

THE BIGGER PICTURE

Just fresh from her recent solo exhibition and memoir launch, trailblazing artist **RITA KEEGAN** shares life lessons on creativity, style and letting your hair down with *Glass Man*

Writer CHARLIE NEWMAN



▲ **Left** – *Self-portrait in Garden 1994*. **Right** – *Homage to Frida Kahlo 1987* Courtesy the artist. Installation view at the South London Gallery

Of Caribbean and Canadian descent and born in the Bronx in 1949, the Vauxhall-based multi-media artist and archivist Rita Keegan has dedicated her life to craft and community, as evident in *Somewhere Between There And Here*, her first solo show in 15 years that was recently staged at the South London Gallery.

Throughout her career Keegan has gathered and raised overlooked voices, particularly in the black British arts scene. Having trained as a painter in San Francisco, she moved to the UK in 1980 and helped to establish the Brixton Art Gallery in 1981, later co-founding emerging technologies outfit Copy Art and curating the Women of Colour Index, all the while

exhibiting her own work centred upon gender, race and identity. A devoted archivist, Keegan reminds us in the book *Mirror Reflecting Darkly*, part memoir and part exploration of her work, that “when you have a history, you have a future”.

As a leading archivist, can you talk us through your creative process?

I am essentially a magpie. I think as human beings we collect – we take that rock or flower from where we went. These articles hold memory but they also hold power. I think there is something innate in humanity that is object-based, that likes objects, that has a need for objects. I do

lots of work that isn't solitary – solitary is great, but groups are important, and the exchange of ideas is exciting. There was a feeling of inclusion in the arts of the 1970s and '80s, [for example] within the women's community of doing patchwork quilts.

There's so many layers in the art world and the hierarchy of making but at the Brixton Art Gallery we hung it all. There also became no reason as an artist to limit myself to paint with the rise of the photocopier, copy art, and computers. But it also harks back to me doing a cut and paste in collages. I could store them and show them as multiples in



Trophies Revised (Detail) 2021 Courtesy the artist. Installation view at the South London Gallery.

terms of a linear theme, so finding a way to work within the constraints of how you live, and how you survive.

Do you feel that the art world has opened up since your experiences in the 1970s and '80s?

I think the art world is different than our practice. I think the art world wants stars. That's how they make money. It's hard to create a star if you have a group of people, [though there's] possibly Gilbert and George. There has to be a gimmick within two people working collectively or even in a group working collectively, so I think it's very difficult. Also, sometimes groups aren't necessarily there forever. They are transient because the more people you have, the more lives and diversity you have, so it's unlikely, unless you're all sort of living within the same community and able to work collectively.

You have previously stated how you struggled to call yourself an artist. Do you think that was something to do with not wanting to be the so called "star", or are you accepting that you're a star now?

The thing is, at five years old when you asked me what I wanted to be, I wanted to be an artist. I guess as I got older and



▲ *Family Unit 1998* Courtesy the artist. Installation view at the South London Gallery



▲ *Somewhere Between There and Here 2021* Courtesy the artist. Installation view at the South London Gallery.

understood the ramifications of saying that, and how easy it was for people to say it who weren't – it was a personal journey for me to name it. Naming for me is very important.

What ramifications do you mean?

It's quite easy to label yourself an artist without having paid your dues, without having really spent your time making and assuming that every bit of creativity is a major work of art. Making and creating are really important to me, and I guess because they are I didn't want to just casually use the name.

Would you call yourself an artist now?

I don't think I have a choice. It's always been what I am. You need to own who you are.

Your breadth of work and devotion to your practice is legendary. What keeps you moving forward and is there anything you're still hoping to do?

You know how some people think, "Oh, that was the best time of my life". I've had some fabulous times, don't get me wrong, but I think I'm always hoping for better. Each time was amazing and each place was amazing. I guess it's about living in the moment and appreciating the moment, but also examining the moment because not every-

thing is fun but it can be interesting. It is a learning process. Even at the end of the worst situation, I think, "What did I learn out of that? What was that for? What can I do to possibly avoid that? What can I do to get something out of that and learn from it?"

How did you find the lockdown for you both personally and creatively?

Most artists and creatives are used to time on their own, so in a way that didn't change. I was really lucky and unlucky to have a major project because I was doing the book and working on the exhibition.

The starting was difficult but it meant that people had to keep in touch with me, so I didn't suffer the isolation that a lot of people did. I also live in this weird and wonderful area with lots of practitioners and people who would wave at my window and find out if I needed anything. I have a community around me which is exceptional. It was strange, I've never seen anything like this before. You couldn't touch people, you couldn't have any contact, and let's face facts, Zoom is one level of hell. To watch yourself talk on Zoom is just so unnatural.

But I think [lockdown] made people stop and think, and that's a gift. It may not be a gift you



Somewhere Between There and Here, installation view 2021, *Self-portrait with Benin Queen Mother* 1985, *Father with Benin Background* 1985
Mother with Benin Brooch 1985, *Views from the Interior* 1983–1986 Courtesy the artist. Installation view at the South London Gallery.



