

**Blimey! From Bohemia to Britpop:  
The London Artworld from Francis Bacon to Damien Hirst**

**Mighty Baby**

Mother Rachel! Mother Rachel! That's the cry I remember going up in the middle of the night from the kitchen at 93 Oakley Street, Chelsea. It was the Glasgow poet Eddie Linden, drunk, with red hair, frightening the unmarried mothers. There were always lots of them there. My own mother was one of them. We used to sit in a circle of mothers watching the black and white TV. The Wednesday Play or The Virginian or All Our Yesterdays.

It was a permanently shabby kitchen. The walls were yellow and there was red lino on the floor. There was a Sellotaped collage of magazine photos from the Sunday papers almost covering one wall. Starving Africans. David Hockney's Tired Indians. Over and in between the pictures were pencilled and felt-penned phone numbers, and slogans from the writings of R.D.Laing.

Rachel Pinney, who ran the house, was a psychiatrist and a campaigner for world peace. This was the last of the several homes she used to own. She had made it into a shore for the lost and drifting to wash up on, for £3 and £5 a week rent. Eddie Linden wasn't really her son, any more than I was. He had been one of her patients. He was just drunk and raving and had washed up here briefly. Her real son had been hitch-hiking in Israel, so news reports about the Six Day War was another thing we used to watch. I passed through here every weekend between the ages of six and thirteen, when I lived in a council-run children's home in St Mary's Cray, in Orpington. I came to Chelsea on the train on Fridays and returned to the home on Sunday evenings.

All sorts passed through. Peace campaigners, patients, doctors, shaky people who'd had electric shock treatment. Sometimes Quentin Crisp came round, with blue hair, to play chess. Dust was piled up thickly in his flat across the road in Oakley Gardens.

Later, when it was the end of the 60s, the mothers drifted away and the place filled up with members of Rock bands. The Family, who recorded an instrumental named after the house, 93's OK J, and the lesser known Mighty Baby, who had been to India. They sat in their rooms, wearing their afghans and afros and snakeskin boots, and listening to Neil Young's Cinnamon Girl, or Frank Zappa's Peaches En Regalia, eating lychees. Rachel, who tolerated the rockers and took their rent - which was now up to £5 and £10 a week - but didn't socialize with them because she didn't understand them and was afraid of their drugs, ate bankrupt soup.

That was her name for it. It was what the kitchen always smelt of. It was an army-sized tureen of old vegetables and slightly off meat that she would just add to now and then, and reheat, until some mother or band member or other couldn't bear the smell any longer and would throw it away. But then, horribly, it would start up again.  
The Mounties

For the cause of world peace she didn't talk on Wednesdays. She would just write things down on a piece of paper. I'm afraid the answer is No. Or, Where are my glasses? Once she allowed an autistic child to cut all her hair off with nail scissors and for a few weeks she had a radical ragged grey prison haircut instead of her normal severe lesbian do.

But then she really did go to prison, for six months in 1970, for kidnapping me when I was fourteen. She gave me some money to run away to Canada. Some detectives arrested me there after a month and when I was brought back to London, by a London detective and a WPC who had come out to get me, it turned out Interpol, the FBI, Scotland Yard and the Mounties had all been in on the search.

## **The Bohemians**

People who are in the artworld get there by all sorts of different springboards. For some of them it is a step up the social ladder, from working class to middle class. But some of course are born into that class. I was born into the Bohemian class, which is a branch of the middle class. My mother went to art school and then later on taught art in secondary schools. Her mother was a dancer and her father distributed films in South America for J. Arthur Rank.

## **Weeping**

After I was kidnapped I was sent to a therapeutic community in Kent, and when I left I did some manual labouring jobs for two years, which were very tiring, like refuse-collecting, cleaning at the British Museum, putting up Residents Only parking signs and mixing concrete.

And then I went to The Byam Shaw School of Painting, where my mother had been when she was fifteen. It was the 1970s. I studied the art magazines in the library and learned to recognize works by contemporary New York artists like Mel Bochner and Lawrence Weiner. They did diagrams of triangles on the floor made of pebbles or lengths of tape, and words on the wall that said things like Eight Pints of White Paint. Then I bought a book called Six Years. It documented in awesome detail six years' worth of Conceptual art. From 1966 to 1972.

There were the early sayings of Gilbert & George, which went something like, Art we only wish to serve you. And the first Conceptual art manifestos by Joseph Kosuth. There were photos of cooling towers and mounds of earth in the desert, and Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty photographed from the air, and a woman weeping.

## **Art & Language**

A man came to the school and gave us a lecture about Art & Language. They were an international art group, spread all over the world, in New York, Australia and Oxford. They typed the letter A in the middle of a sheet of paper, and then after that one of them left, because it was only formalism, which was a bit confusing because we'd just got used to the idea that formalism was minimalism.

## **One second**

We went to exhibitions in Cork Street and at the ICA, in The Mall. We saw colour field paintings in acrylic by John Hoyland, and some suitcases and railway sleepers by a Greek Conceptual artist. At the Tate Gallery we saw a John Latham retrospective. He burned books and made one-second drawings done with spattered ink. And at the Serpentine Gallery we saw a Howard Hodgkin retrospective. He painted dots and patterns and abstract figures who were always in restaurants.

## **Space**

Also at the art school I learned about space, which we had to paint and draw in life classes. The naked models stood or lay around in set-ups with easels and draped sheets and pieces of coloured paper, to make the space richer, with the daylight streaming in through big grid-shaped windows.

We had to draw or paint the scenes with a ruthless spatial eye. Not first of all putting the model's eyes, nose, ears and mouth, or nipples, in the middle of the paper or canvas, with a very sharp pencil or tiny sable brush, as we would very much like to have done, and as we all certainly did on our first morning's life class when we started at the school. But instead blocking in the big areas first, not caring if it was an arm or an easel or a window or a door or the side of the head of the student in front of us. And then gradually getting all the shapes to relate together, so a convincing space would appear.

We would go on from there, blocking in smaller and smaller shapes and going back and correcting the big ones. And then somewhere in all that blocking, after many hours or days, there would be the naked model rendered at last, all dots and dashes and wobbly squares and rectangles and negative shapes, in rugged thick black charcoal or 6B pencil outlines, looking like a wonky diagram of a human.

Or if it was a painting, the lines and shapes would be in thick rich mixed-up oil colours, every contour the result of endless other contours shuffling and colliding, and the model would look like a poor hot and cold coloured paint creature, glowing from a nuclear explosion.