until you start to wonder how he is actually helping his patient - or victim. Then you find yourself staring at a big, dangerous pair of scissors in his pocket.



📷 Krankenhaus, 2016. Photograph: Ken Currie/Courtesy of Flowers Gallery London and New York.

Another medic is forcing a red rubber tube into a prone patient's mouth. The tube is suspended from the ceiling; following it along the length of the picture, you discover it originates from the patient's genitals. He is being force fed his own effluents. Meanwhile a nurse conducts a concert by a blind violinist and a facially injured man who plays the flute from a hole where his mouth should be.

This hospital is not making anyone well. It is monstrously industrialising sickness. It might have been painted by the early 20th-century German artists Max Beckmann or [Otto Dix](#) if they had seen the films of David Lynch. What makes it and *The Flensers* truly horrible, however, is their perverse beauty. Currie is a very skilled painter in an old-fashioned way. Details of painterly excellence in *Krankenhaus* catch the eye: the way he paints hair standing on end made my hair stand on end. Most unexpectedly of all, the whaleskin draperies in *The Flensers* are clearly inspired by a pink piece of cloth that hangs up in Titian's masterpiece [Diana and Actaeon](#).



📷 'A blast of anger at the masters of war' ... Rictus, 2015. Photograph: Ken Currie/Courtesy of Flowers Gallery London and New York

So what's it all about? Is this veteran painter, whose expressionism first made him known in the 1980s as one of the "New Glasgow Boys", merely playing grisly aesthetic games? A third monumental canvas that hangs on an end wall makes clear the serious moral purpose of his apparent sensationalism.

Currie has painted the tragically damaged face of a victim of the [Hiroshima bomb](#) on a gargantuan scale, so big and pale and torn it is hard to look at. Looking at it, however, is a uniformed general who stands with his back to us, gazing close up at what a nuclear war does to the survivors. It is a blast of anger at the masters of war who play with our world as if it were their little toy. This is what Currie would like to do: make a warmonger stand up close to see the real face of his handiwork.

This furious, vomiting scream of a show proves that art can speak to our vile days after all, if it has brains, imagination and passion.

[Ken Currie: Rictus](#) is at Flowers Gallery, London, until 9 December.

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Major artwork *Unknown Man* secured for the people of Scotland



Ken Currie's *Unknown Man*, a portrait of the preeminent forensic anthropologist, Professor Dame Sue Black, has been acquired by the National Galleries of Scotland.

This arresting portrait has been on long loan to the gallery since 2021 but has now been secured for the nation permanently. This acquisition ensures the continued en-

joyment of this poignant work, currently available to view for free at the Portrait gallery.

Unknown Man depicts one of the most distinguished, internationally famous contemporary Scots, Professor Black. Currie's large-scale painting shows her in surgical robes standing behind the covered remains of a body.



The idea for the portrait grew when Currie and Professor Black met during a BBC Radio 4 discussion on the relationship between art and anatomy.

Currie later visited the Centre for Anatomy and Human Identification at the University of Dundee, where Professor Black was Director. The artist was so moved by the work he encountered there that he asked her to sit for a portrait.

The title *Unknown Man* was given by Currie and relates to the essential aim of a forensic anthropologist – to identify remains and restore the identity of the deceased – while also referencing the covered body depicted in the painting.



Currie bestows Professor Black with the qualities of impassivity and sternness in his portrait. She stands, stock still and full-face, arms spread equally, holding the trolley before her. Professor Black wears dull blue scrubs and before her, under the dark green shroud, is stretched the most minimal or rudimentary indication of the corpse – which could be said to be the attribute of her profession.

Artist Ken Currie (born 1960) is renowned for his unsettling portrayal of the human figure, often large-scale, dramatic canvasses of startling originality.

His work prompts powerful responses as he deals with difficult, profound themes through figurative paintings which are carefully considered and painstakingly executed.

Currie's subjects often emerge from darkness, suggesting fearful dramas which are all the more disturbing because so much is suggested but not explicitly articulated.

Currie also has another much-loved work in the national collection, *Three Oncologists*. This 2002 painting depicts three professors who were leading innovators in cancer research at the University of Dundee and its affiliated teaching hospital, Ninewells.

It shows the three, emerging from the darkness as modern-day heroes, battling on our behalf on the front line between life and death. Currie regards *Unknown Man* as being connected to *Three Oncologists*, and a progression from this work.

With both works currently on display in *The Modern Portrait* exhibition, visitors have a special opportunity to experience both in the same space. *Unknown Man* gives rise to strong feelings and emotions. Professor Black had a visibly emotional reaction when she saw the painting for the first time in 2021.

Sir John Leighton, Director-General of the National Galleries of Scotland said: “We are delighted to have acquired this powerful and moving work which has already generated a lot of interest and comment from our visitors.

“The Portrait gallery provides the perfect setting for this outstanding painting which now has a permanent home alongside other images of pioneers in the fields of science, sport and the arts.”



Professor Sue Black, said: “It was such a wonderful experience to work with Ken and I am so grateful that the portrait has been so well received even if it is a bit scary!

“I feel honoured that this has been acquired by the National Galleries of Scotland and secured for the nation permanently. It all feels more than a little surreal.”

Ken Currie, said: “I am delighted that Unknown Man has been acquired by the National Galleries of Scotland and will continue to hang in the Portrait gallery where it will hopefully inspire a new generation of young women to follow in the illustrious footsteps of Sue Black.”



Jenny Waldman, Director of Art Fund, said: “I’m so pleased that Art Fund has been able to support the National Galleries of Scotland to acquire this important painting.

“I am sure that it will continue to delight and inspire visitors to the Portrait gallery for many years to come.”

📅 08/12/2023 👤 davepickering 📁 city centre, North Edinburgh News 🖌️ artist Ken Currie, National Galleries of Scotland, portrait, Portrait Gallery, Professor Sue Black, Unknown Man



"It's mortality that interests me, the fact that we are capable of dying." Ken Currie in 2016. Image: Antonio Parente, courtesy Flowers Gallery

From the May 2024 issue

PEOPLE

Ken Currie: As an artist, it's not for me to proselytise

With a new portrait recently acquired by the national galleries in Edinburgh, the Scottish painter talks mortality, death—and why he moved away from overtly political art

By David McAllister

March 11, 2024

For an artist known for his paintings of ethereal surgeons, mutilated faces, slabs of butcher's meat and bloodied or otherwise disfigured people, Ken Currie possesses an alarmingly cheerful demeanour. I'm surprised to find that this sharply dressed man in a black zip-up pullover and a white mandarin-collar shirt is the same person who—according to his recently published studio journals—once pondered that "Nature can be brutally, stomach churningly hideous".

