



Title

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Cover image: **Fig. 2** *Here is a Gale Warning*, by Rose Finn-Kelcey. 1971–2011. Gelatin silver print mounted on aluminium, 75.2 by 53.2 cm. (Courtesy the Estate of Rose Finn-Kelcey and Kate MacGarry, London).

Rose Finn-Kelcey

by Kathryn Lloyd • 01.04.2020

In 1975, Rose Finn-Kelcey photographed herself doing a handstand on a beach. She is admirably upright, her legs falling backwards into a gentle curve  **FIG.1**. Caught in the wind, her pleated skirt fans around her, creating a shell-like cocoon and obscuring her head and torso. Her feet are clad in black-heeled espadrilles, their flat soles creating a near-perfect forty-five-degree silhouette against in the sky. Her sleeves, protruding from behind her skirt, mirror her shoes, bookending her body with flashes of black. The beach is empty; the tide has receded, leaving curving, repetitive patterns in the seabed. A tiny, solitary figure can be seen walking along the distant shoreline.

Finn-Kelcey's photograph is an archetype of spontaneity – a moment of liberation crystallised with a camera. It denotes its own accident: the strange movement of her skirt, the slight bend in her legs, caught on the cusp of falling. In fact, the image is a carefully considered construction. Inspired by a photograph of the artist's mother doing handstands on the beach with a friend, Finn-Kelcey's image is a partial re-enactment. On a beach near Dungeness she used to visit as a child with her family, Finn-Kelcey repeated the same action again and again to produce a photograph of strategic impulsivity: angles carefully calculated, the shock of singularity achieved through multiple rehearsals.

As a result, the photograph is caught between artifice and reality; it is both a truth and a lie. Adopting Roland Barthes's concept of punctum,¹ the 'success' of the image initially derives from its ostensibly unpremeditated values. We are preoccupied by its strangeness and joyful protest. This is not so much undermined as augmented by the knowledge that the image is a mythic account of a real event. The work's title – *The Restless Image: a discrepancy between the seen position and the felt position* – extends this further, paralleling the relationship between fiction and reality with the disjuncture between the 'seen' and the 'felt'. Finn-Kelcey's upended body, pointing towards the sky on a deserted beach, disrupts the violence of binary structures: the self and the other, subject and viewer, internal and external. It is a restless image, its creator and protagonist constantly disappearing and reappearing.



Fig. 1 *The Restless Image: a discrepancy between the seen position and the felt position*, by Rose Finn-Kelcey. 1975. Archival gelatin silver print, 19 by 26 cm. (Courtesy the Estate of Rose Finn-Kelcey and Kate MacGarry, London).

Across her forty-year career Finn-Kelcey worked in a variety of media including performance, photography, video, sound, sculpture, installation and posters. She was a personal and political artist, known for her flagworks, which she flew from various European landmarks, and her challenges to the institution of art 'by putting forward proposals that re-integrate...art with life'.² Although she mounted a number of significant public works during her lifetime, most notably *Power for the People* (1972) at Battersea Power Station and *Here is a Gale Warning* **Fig. 2** at Alexandra Palace, she remained lesser known than her contemporaries, who included Susan Hiller and Richard Long.



Fig. 2 *Here is a Gale Warning*, by Rose Finn-Kelcey. 1971–2011. Gelatin silver

print mounted on aluminium, 75.2 by 53.2 cm. (Courtesy the Estate of Rose Finn-Kelcey and Kate MacGarry, London).

Curated by Andrée Cooke and Simon Moretti, the exhibition at Kate MacGarry, London, is the second solo show of the artist's works since her death in 2014. In 2017, Modern Art Oxford staged a large retrospective, bringing together works from across her career, up until 2012. In contrast, this display focuses on key pieces from the 1970s to the 1990s, mapping a trajectory between her object-based and performance works. This exhibition is largely documentary in character. Although performance was a large part of Finn-Kelcey's practice no video recordings exist in the estate of the artist. Apart from *Glory*, filmed at the Serpentine Gallery in 1983, the selected performances are mostly shown through text and photography. As an artist consumed by the complexities of language, this is both fitting and frustrating.



Fig. 3 *One for Sorrow, Two for Joy*, by Rose Finn-Kelcey. 1976 / 2012. C-type print, 166.5 by 52 cm. (Courtesy the Estate of Rose Finn-Kelcey and Kate MacGarry, London).

In the mid-1970s, Finn-Kelcey began staging performances, the first of which used her own body as the main agent for activation. In *One For Sorrow, Two For Joy* **FIG.3**, the artist lived with two magpies inside the window of Acme Gallery, London, for two days. The work was a direct response to Joseph Beuys's three-day habitation with a coyote in *I Like America and America Likes Me* in New York two years earlier. Attempting to create a dialogue with the magpies – a species she said symbolised her own alter-ego – Finn-Kelcey offered them food and objects using a transcript of French birdsong. Separated from her spectators by glass, the

sounds of the artist and her birds were relayed to the changing audience in the street outside. During the performance Finn-Kelcey adapted her behaviour in response to the birds, gauging their acceptance or rejection of her efforts at reproducing their language.

