

ARUSHA

GALLERY

A trip through the Kaleidoscope with Norman Gilbert

The work of the late artist Norman Gilbert is often reduced simply to its colours or shapes. While the work does indeed display a masterful knowledge of colour theory, impeccable composition and bold, impactful forms, the context and intention of the work he created is many-faceted. Rife with underlying and interwoven meaning, intention and subtext permeates to the very core of the vast body of work that he leaves behind him.

Each work is like a page from a long-loved photo album - rescued from a box in the cobweb-strewn attic, dusted off and shared across generations over a strong cup of tea. Reminiscing, remembering; steeped in a sense of nostalgia, yet so very tied to the here and now, in Norman's works there is so much to relate to. They impress upon their audience a comforting familiarity of seeing a scene you have not lived before, yet in that same scene, recognising the places, objects, subjects and atmosphere, knowing exactly how it would have played out. The varying cast or stars of Norman's stage are those closest to him. His sons feature heavily in his work, and through his many iterations we are privy to their childhood, we follow them through their teenage years, and meet them once more as adults, with their own chosen families and children, when the cycle begins once more. Norman paints his wife, Pat, documenting her throughout their marriage, - in sickness and in health, and casts his friends as protagonists for his visual tales. The figures, each bursting with personality and exuding a strong sense of personality and self, were all integral parts of Norman's life - depicted through his time at art school and later adulthood, and they appear familiar and inviting, a friendly presence, yet often shrouded in an element of privacy, mystery or anonymity through his simple yet thoughtful titles: *Picnic Table, People and Red Furniture, Patterned Quilt, Caravan...*

The beauty of Norman's work lies in this: it's quiet relatability. Through each painting we see that which is familiar to us. We recognise a family, a home, objects, scenes and events that we too have lived in our own ways, and it creates a connection, a bond. That is Norman's gift to us: by sharing his life, his family, his memories - we too are transported to a plane of safety and familiarity: a hazy summer long ago, sunshine through a kitchen window, a chair newly vacated, an evening picnicking on the grass with friends, late nights curled up on tattered, comfortable couches, the feel of a soft newly knitted jumper as it is pulled over our heads... His narrative becomes our narrative, and the works begin to grow, shift and breathe - coming alive, the scenes continuing just out of frame, the words on the lips of the figures almost audible, tangible.

Norman's home is the setting for so many of his works - objects, rooms, architectural features and textures repeat over and over again in his paintings, and walking into the house that he shared with his family for so many years in Glasgow is a strange experience, like clambering through the frame of one of his paintings and tumbling headfirst into the landscape within. Creeping plants, curlicued end tables and lacy wrought iron railings walk a tightrope between two worlds, mirroring their twin beyond the frame. Norman's home is a delight in colour, pattern and texture - in his studio a well-worn stuffed armchair is covered in a colourful, patterned quilt, the kitchen table still wears the same technicolour Liberty oilcloth from his sons' youth, the checked black and white tiles and afghan rugs that adorn the floors in his home blink out from their reproductions. The adornment of his home and its subsequent echoing within the paintings was a cyclical process - one informed the other. Norman regularly bought furnishings

and decorative elements specifically because he thought they would make great paintings - and he painted existing features because they made for great interior design. His work borrowed from the world around him, and in turn that world around him was used as inspiration in his art.

This concept of cyclical time and time again with Norman. His painting career spans a vast period - almost sixty years, and while no two works are ever the same, Norman revisits concepts, patterns and figures repeatedly, elevating them, reimagining them, and giving them new life. His works appear modern yet with an unmistakable flavour of the psychedelic palette and tessellated mosaics of the 1960s and 70s - yet somehow they are also timeless, existing in an undefined dimension between now and then, and will still remain relevant in the many years to come. Through the recurrent motifs, Norman traces a connective thread through each of his works - each one in conversation with the next: preceding, succeeding...

His work creates a kaleidoscopic journey - a meeting of many colours that somehow remains serene, complimentary, and peaceful - a show of refracting, shimmering shades that surround the viewer, entice them in, and harmonise together in a stunning display of coherence and intention, contrast and imagination. Even in his black and white works, light, shadow, movement and space come to life - a mastery in monochrome.

Norman's boldness in colour and shape is a physical manifestation of his boldness of spirit. Having essentially been cast out of art school in his youth for refusing to play by the established rules of Impressionist revival, Norman always sought to paint that, and only that which is authentic and true to his self and style. His sons describe him as an anarchist, a disruptor, the rebel artist - Norman's work has only ever been his own. His confidence and surety survives and thrives in every brushstroke, every line, every splash of colour or wash of ink. Layering his colours in a system and method that only he understood, he created works that glow from within, displaying an uncharacteristic sense of depth and recession despite the even application of paint in the absence of shadows or blending. Almost every painting exists in both ink, paint, and often charcoal - none a study for the next, but symbiotic and complementary iterations of one theme, exploring a depth of light, shade, colour and line that is unrivalled in its contemporary counterparts. Norman's works will always belong to him, even when they now belong to us - he lives on in each and every painting.

The leaving of a legacy is a need so inherent in us as people. We all want to leave our mark on this world, to know that the fleeting time we spent here was not just a freak of nature, an accidental evolutionary quirk, but that it meant something. That our time on the planet counted in a grander scheme of judgement - that we did something lasting, that our names would be remembered long after we have gone, and Norman was no exception to this. He knew that his works would outlive him, that they would be known far past the bounds of his world when he came to pass in 2019. Everything he did, from conception to preparation of his paintings was carefully considered: using only the highest quality materials, dedicatedly sealing his boards, using a palette knife to smooth out and push in almost-dry paint that had been brushed on days previous - Norman wanted his work to last, to live, to endure. This idea of legacy and immortality through painting is so closely interwoven in the very fabric of his oeuvre as an artist. Though he only painted two self portraits, by choosing his home, his family and his friends as subjects for his work, Norman ensured that his life, and those of his sons, his wife and all those dear to him would live on, would become immortal through his bold and beautiful works, weaving his way into the very fabric of the history of art.

- *Chloe Browne, 2023*