True to expectations, however, we've barely taken our seats in the library of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery before Currie is pointing to a glass display of death masks close by. "See that emaciated one on the bottom row?" he says. "That's the 'Unknown Man' from centuries ago. I wanted to put him in my portrait of Sue Black, looking back at her, but it got too complicated."

In the finished portrait of Black—the forensic anthropologist who played a crucial role identifying the victims of war crimes in Kosovo—the man in question has been turned into an ominous cadaver

covered by a green sheet. Black looms over the cadaver, looking straight at us with bloodshot eyes. The title of the work remains *Unknown Man*. Recently acquired from Flowers Gallery, it sits **just a few rooms away from us**.

Currie's path could have been very different. His entry into art wasn't from traipsing about galleries like this one—he looks at me somewhat wryly at the suggestion—but through prog rock and sci-fi, “the way a lot of other kids from my background got into art.” His father, a welder, would have preferred his son to follow him into engineering. But Currie “wasn't very academically gifted,” he says, and so instead he opted for the “anarchic” Glasgow School of Art.

His earliest work, in the 1980s, was heavily political. As a student with “typical Scottish leftist views” who was involved in the Communist party, he painted giant murals showcasing the glory of steelworkers and shipbuilders. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, he became less at ease with this overly didactic approach—“it's not for me to proselytise”—and turned to more philosophical concerns, many of which hover close to death.

“I don't really think my work is *about* death,” he counters. “It's mortality that interests me, the fact that we are *capable* of dying... It's the fact that we are mortal, and the implications that has for the way we live our lives.” Is that why he is so often drawn to portraiture? “One of the great things about portraiture is that these people have been painted because they're ‘pillars of society’,” Currie says. “But the feeling I get when I look at them is that they are transient creatures... They'll go the same way as all the criminals and all the other people they've spent their whole lives trying to avoid.”

It's only as we make to leave the library that I realise somebody has been watching us.

“I just wanted to say it has been an enormous privilege invigilating your work,” says a gallery attendant. “I have experienced some of the most incredible responses from the public.” She recalls one woman who burst into tears before Currie's portrait of Black; a priest declaring he will write a sermon about her; and one man who screamed “Holy fuck!” the moment he stepped in the room.

“That wasn't planned by the way,” Currie says, smiling like a big kid, as we continue down the stairs.

After such a glowing endorsement, I have to go see the works for myself.

Leaving Currie to rejoin his family, I head over to the room where *Unknown Man* and another of his works, *Three Oncologists*, are hanging. As I stare up into Black's bloodshot eyes, I remember one of Currie's journal entries, about the time she invited him to the anatomy centre at the University of Dundee. "Sue Black asked me to hold the hand of the cadaver. It was supple, cold, with a slight greasiness. It reminded me of handling a chicken prior to cooking." Holy fuck, indeed.

LIFESTYLE | ARTS

Scottish Artist Ken Currie On His First Solo Exhibition In Asia

By Oliver Giles

Apr 16, 2021



COVER Painter Ken Currie in his studio in Glasgow (Photo: eremy Sutton-Hibbert/Getty Images)

Ken Currie's dark, moody paintings explore the vulnerability of the human body. They



Tatler



Last spring, as [Covid-19](#) swept into the [UK](#), painter [Ken Currie](#) had a crisis.

“I was speaking to a lot of artists and people were saying, ‘What’s the point of art? Why are we doing this?’ It seemed like an indulgence to be painting when people are dying all around you,” Currie, 61, says in his Scottish burr, speaking from his studio in Glasgow. “It really got to me, but then I thought, ‘Artists from the past have dealt with famine, war, plague—if I can’t do it, then I’m not a proper artist.’ 2020 ended up being one of the most productive years I’ve ever had.”

Some of Currie’s new works are now on show in *Interregnum* at [Flowers Gallery](#) in Hong Kong, his first solo exhibition in Asia, which runs until May 29. Currie painted several of them in his garden shed, where he worked after his cavernous main studio was temporarily closed due to the [pandemic](#). “I went from 1,000 sq ft to 120 sq ft, so I had to start working on much smaller pieces,” says Currie, whose canvases are often more than two metres tall and can stretch to more than six metres wide. His new works are as small as 45.5 cm by 61 cm, but they still investigate many of the same big, dark ideas that made Currie’s name: illness, [death](#) and decay.

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ABOVE "Liquidator"

(2020), one of Ken Currie's

new paintings for his exhibition at Flowers

Gallery in Hong Kong (Image: Courtesy of Ken Currie and Flowers Gallery)

Currie's visceral depictions of sickness and surgery have brought him both acclaim and censure. He shot to fame in the 1980s as one of the New Glasgow Boys, a group of figurative painters who investigated the city's slide from an industrial powerhouse to one of the most deprived areas of western [Europe](#), and how that painful decline affected its residents. "You're talking about entire communities that haven't had work for decades," say Currie.

"Unemployment, poverty, terrible housing problems—it all has an effect inside people. It transmits itself through ill health. Glasgow has some of the worst health outcomes of any industrialised city in the world. People are scientifically analysing it: it's called the Glasgow

In the Nineties, Currie started looking more closely at physical injuries, driven in part by his horror at the Yugoslav Wars unfolding in eastern Europe. He began painting grisly paintings of disfigured faces and bodies, and sometimes open wounds. Currie's star continued to rise in the art community—his paintings are now in the collections of [Tate](#) in the UK, the [Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art](#) and the [New York Public Library](#), among others—and his work was bought by major collectors, including David Bowie. But his macabre subject matter repulsed some of the public.

"I want my work to hover in that area between beauty and horror," says Currie. "People often see something and say, 'Oh my God, that's disgusting', but then have this strong desire to look as well. I like to operate in that liminal zone."

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ABOVE "Interregnum" (2020) (Image: Courtesy of Ken Currie and Flowers Gallery)

Currie became interested in surgery when he was commissioned by the [Scottish National Portrait Gallery \(SNPG\)](#) to paint a group of the country's leading cancer specialists. That haunting [portrait](#), *Three Oncologists*, which features a trio of doctors floating ghost-like against a black background, was unveiled to huge acclaim in 2002. It remains one of the most popular works in the museum's collection.

"*Three Oncologists* is a work of great dramatic impact," says Julie Lawson, chief curator at the SNPG. "Their faces are distorted as if they have been physically marked by the unimaginable things they have confronted. And they look directly at us, so we are disconcerted and intimidated. It is not a conventional portrait in any sense. Currie is not concerned with accurate likeness, or with the individual as such. It is what these men of science do, their engagement in a life and death battle with a terrifying disease, that makes them heroic and that interests him."

The piece is often cited by other artists as an inspiration. "I was recently speaking to Charlie Schaffer, winner of the prestigious BP Portrait Award in 2019, who told me that it was seeing *Three Oncologists* that made him decide to become a painter," says Lawson. "All of Currie's work is essentially humanistic. There is at the heart of his work a compassion."