▲ *Trophies Revised (Detail)* 2021 Courtesy the artist. Installation view at the South London Gallery.

want, but it was a gift. It made people stop and give them a chance to reassess their lives and find out what they wanted to do and where they wanted to go. We still haven't seen the true ramifications of it – the poverty, the isolation, the loneliness; it hasn't even truly manifested itself. But it seems to have made people more conscious of global issues in terms of climate change. For the world to take two years off is unheard of.

And now that lockdown is over, what are you most looking forward to doing?

I would love to travel. My fantasy is first class travel because I've done the other way. It's really funny because I don't care where. I've always just loved the journey, getting from A to B, as long as the getting isn't too ugly. I'm always up for a road trip. I would also like to organise a sort of biennale, but on a cruise ship with artists. They would be living and making. Not just visual art but music too, all the arts. We could all have nice dinners and do talks and watercolours and drawings; a living room for sculpture and dance classes. I think it could work. Each port you stopped at you could have people come on and see the exhibition.

I'm picturing you on this boat wearing all these amazing garments. One can really see the importance of fashion in your work, an often frowned upon medium of art. What have you learnt from your experiments in fashion?

At high school, I studied fashion illustration and costume design. We were being trained for Seventh Avenue, to work in the fashion industry. I come from a long line of people that have celebrated the joy of self-ornamentation. I love clothes and textiles. I discovered thrift shops in the '60s where I could buy evening gowns from the 1920s, '30s and '40s for little or nothing. I feel guilty that I trashed them but, you know, the clothes needed that. I understand some things are museum quality but I also understand that a dress is made to party, a piece of clothing needs an airing. Some people like jeans – they can have them. I would much rather have six yards of taffeta in a skirt.

In your book you wrote, "either dress to live, or live to dress". When the rest of the world was wearing leggings and tracksuits during lockdown, were you still dressing up?

I think one really had to change your clothes when you got out of bed because there was no beginning, middle and end, so it was really important to make those punctuations in your life. I did make sure to put on earrings and jewellery. Comfort is key after a certain age but comfort doesn't have to be ugly. I think when people say "Oh you're dressed up", you turn around and say "Well, I am out".

Did you have someone to look up to or turn to as you grew up and developed as an artist?

I guess the women in my family were very important. There were some fabulous people at the Art Institute – I learned from the world that I lived in. San Francisco in the late 1960s was an amazing place, there was a radical drag group called the

Cockettes that my friend Sylvester was in. So there were people around me who enjoyed life and dressed for it. Going clubbing at the Filmore or the Avalon but also being in New York and being involved – I like a good party. Going to Studio 54 was just fabulous!

Tell us about Studio 54.

I didn't even know what it was. But my friend took me and we just walked in, I didn't realise that there was vetting to walk in. There were girls in cowgirl and square dance dresses, with lots of rickrack trim, sparkly stuff, petticoats and cowboy boots. The music was fabulous with a great dance floor. I remember looking over and there was Grace Jones just standing in a spotlight with a hoodie on and the most fabulous magenta lipstick.

The music was fabulous and the people were fabulous. When you're out and about, you try to make life as beautiful and interesting as possible, and you try to be as interesting and interested. Being part of a visual culture is important to me. Spending [my] childhood wandering through museums and galleries, not to mention old family photos, the TV with a good Fred Astaire movie or watching



▲ *Trophies Revised (Detail)* 2021 Courtesy the artist. Installation view at the South London Gallery.



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Lena Horne in technicolour or taking a walk in Central Park. I tend to be a city person, but it didn't stop me from liking the odd sunset, sunrise or wind in the trees. I guess in a perfect world, I would have liked to spend more time in the country. But I don't think I would have exchanged that for a night out on the town and a few cocktails. You just sleep through the morning anyway, don't you?

Do you have any fond memories of London similar to that of New York?

I used to work at the Venue in Victoria in the early 1980s – there were lots of bands going through there – and at another club called Fred's. It was an interesting life. It's about living where you are, and I mean actually living not just

walking through it. It's about a certain level of consciousness and trying to participate in your world as opposed to it just washing over you. Even if you have a shit job you can find interesting things within that can pay your rent. But also you need things that feed you emotionally and creatively. And I'm not even talking about a hierarchy of activity – if you knit, if you sew, it's a making. Making is so important.

It's all too easy to lose sight of the importance of creativity

It's about finding the things that bring you joy. Paying your rent is important, it's crucial, and having food on the table or family to support, I understand that I really do. For the most part

I've been a single woman and that has its own complications, but it also meant that I was only responsible for one person and the bad that happened to me only happened to me, it didn't happen to my husband, my children or my lover. So that is a different kind of responsibility and it's a different kind of way that you negotiate the world. There's no get out of jail free [card], it's all complicated. It's all bad and it's all good.

You're definitely a glass half full person, then?

It's hard but, you know, if your glass is always half full, you'll always be thirsty.

Mirror Reflecting Darkly: The Rita Keegan Archive is published by Goldsmiths Press ritakeeganarchiveproject.com southlondongallery.com

All artwork RITA KEEGAN. All photographs ANDY STAGG