



Geoffrey Key

Front Cover

1 Pulcinello with Harlequin, 2014

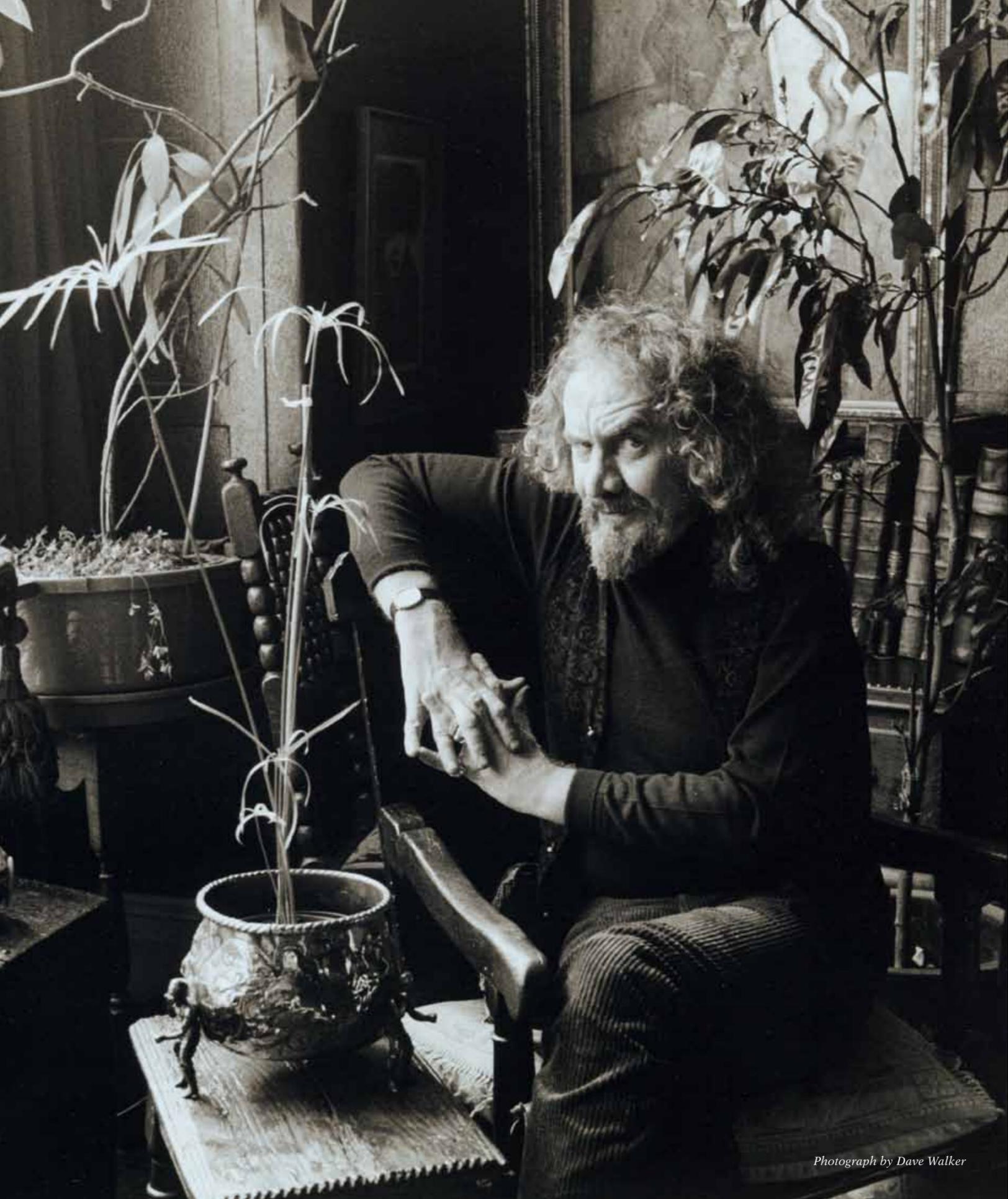
oil on canvas
92 x 92 cms 36 x 36 ins

Opposite

2 Pulcinello in Green, 2014

work on paper
40 x 30 cms 15¼ x 11¼ ins





Photograph by Dave Walker

an exhibition of new works by

Geoffrey Key



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3 Study for Harlequin with Violin, 2014

work on paper
40 x 30 cms 15¼ x 11¼ ins

tricksters playing to an improvised script that is shaped and fuelled by audience participation. Its roots may lie in baroque Italy, but in its later variations – Punch and Judy shows, vaudeville and pantomime – *commedia dell'arte* became something wholly British, and like Key's 2001 'Clown' series, these works were partly inspired by Key's childhood memories of the Belle Vue Circus in Groton, Manchester and pantomimes at the city's Ardwick Hippodrome. Never one to trade in nostalgia however, the series also grew from his observation of local street performers, renowned for their variety and tenacity. (Busker and local institution Noel Ward is well known for playing in the dead of winter with only a blanket over his shoulders.)