Now, as a [pandemic](#) ravages the world, Currie's interest in the vulnerability of the human body feels more prescient and relevant than ever.

See also: [13 Experts Weigh In On The Future Of Arts And Culture After The Pandemic](#)



ABOVE "Chinese Gloves" (2020) (Image: Courtesy of Ken Currie and Flowers Gallery)

"Maybe I should say I told you so, I warned you," says Currie, laughing. "What the pandemic has done is expose the fragility of the human body in a shocking and unprecedented way. I think a lot of people have never given it a minute's thought in their lives. I've been aware of it for a long time, not because I have any particularly prophetic insights, I'm not suggesting that for a second. I have just always held in my mind that we are very fragile."

But Currie admits that the crisis has made him think twice about what to include in his new paintings. "Now is not the time to be banging on about death," he says. "I've been trying not to be too brutal. But the notion of vulnerability, the vulnerability of the flesh, that's something I

In his new pieces on show in Hong Kong, Currie has stepped away from portraiture and focused instead on objects. “I’ve chosen items that have a very close association with the body, like gloves,” he says. Elbow-length rubber gloves are the subject of two new works: in the first, they’re worn by a mysterious figure whose face is cut off by the top of the canvas. In the other, the gloves are pinned to a wall, stained with a repellent green slime. Currie became interested in gloves like these after wearing them for an etching workshop, but he acknowledges that there is plenty gallery-goers can read into his paintings of them, especially after a year in which people have become hyper-aware of cleanliness and the germs on our hands.

“Marcel Duchamp used to say that the artist only makes 50 per cent of the work and the viewer makes the other 50 per cent,” says Currie. “Viewers complete the work by looking at it and making connections in their own minds.

See also: [Art From Death: Taxidermist Morly Tse Proves Preserved Insects Can Make Beautiful Art](#)



ABOVE "Life Cast" (2020) (Image: Courtesy of Ken Currie and Flowers Gallery)

Another piece in the Hong Kong show features a glowing, straitjacket-like object that Currie explains is a full-body cast for a child. The idea for this work began years ago, when Currie

they had a plaster cast from a footballer who broke his leg during an important, cup-winning match, but kept playing through the pain. After the footballer's leg had healed, the museum took his cast and preserved it as a precious object.

That strange image of bandage-as-treasure stuck in Currie's mind until last year, when he stumbled across another surprising plaster cast. "I often look at medical textbooks and I saw this drawing of an all-over body cast for a child," says Currie. "It looked like the child would be imprisoned in this thing, and there is something horrific about the idea of imprisoning a child. But those two things came together in my mind: this child's cast, then the idea of presenting the cast on a little platform."

Like many of the subjects of Currie's paintings, whether objects or people, the cast is positioned in the centre of the canvas against a dark, inky background, a style he developed while studying surgeons for *Three Oncologists*. "In an operating theatre, there's darkness all around and a spotlit area," he says. "Prior to that experience, I had been making a lot of work with very dark backgrounds, but it wasn't until I went into theatre that I thought, 'That's what I'm going for'. The idea of something emerging out of darkness. It has a slightly theatrical element to it."

Other pieces in the Hong Kong show have also been inspired by Currie's visits to the Hebrides and the dramatic, mountainous Scottish Highlands. "I've been travelling to the north of Scotland maybe two or three times a year for the past 30 years," he says. "Last year was the very first year I couldn't go, and it was extremely painful not to."

See also: [South Korean Artist Lee Bul On Her Homecoming Exhibition At The Seoul Museum Of Art](#)



ABOVE *Revenant-The Three Sisters-Plague Finger* (2020) by Ken Currie, which is more than two metres tall and five metres wide (Image: Courtesy of Ken Currie and Flowers Gallery)

One canvas features a child in a full-body wetsuit, zipped up to the eyes as protection against the freezing North Sea, clutching a jellyfish. Another, *Revenant-The Three Sisters-Plague Finger*, stars three fisherwomen flanked by two strange figures. The latter work is so large—two metres tall and five metres wide—that it is too big for Flowers Gallery in Hong Kong, so is being exhibited online.

“I had this idea of three women standing with a seascape behind them,” says Currie. “I was thinking of the herring industry from way back, when fish would be landed in harbours in Scotland and rows of women would be standing by the water, gutting the fish and putting them into barrels for salting.” Currie also says he was thinking of the three witches in *Macbeth*, which is nicknamed “The Scottish Play”.

But, even in this instance, when he was first inspired by history and [literature](#), Currie found himself thinking about the body and surgery. “It’s like there’s a large fish or sea creature in the boat and they’re about to operate on it. And there’s three of them, so they do look a bit like the oncologists,” he says.

Like everyone else, Currie is desperate for the pandemic to end. He is dreaming of returning to the Scottish wilderness and the remote island communities that he misses, but he hopes people won’t rush to forget what humanity has lived through over the past year, and what it has taught us. “We are fragile, we are vulnerable, we are not immortal,” he says. “And, in a funny

precious they are. We continue to make art and we continue to do positive things for each other, in spite of the fact that we know that sometimes human life is hanging by a thread.”

See also: [The Woman And The Sea: Female Free Divers Take Conservation To New Depths](#)

Ken Currie: Interregnum runs until May 29 at Flowers Gallery, Hong Kong.

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By Kristine Fonacier

Jul 24, 2025



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Interview: Ken Currie on ‘the terror’ of mortality

By SUSAN MANSFIELD



Published 20th Jul 2013, 17:33 BST

Ahead of his first exhibition in Scotland for 13 years, Ken Currie tells Susan Mansfield how ‘the terror’ of mortality informs his work

I get a shock when I meet Ken Currie. I’ve been looking at the paintings for his show at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery. Many feature the same figure, balding, slight paunch, questioning eyes. He looks at us furtively over his shoulder; in one case, stares up from the mortuary slab. But I didn’t expect to meet him in the flesh.



Ken Currie in his Glasgow studio: □I□m on the verge of giving up every day□. Picture: Phil Wilkinson

“Yeah, there is a resemblance,” Currie says, thoughtfully, admitting me to his **Glasgow** studio, a quiet, airy space with soft, grey light from roof windows. “I think it’s because I’m the only person here. I don’t work with models, so if I’m looking for people in particular situations or poses, the most obvious person to use is me.”

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And that’s that. Currie makes no secret of disliking interviews, though he’s no stranger to them. He was thrust into the spotlight in his early twenties as one of the forthright band of young figurative painters known as the New Glasgow Boys. For a few years in the late 1980s, they rode the zeitgeist, conquering Glasgow,

London, **New York**. “Back then I could talk for ever about what I was doing. As I get older I find it increasingly difficult to talk about my work.”

