

*The Big Issue previews
a major new exhibition
in London at the
HALCYON GALLERY*

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HALCYON
GALLERY

in association with



LENKIEWICZ ON VAGRANCY

As paintings by artist ROBERT LENKIEWICZ (1941-2002) go on display in a major London gallery for the first time in 30 years, PAUL GREEN, of the Halcyon Gallery, explains the enduring relevance of the artist's work.

HALCYON GALLERY is very proud to be supporting The Big Issue in raising awareness of homelessness in the UK. It is an important subject in our forthcoming exhibition of works by Robert Lenkiewicz.

We live in an age where people lack belief, tolerance and are often disconnected from the world around them. Art has always been one of the most important and certainly most enduring methods of communication between human beings, but the move towards the conceptual art of recent decades has, I feel, lacked the ideas, talent and courage to tackle the very real social issues we currently face. Lenkiewicz's fascination for society's outsiders and his obsession with controversial and challenging subject matter gained him a notoriety which tended to overshadow any serious consideration of his work. He was unfairly neglected by the art establishment during his lifetime, and is only now posthumously being recognised as one of Britain's most skilful and original post-war figurative painters.

Though art is often seen as being for the privileged few, I believe that we all have a social responsibility within our community. Lenkiewicz understood this and his paintings spoke directly to the man-in-the-street about a world that he could recognise. This is reflected in his Projects entitled *Vagrancy* and *Addictive Behaviour*. In collaborating with The Big Issue, Halcyon Gallery aims to make art more accessible and relevant to ordinary people's lives, in the genuine spirit of Lenkiewicz's work.

We very much hope you will be inspired by the images over the following pages and come and see for yourselves these extraordinary works.

Paul Green
President of Halcyon Gallery

Diogenes at Night in Studio Window. 1977. 121 x 160 cm. Oil on canvas. (Detail).

ROBERT LENKIEWICZ was born in 1941, the son of European Jewish émigrés who ran the Hotel Shemtov in Cricklewood. Lenkiewicz was encouraged to paint from an early age and the hotel residents were his first sitters, many of whom were elderly refugees or survivors of the Nazi death camps. After attending Central St Martin's and the Royal Academy art schools, he pursued an independent approach to painting at his Hampstead studios. In an era remembered as the fashion-conscious 'Swinging Sixties,' Lenkiewicz was spending most of his time painting the down-and-outs, the mentally ill and the misfits of the affluent society, all of whom found a sympathetic welcome at his studio. Urged to leave London by the police for attracting so many undesirables to his Hampstead studios, Lenkiewicz soon relocated to Plymouth.

In Plymouth he continued to record the lives of the dossers, housing them in derelict warehouses he had commandeered throughout the city. One of these 'Cowboys' Holiday Inns,' known as 'Jacob's Ladder' (entrance was originally gained by ladder), became the venue for a huge exhibition on *Vagrancy* in 1973. Lenkiewicz exhibited hundreds of pictures of the

tramps and a book of their own observations on the nature of vagrancy, together with the views of those involved in their care and control.

The *Vagrancy Project* became the model for Lenkiewicz's unique approach to art: further Projects on *Mental Handicap* (1975), *Suicide* (1980), and *Death* (1982) investigated hidden or ostracised sections of the community. Other Projects on the nature of human desire, such as *Love & Romance* (1976), *Jealousy* (1977), and *The Painter With Women* (1994), provided the evidence for Lenkiewicz's startling view that the physiological mechanisms responsible for our private attractions and obsessions also led to forms of fanatical social behaviour. He called this phenomenon 'aesthetic fascism,' in which our addiction to gratifying our own aesthetic predilections led us "to treat other people as property" in pursuit of that goal. His 20th Project, unfinished at the time of his death in 2002, aged 60, was titled *Addictive Behaviour*. It drew together the social and private themes from the previous thirty years in an attempt to show the physiological basis of obsessive behaviour and fanatical belief systems.

Robert Lenkiewicz was interviewed in 1997 about the ideas behind the VAGRANCY PROJECT, exhibited in August 1973.

In the sixties you began painting London's and then Plymouth's down and outs. The paintings were eventually collected into the Vagrancy Project, an exhibition of hundreds of paintings and drawings and a large volume of research notes. Can you tell me how it originated?

