“Ron’s Place in Birkenhead”

Iain Jackson

There’s a joy in hearing stories about people who follow a different path. Those who stubbornly refuse to conform. Those who seek a creative culvert from the banality of modern life preferring a world of their own making.

When I saw photographs of giant concrete lion and Minotaur fireplaces I knew that this was such a creator, and I was eager to find out more. The work did not stop with the fireplaces; the entire flat, in this substantial Victorian villa, has become a place for creative expression. It is at once a performance, a studio, an exhibition, and a work-in-progress, for an audience of one – the maker Ron Gittins.

Ron lived and worked in his Birkenhead flat for around 30 years, with very few invited visitors and almost everyone else refused entry. Occupying the entire ground level there are four large rooms, plus entrance hall and bathroom, all highly decorated tributes to antiquity.

The fireplaces are the centre pieces. In one room with murals depicting Classical Greece there is a large Minotaur’s head fireplace. The mouth of the beast forms the opening for the fire. Above the Minotaur are portraits of Greek tragedians perched above the picture rail. These are not meanly proportioned rooms, and the ceiling heights stretch to almost four metres, with every surface painted, sometimes overpainted again, and even the floor intricately modified. Across the hallway is even more impressive lion fireplace. Standing at three metres hall it is an accomplished piece of work. Imagine the room lit only by the flames coming up from the belly of these creatures and the different scenes and figures of the room becoming suddenly illuminated and then disappearing into the darkness. The fireplaces have breezeblock and wired structures overlaid with carefully polished concrete. There is a precision and undeniable skill in these pieces. Ron also produced sculptures of human figures using papier-mâché and some of this work still survives.

In the rear kitchen the fireplace is again celebrated, this time in a more architectural fashion, a temple-like structure with gladiatorial bas relief figures on either side of a central disk.

Building and art materials were gathered in a vintage pram that he would wheel round Birkenhead, piled up with cardboard boxes donated by the local florist and building materials gathered in the town.

Whilst the creative process at home was a private activity, the sojourns into Birkenhead were elevated into a kind of performance practice. Ron would adorn special outfits he fashioned for himself. He enjoyed orating, reciting pieces of literature, and occasionally busking with his guitar. Ron referred to himself ‘The Minstrel’, and his dapper outfits, hats and wigs were deliberately worn to attract attention and sometimes provoke.

Ron enjoyed this public exhibitionism; he was a wandering flaneur and Birkenhead was his stage.

But his home practice was a more secluded affair. He collected, made collages, assembled bricolage from found objects. He compiled literature, made notes, wrote lists, and penned reports – activities that began to dominate the space. Piled high amongst aborted prototypes these collections restricted access to some of the rooms in the end. With space now at a premium, Ron slept in the hallway – his creation almost pushing him out of his own home.

This work was not his first creation. He had previously been evicted from one place, and even set about building a Roman wall in the garden of his parents' rented home, much to the annoyance of the neighbours. He had a determined impulsion, a necessity to create and perform. Ron was provocative, a contrarian, he could be argumentative and difficult. His father was in the Royal Navy before working for Cammell Laird shipbuilders in Birkenhead. Ron’s flamboyant manner was certainly contrary to the tough dockworker image, and his renditions of Richard III performed in the outside lavatory goaded fascination and astonishment.

Ron briefly studied art, but he didn’t approve of the formal school syllabus, and became a quality controller at a refrigeration production plant. He was too diligent in this role and condemned nearly everything as falling short of his standards – a job he didn’t keep for long. The rest of his life was devoted to his art, and a few portrait commissions he painted for close friends.

Ron ensured that his rental agreement included permission to decorate as he saw fit, as well as permission to build the fireplaces – but he was reluctant to give landlords consent to enter, and the dilapidated dwelling lacked all modern conveniences. Eventually his creative practice ventured into the front garden. Now he was exhibiting publicly, and perhaps giving a hint at what lay within. Two concrete totemic columns were installed, enigmatically guarding the front door. Sadly, these columns became detached from the main façade - and have now been removed.   
Ron died in September 2019, and it was only then that his family discovered the full extent of the work. Ron’s niece, Jan Williams (part of The Caravan Gallery with Chris Teasdale) – entered the house and was astonished at what they saw. They knew Ron was an active creator and artist, but didn’t expect to uncover work on this scale. After clearing a way though the possessions they began to see the murals and substantial creative works.

It is probably appropriate to define Ron as an ‘outsider artist’. The term ‘outsider art’ (originally used by Roger Cardinal in 1972) is notoriously difficult and at best a problematic, if convenient catch-all term. It is useful however, because it helps us to recognise and define art that was produced by those who are outside of the art market, who are largely self-taught, and often at the margins of society (economically and socially). There’s something precious and exciting to be found here – it’s work that is searching, mysterious, frail, innocent, and often challenging. It is challenging to examine this creation and not come away changed – for it provokes a response, not only in terms of value judgements, but also questioning the limits we place upon ourselves. What is stopping us from being expressive, creative, and pursuing uninhibited artistic production?

Ron’s work should be taken seriously and considered an important creative endeavour. The challenge is now to retain this extraordinary environment, and to see it impact and contribute to the community. Jan and Chris have secured a six-month lease, and the landlord is sympathetic to the work and the future vision they have for Ron’s Place. A crowd-funding website has been set-up to help preserve the work and cover basic expenses, but there’s a long way to go – please consider contributing to the future of this eccentric and intriguing place.

<https://thecaravangallery.photography>

<https://www.crowdfunder.co.uk/saving-rons-place>