

LIFE AFTER PAINTING

John Keane



It's now three and a half years since I broke it to the world that I had stopped painting. For me, it felt like a seismic watershed. For the world, however, it was barely noticed. What does that make me think of? Oh yes, Auden, *Musée des Beaux Arts*, based on *The Fall of Icarus* by Breughel, above ...

Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

... and ...

the ploughman may

Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,

But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone

As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green

Water

My own 'forsaken cry' did result in a number of very kind and supportive messages both from friends and also from people I don't know on social media. Interestingly, and mildly annoyingly, some also confessed to their own doubts and thoughts about quitting. Annoyingly, because when you've finally plucked up courage to take the plunge and come out with it, the last thing you want to hear is that thing when someone comes back at you and says 'Oh I know! You'll never guess what happened to me, blah blah...'. Yes, I know.

Yet since I finally laid down the brushes for the last time and switched off Photoshop, five years on I can honestly say I don't miss it, and I don't regret it. I do have regrets though about how it turned out, and how this was the choice I felt obliged to make, but I don't actually miss either the graft of painting or the emotional investment that it required as an activity. To be brutally honest, what I do regret is that after, compared to many, not a bad run of a career in which I sustained a living engaged in a profession which I loved over a period of 35 years plus, the importance the world attached to me in no way matched the importance I attached to myself. There, I've said it. But rather than wallowing in bitterness at a relative lack of recognition (aside, of course, from the small but very supportive vehicle that is *The Jackdaw*), the years since have resulted in a surprising and welcome degree of contentment. Dare I say, happiness.

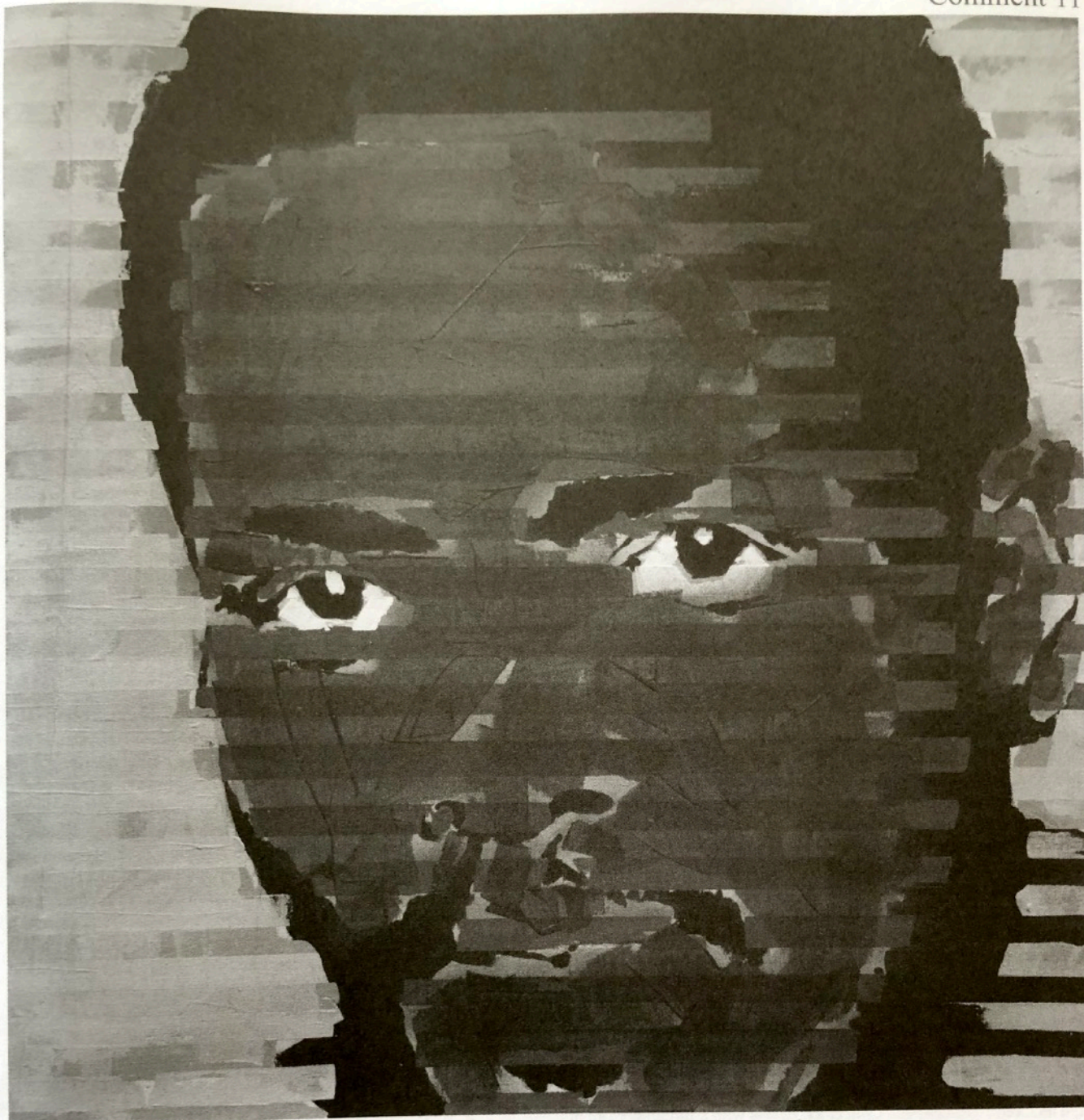
I used to pretty much keep office hours, 10-6, 5 days a week, but don't ask me what I do with myself now, because I couldn't possibly give an adequate answer. There was Covid for quite a while, then a considerable part of it has been taken up with the tedious business of selling/moving house, and converting and moving into what had