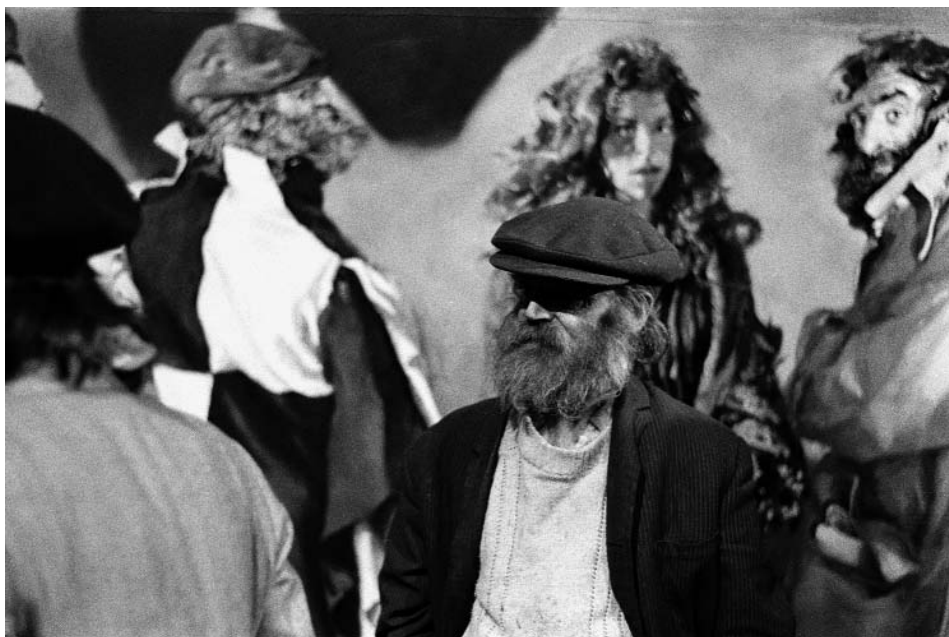
While in Hampstead, Camden Town and Chalk Farm, I had all kinds of studios. A lot of disturbed and difficult people were attracted to those studios. They knew they could get somewhere to stay, something to eat, and I would paint them. A lot of them were criminals or mentally ill... I also had eleven heroin addicts there and that's when it started to get more serious. I had them for two years. Many nights I had to tie some of them up with rope and put a wooden spoon in their mouths to stop them choking on their own tongues from the effects of withdrawal. Some of them had been left at my house by ambulance men in the days of lobotomies; they had literally changed their minds while on the table about to undergo surgery and run out in their pyjamas. That was it for them – no doctor would touch them and they could only go cold turkey. One of them hanged himself in my studio – I remember cutting him down. He had lost an eye a few months before diving through a chemist's window to fix himself on a bottle of aspirin because he was so desperate. I painted a lot of them.



Albert Fisher, the vagrant known as 'Bishop,' outside the 'Jacob's Ladder' studio, 1973.

Did you see the down and outs as victims of society in the liberal sense or take a more medieval view of them as interesting characters?

The latter, I think. I did have what I would at that time have construed as 'compassion' for them and this was known by them. There could have been forty to sixty people at Clifton Street,



Edwin Mackenzie, the vagrant known as 'Diogenes,' at the opening of the Vagrancy Project exhibition in 1973. Photo: Philip Stokes.

Keppel Terrace, Rectory Road in Plymouth. This was the most notorious place, where I met The Bishop, Les 'Cider' Ryder, Corky, Cockney Jim, Snowy and all the other dossers or down and outs – hundreds of them.

Was there camaraderie amongst the vagrants themselves?

It was very superficial – the drink came first: drink, drink, drink! It was really false camaraderie – Les Ryder, after all those years on the road hasn't a single friend; just an immense cachet of stories and memories that he can barely articulate. Les will be guest of honour at the Retrospective Exhibition (Plymouth City Museum & Art Gallery, August 1997) along with Sir Terry Waite. In his own way, Les has suffered like Terry Waite – total isolation, but for all his life. Finally, illness and disease dragged him into hospital and here he is, a survivor.

There was a view emerging in the sixties, Foucault's 'Madness and Civilisation' for instance, that madness had its own wisdom and was in some sense a triumph over the blandness of modern society – did you share that point of view?

I must say that I was definitely aware of that – R.D. Laing, for instance. Right from the start I just accepted them as they were. I knew you couldn't do anything for them. I had no desire to change them. What I did want to do was produce a painting project and see if I could get them to talk, which I did in no uncertain terms. Some of these people were quite insightful.

I was interested in their amorality and their psychotic behaviour. I did think there were insights to be gained. There was almost a

prophet-like quality about some of them. I was very taken with the 'Caspar Hauser' metaphor, later developed by German film-maker Werner Herzog.