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With the benefit of hindsight, he says, it all seemed “ridiculously premature”. “I see now that I had a long developmental road ahead of me. The good thing about all that was that the focus of attention didn’t last very long. It had all simmered down by about 1989 and I was able to retreat from that intense glare and develop what I’m doing. It’s only been in the last ten years or so that I’ve felt I’m beginning to get to grips with what it is I’m trying to do.”

Of his New Glasgow Boys peers, Currie has done most to avoid the spotlight. Peter Howson’s fall and rise has been widely documented in the media. Adrian Wiszniewski famously – and publicly – gave up painting, only to take it up again a few years later. Steven Campbell enjoyed a period of prolific creativity before his untimely death in 2007. Currie, however, hunkered down, kept quiet and kept painting. He continued to show with his gallery, Flowers, in London and New York, but has shown little in **Scotland**. This summer’s exhibition is his first solo show on home turf for 13 years.

Currie grew up in Barrhead and graduated from Glasgow School of Art in 1983. His best known early works were large-scale crowd scenes, vibrant and violent, usually politically charged. As the glare of the spotlight retreated, his paintings became quieter, focused on smaller groups, single figures. He considered abstraction and rejected it. He continued to be fascinated by “politics, history, those kind of things that artists aren’t meant to be interested in”. In conversation, he is serious, opinionated, cerebral, with an undercurrent of dark humour. He loves irony.

He has painted a handful of portraits, including the Three Oncologists, which has become one of the most iconic contemporary works in the SNPG collection. But, like his idol, Francis Bacon, he prefers not to work from life. He painted the cancer specialists after watching them at work in the operating theatre and having a life mask made of each man's face. "Even as student, I had a complete abhorrence of the life room, I couldn't stand this idea of doing mechanical recording of a figure in front of me, it felt like a complete abnegation of the ability to think, to use your imagination."

In recent years, he has developed a profound interest in the body, physical and metaphorical. He says he is "distracting himself" from the up and coming SNPG show by working on two large-scale faces, hanging on the back wall of the long room. One has a black eye, the other raw patches of skin, but whether ravaged by violence or illness or just by life itself, he isn't saying.

Paintings must speak for themselves. Nothing – not even the views of the artist – should disturb the encounter between viewer and work. Currie once destroyed a painting after someone said too definitely that it was about the banking crisis. "The minute someone can pin something down, the painting dies a death. It would really upset me if people came out of the exhibition saying 'I know what all that was about'. They should come out and say: 'What was all that about?' because that means they are continuing to think. I don't want to produce easy images. I want to produce paintings that have that impact on people. Paintings can be terrifying in all sorts of ways, but the worst thing is for paintings to be ignored."

In 2011, he presented a new body of work at Flowers which he called 'Immortality'. Timeless but prescient, they were paintings that spoke of the trappings of power, sartorially dressed men and vapid women, clinging to wealth, fame or class. Currie was dissecting what portraiture does with the same unflinching attention he pays to all his subjects. The title is, of course, ironic. The powerful think that they can cheat death. The laugh of it is, they can't.

The new work follows on from that, but the tone is different. These pictures don't try to deny mortality, they stare it in the face: the royally dressed figure, lying in state, like one of Velasquez's popes; the man on the slab while a death mask is being made; the man making the death mask, furtively glancing up towards the viewer. Several feature mirrors, doubles, doppelgangers: these are paintings made to be shown in the city of Hogg and Stevenson. "If it's about anything, it's about a meditation on the nature of what portraits are, and an even deeper question about the nature of the self. What are we exactly? When you look in the mirror, is that you? What is you? What is a person?"

The guiding spirit of the show is Velasquez ("For years and years I thought he was one of these dreadful court painters, then the scales fell from my eyes and I saw that he was god –it's been worship ever since!") with a dose of Samuel Beckett (think of those lonely figures articulating their own isolation on a dark stage). It is mature work, a marriage of content and technique which takes many years to master. If, that is, you ever really master it.

"Every single day it's like the mist is continuously clearing on some peak, you think you've got to the top and then another peak appears," says Currie. "And it just goes on and on and on like that, until you drop dead." He laughs without mirth, and it's hard to tell how ironic he's being.

Mortality has always interested him but now, in his early fifties, it is "a bit of a terror". "Because a certain point comes in your life when you do actually see that there is an end. I think it does make the creative process more intense. You feel time slipping, and so you think 'I've got to try and make work that I'm pleased with,' which is an illusory thing, because you're never going to be happy with what you're doing."

“I think that’s the way it has always been for most artists – permanent dissatisfaction, permanent despair. The last couple of sentences in Beckett’s trilogy is ‘I can’t go on. I’ll go on.’ That’s exactly what it’s like. I’m on the verge of giving up every day. Every day, I think, I can’t do this, I’m finished with this whole art thing, it’s crazy, it’s going to kill me, I can’t do it any more. And then the next day you come in and think, ‘God, that’s really interesting the way the paint delineates that eye.’ And you go on.”

Ken Currie: New Work is at Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh, today to 8 September

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Ken Currie, Kehinde Wiley, Susie Hamilton Three Exhibitions About Communities – Revd Jonathan Evens



22 October 2024 • [Share](#) —

The work of Ken Currie, Kehinde Wiley and Susie Hamilton can be seen currently in central London. Each knows the communities they paint intimately and create insightful figurative work as a result.



Ken Currie, *The Crossing I*, 2023 ©Antonio Parente, courtesy of Flowers Gallery

Currie's latest collection, 'The Crossing', derives from his love for Scotland's Western and Hebridean islands. His love for these places, as revealed in the recently published book 'Ken Currie: Paintings and Writings', derives from the extent to which these "places are haunted with tragedy", making their vistas "all the more poignant, knowing the suffering and injustice that was meted out to the people that once lived there and were so brutally removed." As a result, he feels there "are ghosts everywhere" and "a deep melancholy about the place which sometimes stares back at you when you look for too long."

Under the influence of John Bellany, whom he views as "one of the great North European expressionist masters" and whose breath he has felt on the back of his neck in coming up with recent images, Currie has created for this exhibition a water world landscape and community that is reminiscent of the westernmost islands of the Outer Hebrides, featuring eroded rock towers emerging from a deep, black sea.

Water invades these canvases, streaming down as rain-like drips and runs, welling up from the sea that foams and sprays at their bases. Life in these islands is lived in boats – whether fishing or transporting people and livestock – and the people are primarily depicted in their boats – whether in their Sunday best or shrouded from the weather – in revelatory poses – whether of ritual or resilience. In their stark and unforgiving environment, this community endures a precarious existence without significant shelter and bending – whether in prayer or submission – to the forces that constantly swirl around them. These are weather-beaten images and communities – whether in the silt-stung, red-tinged eyes and skin of the people depicted or the sense of sea salt coagulating on the works themselves.