previously been my studio, where we much enjoy living. (On my first visit to New York in 1980 I stayed in a Tribeca loft, and ever since had relished the idea of living in a similar industrial building). I have built a small art barn for storage in Suffolk to house the 'collection of the artist', which is considerable. The gallery who represented me for more than 30 years have now more or less disowned me, but I don't have a problem with that, although the fact of their declining ability to sell my work in recent years somehow didn't mitigate a decidedly hostile reaction to my decision to quit. And over the last few months I have been working with a web designer to create 'The Complete Works', an archive as comprehensive as possible, now live (johnkeaneart.com), but still a continuing work in progress. Images of hundreds of works have been uploaded, but for many works I do not have decent enough images, and many have not been properly photographed at all. Over time, new images will be uploaded.

But what got me up in the morning over all those years were my reactions to what was going on in the world around me, things I felt concerned about even though they may not affect me, and things I felt others should be concerned about. My work was an effort to try and process this, to distil it, to make something that might be beautiful out of human behaviour that shocked or appalled me, and thereby to try and understand it, and invite others to as well. In the early years, after art school, I didn't know what I was doing, and at times I was close to despair. But slowly, and perhaps just through sheer bloody mindedness, I began to find my voice. And with that began to gain some confidence. There was a period when I felt I was banging my head against a brick wall, but eventually the wall began to show signs of cracking. I was accepted for competitions and open exhibitions, and then galleries decided they wanted to show me, and my work began to sell. When the Imperial War Museum bought a couple of drawings relating to the Falklands war (*Death Squad*, 1991, above, is also in the collection of the IWM) I felt like I had crossed a threshold.

Over the years fortunes waxed and waned, waxed again, and then finally waned, a fact I have come to terms with despite the misgivings outlined above. Over the years my work evolved, developed, changed and, I think, improved. A considerable benefit of getting old is the perspective it provides of one's own history, and since I am an image maker, that history can be observed pictorially. For some years, as I



developed, I would feel shame or embarrassment about earlier work, and not want it seen, as I would feel I had moved on. But now I find a rather different, perhaps more detached reaction to work that I may have long since forgotten about. I become transported back to the time that I made it, but still can view it with a kind of benign objectivity that previously I hadn't afforded myself, such that I don't mind it seeing the light of day again. The arc of my development as an artist becomes apparent, the narrative forms a detectable shape, although the texture changes over the years. Some early works I feel a certain pride in. When I was 23 in 1977 I did a painting of the murdered anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko (above). I'm not entirely sure why I chose that subject. I was looking a lot at people like Andy Warhol at the time. Nevertheless, from my perspective now, I'm proud of it. It's not just the subject matter, it's a good painting. And it somehow anticipated the direction my interests would follow years later, although I didn't know it at the time.

Those interests continue to interest me. People who query my decision to quit point to the febrile and dangerous state the world has

been descending into over recent years, which I would have been likely to be addressing in my paintings. However I point out that there is little happening now that I haven't at some point attempted to make work about over the years, whether it's environmental catastrophe or violent ideology, and that work is still in existence.

Twenty years ago, if asked for my suggestions for a more peaceable future, two things would have been top of my list: Divest from fossil fuels, and create a secure state for Palestinians – much else might have followed. Third on this list might have been Don't Trust Putin. Now we have Trump ranting 'Drill baby drill', and Gaza where thousands of its occupants have been reduced to ashes.

Now, as much as ever, the words of Voltaire ring true: 'Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities.' And still ...

... the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