Did you feel that you were preparing a documentary record of vagrancy?

Very much so. I liked the idea that I could put together a body of information on a theme, no matter how transitory, and that information could somehow be a microcosm of the macrocosm, could be a metaphor. But, at the same time, I could only do that innocently and energetically if I didn't worry about art. If I worried about art, it couldn't be done. I decided that I was not to worry whether I was going to a 'good' or 'bad' painter, or a 'modern' painter or a 'man of my times'... I thought that the *humanitas* involved in putting this Project together was of more importance than any art theory.



Robert Lenkiewicz at the opening night of the Vagrancy Project, 1973. Photo: Philip Stokes.

Some of the sitters for the Vagrancy Project feature regularly. Would you tell us more about them?

The most startling of them all was 'The Bishop' as he was called – Albert Edward Ernest Fisher. He was a most extraordinary man. He was an alcoholic; he slept rough most of the time and lived at the Salvation Army hostel for many years. He constructed this posh Oxford accent even though he would say, "Derbyshire born, Derbyshire bred, strong in the arm, weak in the head!"

I asked him to open the Vagrancy exhibition (in the Jacob's Ladder studio); there was a huge painting called The Apotheosis of Albert Fisher, now lost, which was about sixty feet long and

showed the Bishop rising up into the air with the local policeman, another hundred figures at the base.

And the other dossers?

Of course, there was 'Diogenes.' His real name was Edwin Mackenzie and he was sometimes known as Blackie or Steptoe... I called him Diogenes after the philosopher who lived in a barrel, because I found him living in a concrete barrel, a circular container looking down onto Chelson rubbish tip over a precipitous drop, and he had lived in there for nine years. I remember lifting up some of the coats that he slept on to find the whole thing teeming with maggots, so he was a pretty rough and ready fellow.

I became friendly with him and began to visit him up there and do watercolours of him on site. There is a coloured photograph on the front cover of one of the early Daily Telegraph magazines which shows me, young and beardless, painting him and Diogenes smoking his pipe, which he had smoked since he was twelve.

If Diogenes was to be believed, then he had designed and built Plymouth's Civic Centre building; he had a market garden business with 300 employees; he had won The Grand National once and The Derby twice; he had played for Arsenal and built the Tamar Bridge.

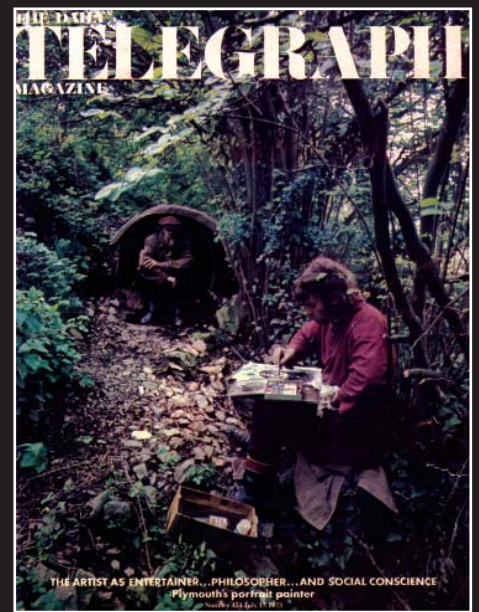


How did the dossers look upon you painting them?

Bishop enjoyed it – he loved posing. Most never commented except for Samuel Eric Roberts, known as ‘Black Sam.’ He was a gypsy, a fine pianist, who eventually committed suicide. He had burned his house to the ground in a drunken incident, with his mother inside it – he could never come to terms with that. He said, “I’d like to move to Scotland and get myself a dog. My ears are so full of noise.” But he never did. He came to the opening night of the Vagrancy exhibition and said, “Fine stuff! Fine stuff! But when I looks at the pictures o’ the lads, I feels like I’m in a mortuary.”

So did you believe that the Vagrancy Project would have a liberal, educative effect on its audience?

Oh, yes! I thought that it would be possible to make a difference. It was very schmaltzy, very romantic, and done to galvanise a small community into action. I invited Plymouth’s Lord Mayor to the opening. He wouldn’t come but some representative of his did come along on the night – there were over 500 people milling about in the studio – and gave a speech about how fortunate it was that Plymouth didn’t have a vagrancy problem... it was at this point that I gave a pre-arranged signal and 73 dossers entered the room, most of them drunk, and they wrecked the whole evening.