Currie has shared the following words about this new body of work from his studio journal: "People of the Sea. People on the Edge. People at Extremes. Contested Land. Crossing the Sea. Eviction. Evasion. Evacuation. Displacement. Dispossession. Destitution." Tom Normand, who edited 'Ken Currie: Paintings and Writings', describes Currie's motivation "that drives his art towards extremes" in terms of "the perfidy of those in power, the betrayal of truly human aspirations, the ruthless exploitation of subject peoples, the myriad destructive impulses of humanity and even the self-serving opportunism of the cultural nexus". This leads him to embrace "the wildness of a terrifying reality"; the "abiding primordial truth" of the "grotesque travesty in human life".

This motivation leads Currie, like Bellany, to paint with a life that "is unbound in gestural energy and passion", "putting his life on the line with every brushstroke"; "all-consuming and 'existential', rather than professional or calculating". With 'The Crossing', Currie is again following his instincts and not looking over his shoulder.



Kehinde Wiley
Portrait of Jouifsoif Esther Itoremikesi, 2024, Stephen Friedman Gallery

Kehinde Wiley's work responds to a similar narrative of injustice and exclusion by challenging and reinterpreting the narratives of art history. He celebrates people of colour by reconstructing the hierarchies and conventions of classical portraiture to include contemporary African American and African Diasporic men and women. With 'Fragments from the Treasure House of Darkness', his first solo exhibition in London in three years following 'The Prelude' at The National Gallery, he highlights the beauty, self-invention and magic of being young and hip on the streets of West Africa in works inspired by the historic miniature portraits that first appeared in European royal courts in the sixteenth century.

His sitters, whom he met on the same day at the University of Lagos, are a diverse cross-section of young people, some donning streetwear and others traditional West African dress. Wiley paints them in heroic poses that reference European and American portraiture through their sense of authority and grandeur. His lavishly detailed, floral backgrounds, an aspect of his work which connects back to explorations of his mother's thrift store as a child, entangle his subjects, setting beauty against beauty and creating a celebration of life through an emotive extravagance of pattern, texture and colour.



Susie Hamilton, *South Transept*, 2016, Oil on board, Paul Stolper Gallery, Copyright The Artist

Susie Hamilton goes further into distressing or abusing the canvas and image than either Currie or Wiley. Her work exists in the liminal space between abstraction and figuration, and she uses a range of methods to overwhelm or overload her image with threatening forces while revealing to us, through her resilient individuals found in wilderness spaces, the fundamental indomitability of the human spirit. For her, less is more, particularly in her magical ability, through a minimal number of brushstrokes, to suggest profound elements of character in the pose or stance of her individual characters while positioned centre-stage.

Her community is that of the “discarded or over-looked people, which include road sweepers, pensioner shoppers, stranded drunken hen-nighters and Caliban in *The Tempest*”. These characters are “like lost souls looking for something . . . searching for something more fulfilling, some deeper good that the brands promise when they say ‘Open happiness’, ‘Because you’re worth it,’ ‘Live the dream.’ And the search goes on. Shopping becomes unending . . . shopping is a metaphor for human desire . . . and because it never gives true fulfilment . . . is also a metaphor for this endless search.” The situations that she paints suggest isolation. Still, the figures themselves, standing out against distressed backgrounds, have “a resilient singularity with which they resist the dreariness of the uniformity of contemporary urban life”.

Although differing considerably in application and style, these works have a common core in relation to the empathy and attention shown and paid to the communities depicted.

‘Ken Currie: The Crossing’, 9 October – 16 November 2024, Flowers Gallery.

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Ken Currie: Unknown Man Scottish National Portrait Gallery – Clare Henry



24 May 2021 • [Share](#) —

Rarely can a portrait, including a dead body under a sheet, have created such a powerful, immediate, critical and public response.

Ken Currie, undoubtedly among the most significant painters of our time, is known for his dark side, his bleak, black pictures of haggard figures and harrowing happening, tortured flesh, forensic finales, illness, death. Long before Co-vid, he recognised the fragility, vulnerability and desperate aspects of human life and, never flinching, captured them with an evocative intensity.



Ken Currie Unknown Man

Death is also central to this new work. Yet, it is transformed into a welcome statement about power for good, knowledge as key, medicine's possibility to resolve problems, and – in the right hands, a consoling ability to reveal lost identity.

Titled *Unknown Man*, Currie's poignant, dramatic, the large-scale spectacular painting shows Professor Sue Black in surgical robes standing behind the covered remains of a body. She is a world-famous distinguished forensic scientist (Dame of the British Empire, FBA, FRSE, FRCP, FRAI, vice-chancellor of Lancaster University and a peer in the House of Lords) and this in itself comes over strongly. Currie is a reluctant portraitist, yet on this occasion, he himself was keen to create it.

"I knew exactly what I wanted to do. I invited her to my studio in Glasgow, and she came. The idea was simple, pretty basic: a big table, a surgical sheet and an orange bucket. I did try other compositions but always came back to my first thought. And it worked. I didn't need to show the skeleton."

The confrontational quality alludes to Black's important and revelatory work, with all the drama, intensity and careful calibration that are the hallmarks of her career. Life and death. A sober and sobering responsibility. Our most important subjects. She has identified bodies of murdered children, worked in war-torn countries where body parts are common. In 1999 she became the lead forensic anthropologist to the British Forensic Team in Kosovo, deployed by the FCO on behalf of the UN, and later that year deployed to Sierra Leone and Grenada. In 2003 she did two tours to Iraq. In 2005 she was part of the UK's contribution to the Thai Tsunami Victim Identification operation as part of the Indian Ocean earthquake international response. And that's for starters. As Currie says, 'It's mind-blowing.'

Currie and Black met via a BBC4 discussion on art and anatomy. On-air, Black asked Currie if he'd ever witnessed a dissection. Maybe assuming that, as was the case traditionally, art students studied anatomy. Think of Rembrandt's famous *Anatomy Lesson*. Currie admitted, no, he had not. She asked if he would like to. Currie laughs. "I could hardly say no! So I visited her in Dundee, where she was then director of the Centre for Anatomy and Human Identification. It was a very visceral experience. Sue has had a very impressive career."

Currie knew that as a crossbench peer, Prof Black would be unable to give him much time, so he took a plaster cast of her face. Quite a brave thing to do! But Black seems able to cope with anything. "She told me her first Saturday job was in a butcher's shop in Inverness, where she grew up and went to school." Dedicated but passionate about her work, she emphasised to Currie the respect and even reverence with which bodies must be treated. Objectivity coupled with humanity.

The composition itself has a directness and power, being arranged around a central axis, her red hair echoed by the orange bucket, "which I bought at B & Q for £1 though I did order a proper surgical sheet. It was important to get the authenticity, the exact reality."

