

A Rake's Progress

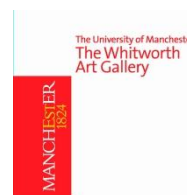
Kei Miller

Kei Miller was commissioned by Manchester Literature Festival to write a sequence of poems responding to the *Hockney to Hogarth: A Rake's Progress* exhibition at the Whitworth Art Gallery, showing 6 October 2012 – 3 February 2013. The resulting work was performed at an event in the Whitworth Art Gallery on Sunday 14th September.

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Author's Note

7 or so months ago Cathy Bolton of the Manchester Literature Festival asked if I'd be interested in a commission in which I'd be responding to art work. Before this I'd been eagerly looking for other kinds of projects and collaborations to work on to shake me out of my comfort zone and open up different worlds, and so Cathy's request seemed to me a way in which the Universe had answered. Going to the Whitworth Gallery and leafing through the Hogarth prints and then Hockney's was of course an incredible experience, but to my embarrassment I realised I didn't know much, or anything really, about either artists. I often find these kinds of gaps in my knowledge, which I am learning not to apologise for, but the embarrassment is still there. I grew up in Jamaica of course and our art world was different. Over the next many months I realised that what I was doing more than anything else was reading, about Hockney in particular. I bought his biographies and I realise many of the details of the poems come from that, like his painting of bicycles in his father's shop.

Hockney also gave me the freedom to insert my own biography in the narrative of the Rake's progress. This is of course what he did when he responded to Hogarth's work – he reinterpreted the rake as himself and told the story of himself in New York. I've done something similar. In 2004 I came to Manchester. In fact, this is when I met Cathy Bolton. In that year a hurricane had just hit Jamaica and I remember a landslide had covered the road right outside of my house. I had to sell my car in Jamaica. Where Hogarth's rake inherited money, and where Hockney in New York sold his prints, in Manchester it was the money from my car that I was living off.

These poems then are a response to Hockney's response to Hogarth, but also, together they form part of the story of my 'progress' in Manchester.

Kei Miller

1. Dear David,

Were you to paint this slide you should paint it brown
with dots of black to recreate the stones.

I left after a hurricane had made the hill so soft,
it slipped and poured through the house above ours.

We heard the dirt scraping down the road
a sound like a hundred radios had lost
their channels.

I went outside to suddenly know –
land does not always hold.

2. Dear David,

I hope you do not take offence
when I suggest what or how
you ought to paint -
in this, or in that colour,
brown, indigo, of your favourite –
emergency yellow,
as if I know how to compose
a picture more than you do.

Look – I know your eyes are not mine
and that my eyes are not yours
and that we see different things
in the world.

It's just that sometimes I lift
your large work towards me
as a man might lift his spectacles
from a bedside table,
and I squint, and I focus, and I swear
on those days I see
the world better.

3. Dear David,

Were you to draw my leaving
you ought to draw a car.

The details are not important,
except the muffler.

This you ought to draw larger
than the car itself.

It was loud enough that no one
in Jamaica could hear
the noise of my wrists and hips
nor of my drooping
shoulders.

It was in the quiet
of Manchester
that such things began
to make a keener sound.

4. Dear David

The sale of my car funded this new city,
so from slide to slide, you could draw
in the corners – an ever diminishing
Nissan, or Honda – and a man
who looks somewhat like me,
eating first the roof, then grinding
windshield between his teeth,
then picking through a salad
of sparkplugs and engine wires,
eating his way toward
the Goodyear tires.

5. Dear David,

I wrote my first poems
on bicycles.
I scratched untidy letters
onto the handlebar
and on the saddle
and on the bearings;
I punctured tires
with full stops that took the air
out of everything.

I'm sorry.
None of this is true.
Of course it was you
who painted art on bikes
restored in your father's shop.
It was you who having placed
your work on moving parts
destined it, from early,
to travel far.

6. Dear David,

A woman with breasts like peace missiles
is singing heaven as a spill of orange.
I think I know her;

It is she who weeps in the corner
while tailors measure
the seams of the rake's trousers.

It is she who daubs the sores of lepers.

It is she who throws her wages behind the wagon of the poor.

It is she who has been raising a son alone.

She has been waiting umpteen yeas and counting
for a good man;

Or she has left a bad man because he gambled and raced horses;

Her name is Mahalia Jackson.

Her name is Sarah Young.

Her name too is Sister Eunice,

or Sister Adessa Or Sister Gilzene.

She is from New Orleans,

She is from Bradford

She is from Mount Zion Pentecostal Church
on a little green island.

7. Dear David

Your mother confides to her diary
That she is pleased with your humility
but displeased by your hair.
Again and again she will write
about your Lady Clairol hair.
And maybe this is the only way
she can say something else.

My grandmother is known to occasionally mutter
'Kei has a strange way of putting clothes together'.
A habit I learnt in Manchester.
and then she will turn her head
and fall to silence.

Your mother. My grandmother.
Theirs is a language
in which is translated
the love of comrades,
and the fear of stones,
the fact of boys, together, clinging.

8. Dear David

If you draw films on Tuesdays – three or four
because sometimes a man just too poor
to go to only the one he has paid for

if you draw blue buses overheating down south
if you draw a man sleeping on a bench in Portsmouth

if you draw the aquatic centre, MMU's Didsbury Gym
if you draw 5 pound phone cards spent on calling him

If you draw Michael, and also Michael
Simon, and Rowena, and the cottage in Hatfield
If you draw meals of tinned spaghetti

If you draw such a version of Manchester
You would have drawn a land I hoped
would forever hold me.

9. Dear David,

It is not the worst thing to be tossed aside
Snakes are quite cosy things on the inside
There are rugs and windows and beds
from whose quilted shores we can catch a soft dream-tide.

10. Dear David

How lovely are the misfits
The ones who never seem quite with it
These are our sisters, our brothers,
our tribe
How special – the friendship not of the good,
but of the others

11. Dear David

I left Manchester after the London bombs went off
I left after the police had killed a man who was only trying to board
a train –

I left after his family had written a letter which began
*We do urge the police to be ever more careful
though we know they are trying their very best*
I thought a man's death did not deserve such politeness.
In any case, I had to go back. I had eaten the car
right down to the tire-tracks.

12. Dear David,

In the last of your prints, we lose sight of the rake
You hold the edges of a future and draw it
towards today,

And maybe the rest of your art is yet to come true
But that one day you would have painted the
whole world new