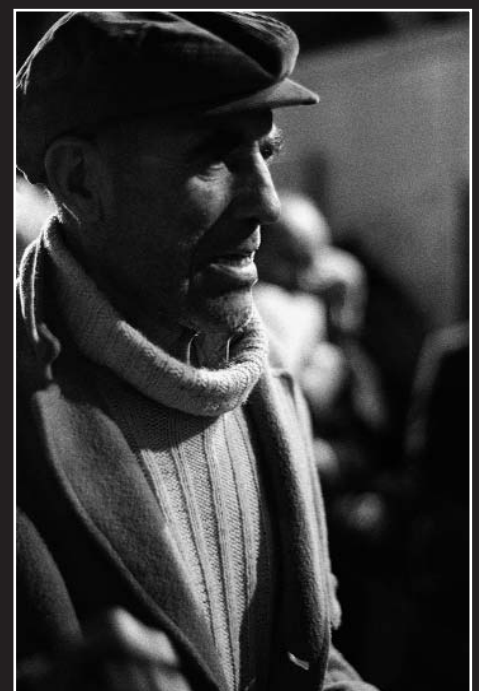
The Daily Telegraph magazine from July 1973, showing Lenkiewicz painting the vagrant ‘Diogenes,’ named after the philosopher who lived in a barrel.

Most of the vagrants you knew then are dead now, but you still put on a Christmas Day dinner for others at Bretonside bus station.

Yes, apart from Les Ryder, not one of them has survived. The dinner used to be in my house: it’s only been at the bus station for the last twenty years. Until four or five years ago, I used to have the food donated by local shops or restaurants, but that is so tiring now. It’s rather sad when they refuse. The Plymouth Gin distillery across the road never gave anything – “Not our policy!” I go there every year to ask, just to irritate them.



The Bishop and The Painter Dancing to Mahler. 1973. 219 x 300 cm. Oil on sailcloth. View of ‘Jacob’s Ladder’ studio, venue for the Vagrancy Project.



Samuel Roberts, known as ‘Black Sam,’ in 1973. Photo: Philip Stokes.

“There is only addictive behaviour and one is simply somewhere along the spectrum of possible intensities.”



A painting from Project 17 – Observations on Local Education: *Syd Sniffing Glue*. 1988. 135 x 135 cm. Oil on canvas.

You've begun a large new Project, very cross referential, on the subject of Addictive Behaviour – how did that come about?

It's the twentieth Project and the culmination of all of them. It's an attempt to put together as solidly as possible all the ideas that run through the other Projects as a common denominator; that is, to consider the physiological basis of belief systems – particularly those that lead to fanatical or obsessive behaviour. It seems to me that in studying addictive behaviour, attention can be drawn to physiological issues.

There are ten themes in the Addictive Behaviour Project, the central one being the 'falling in love' scenario. Others are on alcohol, money, creativity, theological persuasions and so on.

Of course, nicotine is the hardest drug to withdraw from, but to have dozens of paintings of people holding cigarettes would just bring a smile to people's faces! However, to do that with heroin, even though only a few addicts die each year compared with 100,000 smokers, does strike a chord in this society.

Do you think that there is an identical mechanism at work in the body when one gets hooked on heroin or when one is in love?

Anything can increase dopamine in the brain and bring about a high... I see no evidence that suggests that alcohol or drug abuse is any different physiologically from 'falling in love' or even acquiring a religious conviction. I think the *physiology* of it is identical, even though the sociological or political aspects certainly do vary. There is *only* addictive behaviour and one is simply somewhere along the spectrum of possible intensities.

The thing that attracts me about these reconsiderations is that there is a shift away from 'truth' hunting and emotional certainties. It's in the area of feelings or emotions and beliefs that people feel most entitled or self-righteous. It's this area that fascism (with a small 'f'), fanatical behaviour and war thrives on.

I should explain that my views about fascism didn't stem from sociological or political inquiries or readings; they stemmed

entirely from observing human behaviour where, in a state of crisis, that behaviour *treated another human being as property*.