Prof Black's reaction at the unveiling, shown on BBC TV, was obviously genuine, one of delighted surprise and, no doubt, relief. Currie can sometimes go for the macabre. Happily here, he has given us a perfect 21st-century role model: a distinguished woman scientist passionate about her job and above all capable of taking on whatever the world throws at her.

The painting, now on show at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, is on loan from Ken Currie. "It's my picture, my idea. It's not a commission, but I am delighted it's on public display. I have another picture, *The Three Oncologists*, 2019, in that collection. I've received

great support from the SNPG.”

Meanwhile, Currie currently has a show in Hong Kong, a place with multiple political and social issues. Lockdown. Co-Vid. Hong Kong. I am sure he will soon take up his brushes and give us his response. These are big issues, serious problems. Just what Currie loves!



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Anatomy of the Human Experience: The Painting of Ken Currie



Ken Currie, *The Crossing II (Famine Horse)*, 2024. Oil on canvas, 214 x 305 cm. 84 1/4 x 120 1/8 in. ©Antonic Parente, courtesy of Flowers Gallery

By **MANUELA ANNAMARIA ACCINNO** December 24, 2024

Man is a recent invention of our knowledge, destined to disappear ‘like a face of sand on the brink of the sea’, writes Michel Foucault in *The Words and Things*. In our contemporary society, characterized by unprecedented complexity, the sea emerges as a symbol of the human condition, a place of exploration and revelation, but also of bewilderment. Foucault, in his examination of the history of knowledge, invites us to consider how our conception of man is a social and cultural construction. Modern epistemology has restructured our view of subjectivity, relegating man to a concept driven by social, political and economic dynamics. In this sense, contemporary man becomes a reflection of the forces around him, a creature shaped by knowledge and institutions. However, like that face of sand, man is destined for continuous metamorphosis, at the mercy of the currents of time and history. The sea, with its vastness, then becomes a metaphor for this condition. It is both creator and destroyer, similar to our own existence. Today we observe it not only as a natural resource, but also as an ecosystem that challenges our understanding, where every action can lead to

inforeseen consequences. The ecological crises afflicting the oceans are a clear warning: we are part of an interconnected system, where our existence is intrinsically linked to that of the environment. In an era of globalization, the sea also represents a border and a bridge. Maritime routes are routes of trade and cultural exchange, but they are also routes of migration and escape. The image of the migrant crossing the sea in search of a better future raises questions about our humanity. Who is man in this context? A being in search of identity and belonging, whose existence is severely tested by political crises and economic uncertainties. The stories of those who attempt to cross the sea to reach a promised land tell of dreams and hopes, but also of pain and loss. These narratives force us to confront our responsibilities and privileges, prompting us to reconsider what it means to 'be human' in a world where barriers are as physical as they are symbolic.



Ken Currie, The Lantern, 2024. Oil on canvas, 153 x 122 cm. 60 1/4 x 48 in. ©Antonio Parente, courtesy of Flowers Gallery

Ken Currie, an internationally renowned Scottish painter, is an artist whose work addresses existential and ontological questions with a unique sophistication. His painting style, characterized by an intense palette and highly expressive figures, manages to capture the essence of complex human experiences, raising questions about mortality, identity and the social context in which the individual finds himself living. Currie explores identity in a context that is anything but static; he uses the human figure as an entry point to examine the fragmentation of contemporary existence. Her works invoke a tension between the individual and the external forces that influence their lives, from social and cultural contexts to the actual conditions of mortality. In this perspective, the representation of debilitated bodies or bodies in transition becomes a symbol of the intrinsic vulnerability that characterizes every human being.

Currie's figures, often in a state of agony or transformation, reflect this instability; they embody a humanity whose body and mind are constantly under pressure, a humanity that, as Foucault would say, is 'destined to disappear'. Mortality is another recurring theme in the artist's work. His canvases manage to encapsulate the inevitability of death and the search for meaning in it. In this context, Foucault's quotation resonates deeply: the notion of humanity as a recent invention implies that our thinking about life and death is also subject to severance and traversal. Death, which the painter depicts in stark and sometimes disturbing tones, becomes not only an epilogue, but also an opportunity to reflect on life itself and the value of the human experience; not merely portraying the moment of death, but investigating the process that leads to it. The artist manages to weave a powerful and profound visual narrative that not only depicts individual experiences, but also takes the viewer to a broader understanding of humanity. His works can be likened to an anatomy of the human experience, exploring how each of us is both the origin of a narrative and the product of a multiplicity of contexts.



Ken Currie, The Crossing III, 2024. Oil on canvas, 214 x 305 cm. 84 1/4 x 120 1/8 in. ©Antonio Parente, courtesy of Flowers Gallery

The works, presented in the solo exhibition ‘The Crossing’ at London's Flower Gallery, take viewers to an enigmatic archipelago, characterized by desolate, rugged islands and imposing stacks. The landscapes are reminiscent of the remote Outer Hebrides, where towers of eroded rock rise from a deep, dark sea, whose foaming waves crash against the rock formations. In this desolate and unforgiving setting, an unidentified community lives, in precarious conditions and without shelter. Trapped or perhaps in an eternal state of waiting, these individuals move on a fragile balance. The artist has accompanied this series of works with a text:

'People of the Sea.

People on the Edge.

People at Extremes.

Contested Land.

Crossing the Sea.

Eviction. Evasion. Evacuation.

Displacement. Dispossession. Destitution.'

n these words, resounds the warning of the precariousness of existence. Man, understood in his essence, is a fragile construct, constantly challenged, subject to corrosion by his surroundings, like waves slowly eroding the sand. Currie's art becomes a vehicle for this uncomfortable truth, an experience that smacks of quicksand, where destinies intertwine and blur. Every brushstroke, every figure portrayed is a collective memory. **WM**



Lancaster Professor's portrait unveiled at Scottish National Portrait Gallery

28 April 2021 10:28

© Neil Hanna

Professor Dame Sue Black and the artist Ken Currie in front of Currie's portrait of Black, Unknown Man (2019), in The Modern Portrait exhibition in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, which opens Friday 30 April 2021.

A striking new painting by the celebrated Scottish artist Ken Currie, depicting the pre-eminent forensic anthropologist Professor Dame Sue Black, will go on public display for the very first time when the Scottish National Portrait Gallery (SNPG) reopens this coming Friday April 30 2021.

The large-scale portrait, arriving at the National Galleries of Scotland (NGS) on long-term loan from the artist, will be shown alongside several other new works as part of The Modern Portrait exhibition.

Growing up in the Highlands of Scotland, Sue worked in a butcher's shop from the age of 12. She began her anatomical studies at the University of Aberdeen and in 1999 she undertook the first of three tours of Kosovo where she worked to identify the human remains of the victims of war crimes. She worked at the University of Dundee before becoming Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Engagement at Lancaster University where she leads on projects from **H-unique (which sets out to harness anatomical hand variation)** to initiatives such as Eden Project North. She regularly assists the police with specialist forensic work and is the current President of the Royal Anthropological Institute.