Here, the artist usurps the delineation between public and private in a socially and commercially coded environment. She is on display in a 'shop front', co-opting a framework synonymous with the male gaze. For Finn-Kelcey, language is inextricable from patriarchal dominance: 'Through the magpie sounds, I wanted to talk about the potential for another language [. . .] and through that talk about the potential for women having a voice'.³ While Beuys's performance was documented on video, Finn-Kelcey's symbiosis with nature exists in here solely as a C-type print and an artist presentation book. Without an existing soundtrack, the presentation does feel partial, unable to represent the cadence and determination in the artist's voice as she attempts to establish a new, shared language. It can only be explained through the conceptual which stands apart from the artist's embodied enactment.



Fig. 4 *Mind the Gap*, by Rose Finn-Kelcey. 1980 / 2019. Archival C-type print, sound, 26 by 17 cm. (Courtesy the Estate of Rose Finn-Kelcey and Kate MacGarry, London).

Three years later, Finn-Kelcey introduced the idea of ‘vacated performance’ – a concept summarised by her desire to be ‘both inside the work and yet, as it unfolded, to also be an objective viewer’.⁴ In 1975 *The Restless Image* – a self-portrait without a face – signalled her growing ambivalence towards the artist’s position as creator, subject and viewer, anticipating the gradual reduction of her physical presence in later works. The scale and strategies for these performances varied but they were a combination of live-action, recorded sequences and installation, which allowed the artist to be both present and absent. Through these vacated performances, Finn-Kelcey questioned the role of the live performing body, equating it with the restrictions of ‘seen’, external communication and the visibility of women in 1980s society.

Mind The Gap **FIG.4** is perhaps the best-known example of Finn-Kelcey’s vacated performances. In the exhibition, it exists as a

three-page text, a photograph and a sound piece that plays from a speaker in the gallery ceiling. The text acts as instruction for and record of the performance. It begins by describing the theatre of the Institute of Contemporary Art, London, where it took place: darkened, with a treadmill at one end and a large, rectangular prism of ice at the other. The spectators are arranged in parallel rows, facing one another across a narrow corridor marked out with tape. Gradually, recorded sounds of 'muzak' filter into the gallery – 'an ironic prelude to activity' – but still the artist does not emerge. Instead, a recorded female voice recites a selection of working notes for the performance, detailing what it could have been, before announcing Finn-Kelcey's apologies for failing to appear as 'finally, she didn't know what she wanted to say'.

Despite its own cancellation, the performance continues. Finn-Kelcey eventually appears, mounting the treadmill and running for as long as she can: 'Running only against her own stamina, she slowly reached her limit, disengaged the belt and switched off the power'. The muzak returns and so does the voiceover, reciting 'words like crevice, ravine, gorge, breach'. *Mind The Gap* is happening even while it is not happening, providing its audience with a sustained sensation of 'non-starting'.⁵ At the end, Finn-Kelcey crouches down, another preparation to start, and waits for her audience to leave. It is apt that, as they waited for a performance to begin that had already begun, viewers are now faced with the impossibility of its renewed beginning. We read and listen, unable to experience the frustration of Finn-Kelcey's 'false' false starts and her own deliberate absence. Instead, we are faced with another absence.

By focusing on a period in which she continually challenged her own position as creator and subject, the exhibition at Kate MacGarry expertly introduces the breadth of her practice in a relatively small selection of works. While it is impossible to escape the remorse at not being able to experience Finn-Kelcey's performances on film, or in reality, the careful curation deftly reveals their complexities. Across her vast output, the artist communicates the anxieties around constructing an identity when society is already reflecting one back at you. She mines the dissonances between the outside and the inside, the 'seen' and the 'felt'. Like the woman doing a handstand on the beach, her work is always restless, always starting over again, from a state of beginning.

Exhibition details Rose Finn-Kelcey
Kate MacGarry, London
14th February–4th April 2020

Footnotes

- 1** R.Barthes: *Camera Lucida*, Farrar, New York 1981, p.27
- 2** G. Brett: 'Tissues of Thought. Performance and Some Other Works in London 1970–1985', *Third Text* 22 (March 2008), p.237.
- 3** R. Finn-Kelcey: *One For Sorrow, Two For Joy* [artists' presentation book], 1976.
- 4** Rose Finn-Kelcey quoted in G. Brett: *Rose Finn-Kelcey*, London 1994, p.8.
- 5** E. Roberts: 'Restless images: the feminist performances of Rose-Finn-Kelcey', *Oxford Art Journal* 38, no.3 (December 2015), p.402.

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