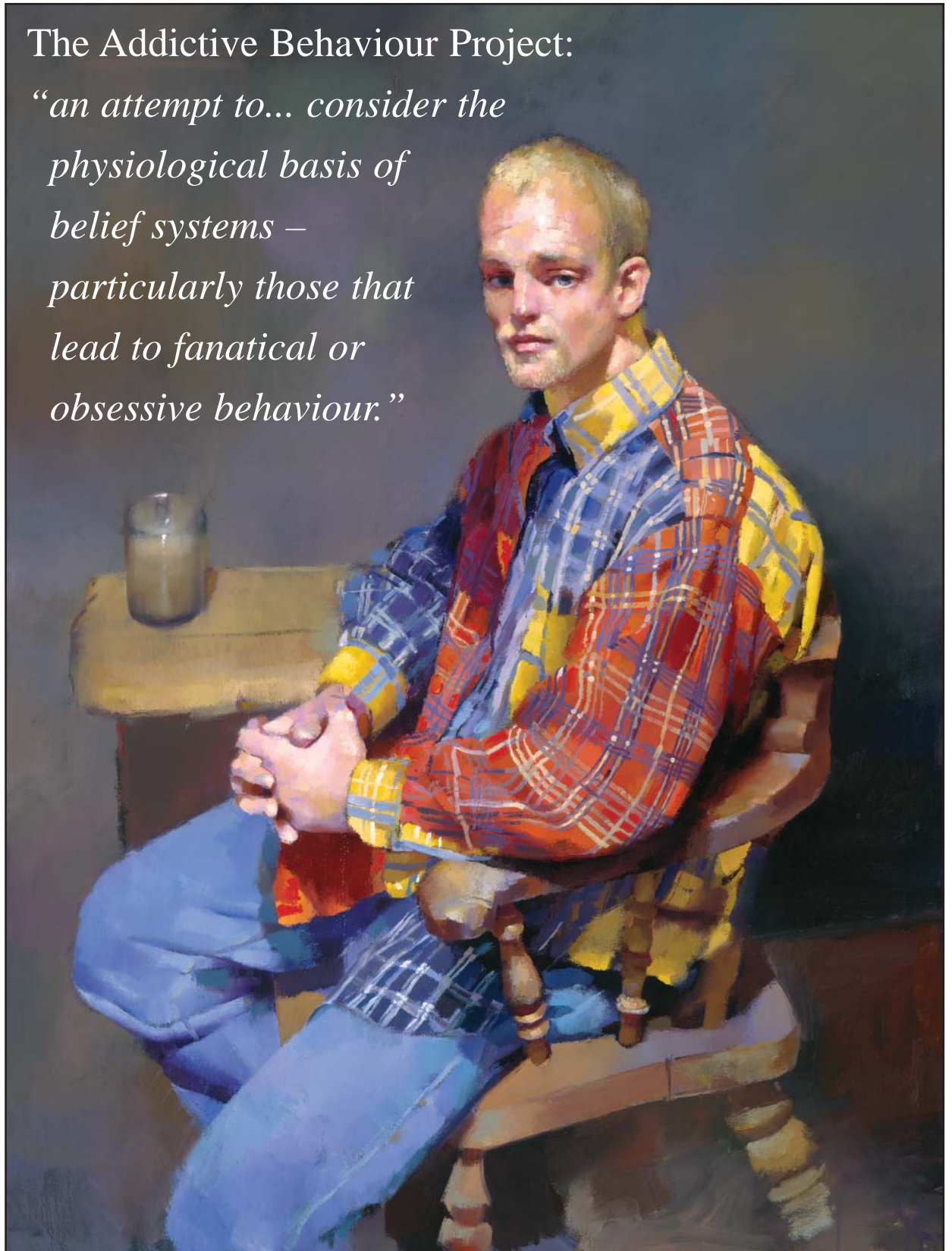
So my consciousness of what I call 'aesthetic fascism' came through a study of aspects of human relationships – the way people behave with each other, become dependent on one another. The notion then expanded: well, hang on, if they're quite interested in each other, or think they are, and become addicted to or preoccupied with that, then why don't they do

the same with *ideas*? So the Projects are simply naive inquiries into one or two ways of considering the types and the causes of the difficulties people have with each other.

Robert Lenkiewicz (1941-2002)