She has cited the job of a forensic anthropologist as being "to reunite the identity constructed during a life with what remains of the corporeal form in death".

Titled Unknown Man, Currie's poignant, large-scale painting shows Professor Black in surgical robes standing behind the covered remains of a body. The idea for the portrait grew when Currie and Professor Black met during a BBC Radio 4 discussion programme on the relationship between art and

anatomy. Currie later visited the Centre for Anatomy and Human Identification at the University of Dundee, where Professor Black then was Director. The artist was so moved by the work he encountered there that he asked Professor Black to sit for a portrait.

Currie regards Unknown Man as being connected to his popular SNPG commission Three Oncologists; the former representing a progression from his 2002 painting. With both works now on display in The Modern Portrait, visitors now have a very special opportunity to experience both in the same space.

The artist Ken Currie said: "I am delighted to be able to loan the painting Unknown Man to the Scottish National Portrait Gallery. This will make the painting more accessible to a wider public and hopefully draw attention to the astonishing work that Sue Black has undertaken in her long career as an Anatomist and Forensic Anthropologist throughout the world. I'd like to thank both the Portrait Gallery for facilitating this loan and Sue Black herself for her patience and co-operation in the making of this painting."

Professor Black said: "It was a terrifying moment, anticipating what Ken's portrayal might look like, but I was blown away. The image is striking, powerful, determined, focussed and no-nonsense. The portrait is not about me though, it is about the unidentified man, it is about the job, the skills and the experience needed to do the job which is to reunite him with his name. Ken has captured the sentiment perfectly and so sensitively. Had my parents been alive to see it, my Mother would have despaired that I had not had my 'hair done' and my father would have said that it looked like too good a bucket to hide under the table. Good old-fashioned Scottish Presbyterianism keeps your feet on the ground and your head out of the clouds."

Christopher Baker, Director of European and Scottish Art and Portraiture at the National Galleries of Scotland, said: "Encounters between accomplished artists and subjects can have electrifying results and that is certainly the case with this powerful portrait of the distinguished forensic scientist Professor Dame Sue Black by Ken Currie. It has a confrontational quality and alludes to her important and revelatory work, with all the drama and intensity and careful calibration that are the hallmarks of the painter's career. We are proud to be able to show this extraordinary painting, which will be a key attraction in The Modern Portrait display, when the Scottish National Portrait Gallery re-opens to the public."

Ken Currie is one of the UK's leading painters, renowned for his unsettling portrayal of the human figure. A Glasgow School of Art graduate, Currie forged his career in the 1980s as part of a generation of painters known as the "New Glasgow Boys". His work is known for its dominant themes of mortality, the body, mysterious rituals and quasi-medical practices, often tackled through unnerving imagery. His work resides in collections worldwide, including Tate, London and the New York Public Library. Currie is well represented in Scotland's national collection, with over 55 artworks.

Visitors can book their free tickets now on the National Galleries of Scotland website.

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Professor Dame Sue Black

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Ken Currie

8 Nov — 9 Dec 2017 at the Flowers Gallery in London, United Kingdom

29 NOVEMBER 2017



Ken Currie, *Whitened Hands*, 2017, Oil on panel, (c) Ken Currie, Courtesy of Flowers Gallery London and New York

Since the early 1990s, Scottish artist Ken Currie has been known for his closely observed and often unsettling portrayal of the body, depicting the damage inflicted by war and conflict, illness and decay as a response to what he felt was the sickness of contemporary society. Currie's rich, luminous paintings address the tragic themes of modernity, balancing the opposing imagery of mechanised destruction and degradation with the generative, creative potential of the human body.

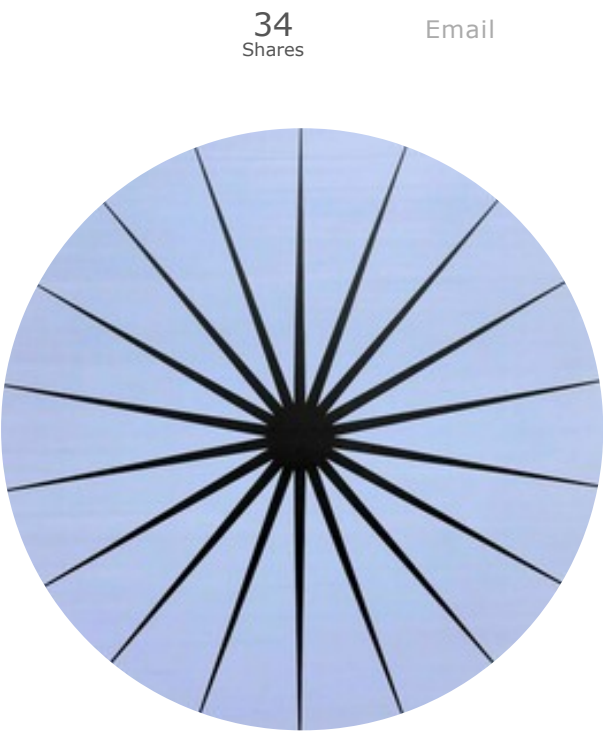
The works in the present exhibition depict the figure transformed by acts of unseen violence or engaged in mysterious medical procedures. The nightmarish painting *Krankenhaus* portrays ailing subjects treated with arcane medical instruments in a makeshift surgery, uncannily juxtaposing paraphernalia from the abattoir and misplaced players from a military band.

Alongside this painting, a series of images titled *War Paint* marks Currie's continued inquiry into facial disfigurement, portraying young men with strong youthful features transformed by war into what Currie calls "monstrous violations of all our ideals of beauty and harmony". In these works, Currie pays homage to the images of reconstructive surgery recorded by British artist and former surgeon Henry Tonks during World War I. Veiled references to the scars of war can be seen in the bruise-like blue-blacks of the over painting, lending the works a disturbing edge of barely concealed trauma.

The theme of disfigurement continues in the painting *Rictus*, from which the exhibition takes its title, and which relates to a fixed grimace or grin. Within this painting a military general can be seen studying a portrait of a survivor of atomic warfare. The portrait itself is intended to be difficult to look at, as Currie sets out to expose the true human cost of mechanised combat, with grotesque distortions, misplaced eye sockets and lolling mouth cavity. The character of the officer, inspired in part by John Singer Sargent's painting *General Officers of the Great War* faces away from the viewer, his reaction shielded from view. In contrast, two smaller paintings titled *The Lime Bucket*, and *Whitened Hands* depict hands scrubbed and dripping with lime solution, a substance usually intended to degrade or decontaminate. Relating back to the mysterious procedures in many of Currie's quasi-medical scenes, the symbolism is shrouded in ambiguity, as though stemming from partially-recalled moral emblems or allegories for contemporary life.

Ken Currie was born in 1960, and studied at the Glasgow School of Art from 1978 - 1983. He was known as one of the New Glasgow Boys along with Peter Howson, Adrian Wisniewski and the late Steven Campbell who studied together at the Glasgow School of Art. Notable public works include a mural commissioned by Glasgow Museums to mark the bicentenary of the Calton Weavers Massacre, which is displayed in the dome of the People’s Palace, Glasgow; and a portrait of eminent medical scientists Professor R. J. Steele, Professor Sir Alfred Cuschieri, and Professor Sir David P. Lane, in Three Oncologists, which was initiated by the National Galleries of Scotland.

Currie has exhibited widely internationally, including a recent solo exhibition at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery; and has been selected for numerous group shows including The Scottish Endarkenment: Art and Unreason 1945 to Present at Dovecot Gallery, Edinburgh, 2016; Reality, Modern & Contemporary British Painting at The Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, Norwich and Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool; and Drawing Breath, a touring exhibition marking ten years of the Jerwood Drawing Prize. His work is in the collections of Yale Centre for British Art, Connecticut; Tate, London; Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh; New York Public Library; Imperial War Museum, London; Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon; Campbelltown City Bicentennial Art Gallery, Australia; British Council, London; Boston Museum of Fine Art; and ARKEN, Museum of Modern Art, Copenhagen.



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Gallery profile

Location
London, United Kingdom

Founded in
1970







1. Ken Currie, War Paint #3, 2017, Oil on panel, (c) Ken Currie, Courtesy of Flowers Gallery London and New York
2. Ken Currie, Rictus, 2015, Oil on Linen, (c) Ken Currie, Courtesy of Flowers Gallery London and New York

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Ken Currie painting fetches record price at auction

🕒 30 November 2016



BONHAMS

A painting by Glasgow artist Ken Currie has been sold for a record-breaking £100,000 at an auction in Edinburgh.

Bonhams said it was a new world record for the artist, surpassing the previous figure of £31,000 set at the auctioneers in 2002.

The work, called "A Scottish Triptych: Nightshift, Departure, Saturdays", depicts Glasgow in the 1980s.

It has been exhibited in Glasgow, Berlin and San Francisco, where it was bought by the exhibition's organiser.

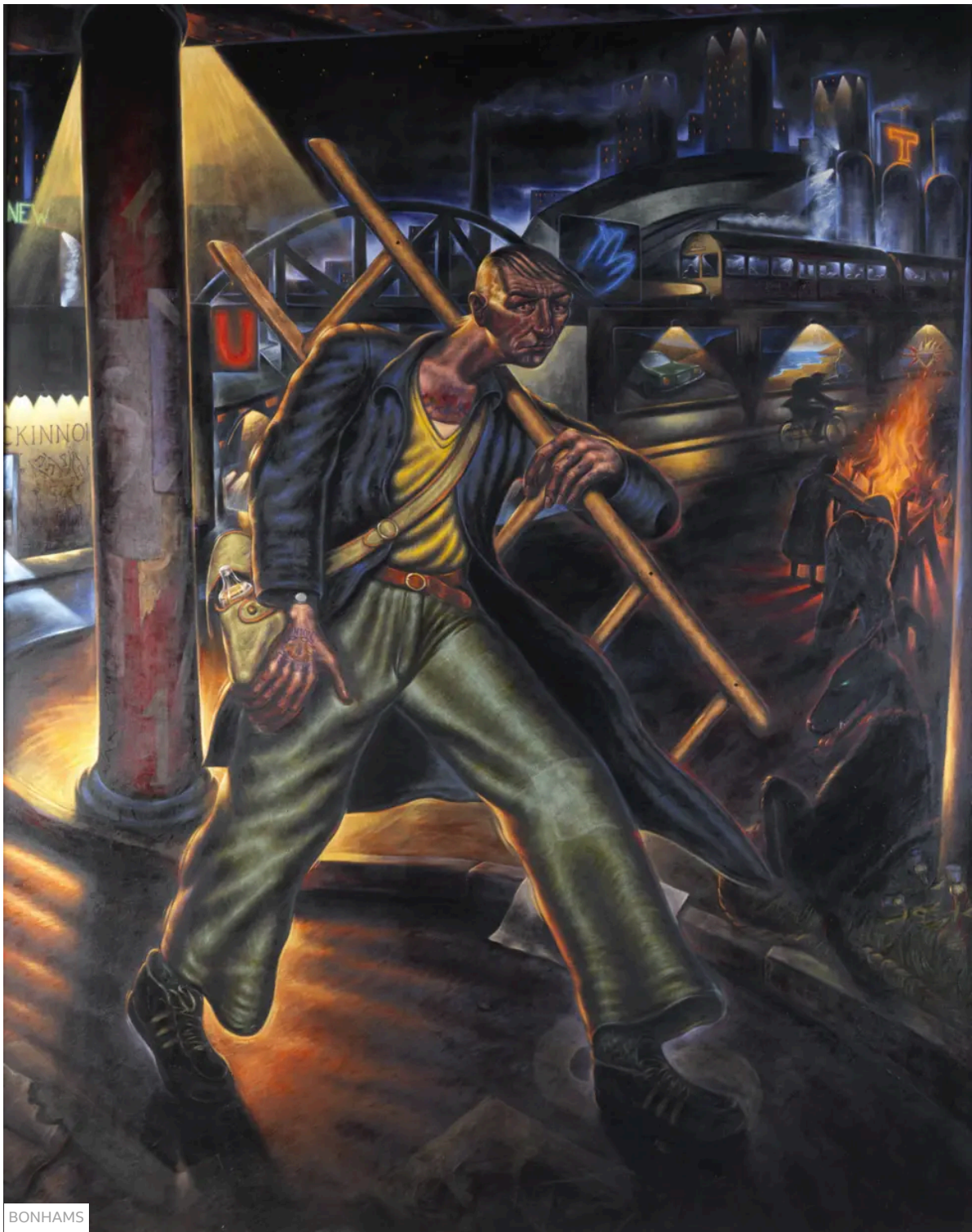
The painting has been in California ever since.

Bonhams head of Scottish art Chris Brickley said: "A Scottish Triptych: Nightshift, Departure, Saturdays is an astonishing work of great depth by one of Scotland's greatest living painters.

"There was a lot of pre-sale interest in this piece and I'm not surprised that it was sold for such a high price."

The auctioneers said the three panelled picture, or tryptych, was one of the most significant Scottish post-war figurative artworks to have come onto the market in recent years.

Ken Currie was born in 1960 and graduated from the Glasgow School of Art in 1983. He is one of the generation of artists known as the New Glasgow Boys.



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