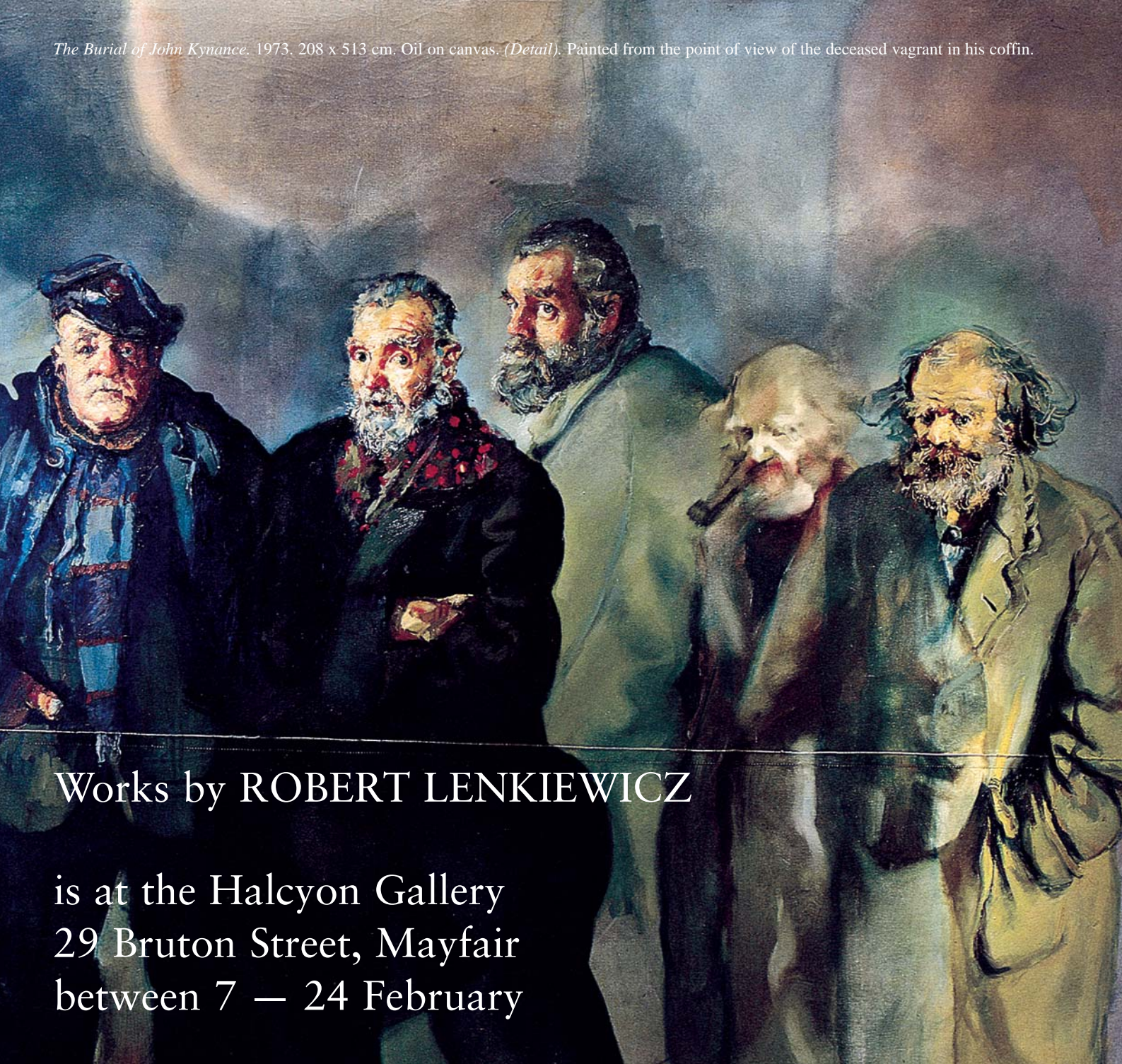
The Addictive Behaviour Project:

“an attempt to... consider the physiological basis of belief systems – particularly those that lead to fanatical or obsessive behaviour.”



A painting from Project 20 – Addictive Behaviour: *Jack the Burglar*. 1988. 121 x 92 cm. Oil on canvas.

The Burial of John Kynance. 1973. 208 x 513 cm. Oil on canvas. (Detail). Painted from the point of view of the deceased vagrant in his coffin.



Works by ROBERT LENKIEWICZ

is at the Halcyon Gallery
29 Bruton Street, Mayfair
between 7 – 24 February

FURTHER INFORMATION:

BOOKS

'Robert Lenkiewicz: Paintings & Projects' (2006). ISBN 09531370 90.

'A Portrait of Robert Lenkiewicz: Photographs by Dr Philip Stokes' (2005). ISBN 09531370 66.

THE LENKIEWICZ FOUNDATION

A registered charity which seeks to promote the work and ideas of Robert Lenkiewicz for educational and social purposes. See the official website for contact details.

WEBSITES

www.halcyongallery.com – for information about the exhibition and other events

www.robertlenkiewicz.co.uk – the official website of The Lenkiewicz Foundation

lenkiewicz.org – a lively forum with biographical information and an image gallery

www.robertlenkiewiczpublications.co.uk – books on Lenkiewicz by White Lane Press


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