While not exactly 'theatrical', Manchester's cityscape offers mimes, actors and musicians a variety of ad-hoc performance venues. Much of the centre has been pedestrianized and the concrete facades of Piccadilly

Foreword

Collectors in Lancashire and Cheshire, Wales, Ireland and Scotland have long prized Geoffrey Key's boldly stylised paintings. Some already have a significant number, making his work the focus of their collections, and yet eagerly anticipate his exhibitions in the hope of acquiring still more. In addition, his paintings are now collected throughout Britain, in France, Germany, Australia and the Far East and recently, have set record auction prices for northern contemporary art.

It is not difficult to see why Key's work is so popular; his style evokes the technical daring of cubism (without the usual decoding process) and his love of colour, pattern and rhythm recalls various strands of modernism from the Bloomsbury painters to The School of Paris. But as one of his earliest collectors, Neville Rawlinson, once wrote: 'it is unnecessary to make comparisons... [Key] has already established a style, which is personal and recognisable, and he is constantly experimenting and developing.'

His experimental flair has perhaps never been more apparent than in his series inspired by the *commedia dell'arte*, featuring several of its stock characters: Pulcinello, Columbine, Scaramouche and Harlequin,



4 Study for Harlequin, 2014

work on paper
42 x 33 cms 16½ x 13 ins



5 Harlequin Musicians, 2014

oil on canvas
92 x 92 cms 36 x 36 ins



6 **Study for Harlequin, 2014**

work on paper
40 x 30 cms 15¼ x 11¼ ins

and carved. Equally, it reflects his interest in classical art, specifically the opposing diagonals and expressive frontality of the Hellenistic period. Ultimately, however, like all his work, his *commedia dell'arte* pictures are set in the here and now, with the players acting out their roles against a pastiche of Manchester's canals and landmarks, both historic and contemporary, including the watchtower of HMP Strangeways, warehouses on Liverpool Street and the Beetham Hilton Tower (Britain's tallest structure outside London).

This contrast between costumed fantasy and the modern urban, as seen in *Harlequin in the City* (no. 8) and *City Harlequinade* (no. 11), also complements and expands upon Key's studies of commercial culture: bars and jazz clubs filled with city-boys and girls. In *The Credit Card* (no. 39) and *Mobile Trio* (no. 41) – paintings that gently skewer the mandatory 'fun' of corporate entertainment – 'beautiful people' cluster beneath puddles of halogen

Gardens provide suitable backdrops; the steps outside the M&S an informal amphitheatre; the covered walkway at the end of Market Street is effectively a sound tunnel. Moreover, the city's creative energy is fired by its well-earned reputation as a music capital, having produced icons and iconoclasts from blues legend Victor Brox to "punk-poet" John Cooper Clarke, Frank Sidebottom, Joy Division and ... well, the list is endless, really.

Initially, these *commedia dell'arte* pictures reminded me somewhat of Léger's post-war 'Peace Movement' paintings of circus performers and acrobats, and Key's distinctive play of volume with strong contours chimes somewhat with "tubism". But unlike Léger (to paraphrase the man himself), Key paints more by instinct than reflection. As he put it, "Most of the time, I don't even know where the picture is leading until it gets there". Indeed, it is not unusual for him to work on several canvases at once "finding a solution to one composition while exploring options in another".

He begins each work, painting in dry pigments to achieve as much impasto as possible, before building up specific areas in layers of glaze to achieve depth of form, colour and tone. His relief-like painting technique is a logical extension of his work in sculpture, both plastic



7 **The Trio, 2014**

work on paper
47 x 34 cms 18½ x 13½ ins



8 **Harlequin in the City, 2014**

oil on canvas
92 x 92 cms 36 x 36 ins



9 **Harlequin, 2014**
work on paper
50 x 30 cms 19½ x 11¼ ins

tide. In some pictures such as *Bay Railings* (no. 47) and *Approaching Tide* (no. 51), his exaggeration of the boats' proportions strike chords with the shapes of swooping gulls and oily reflections in the water.

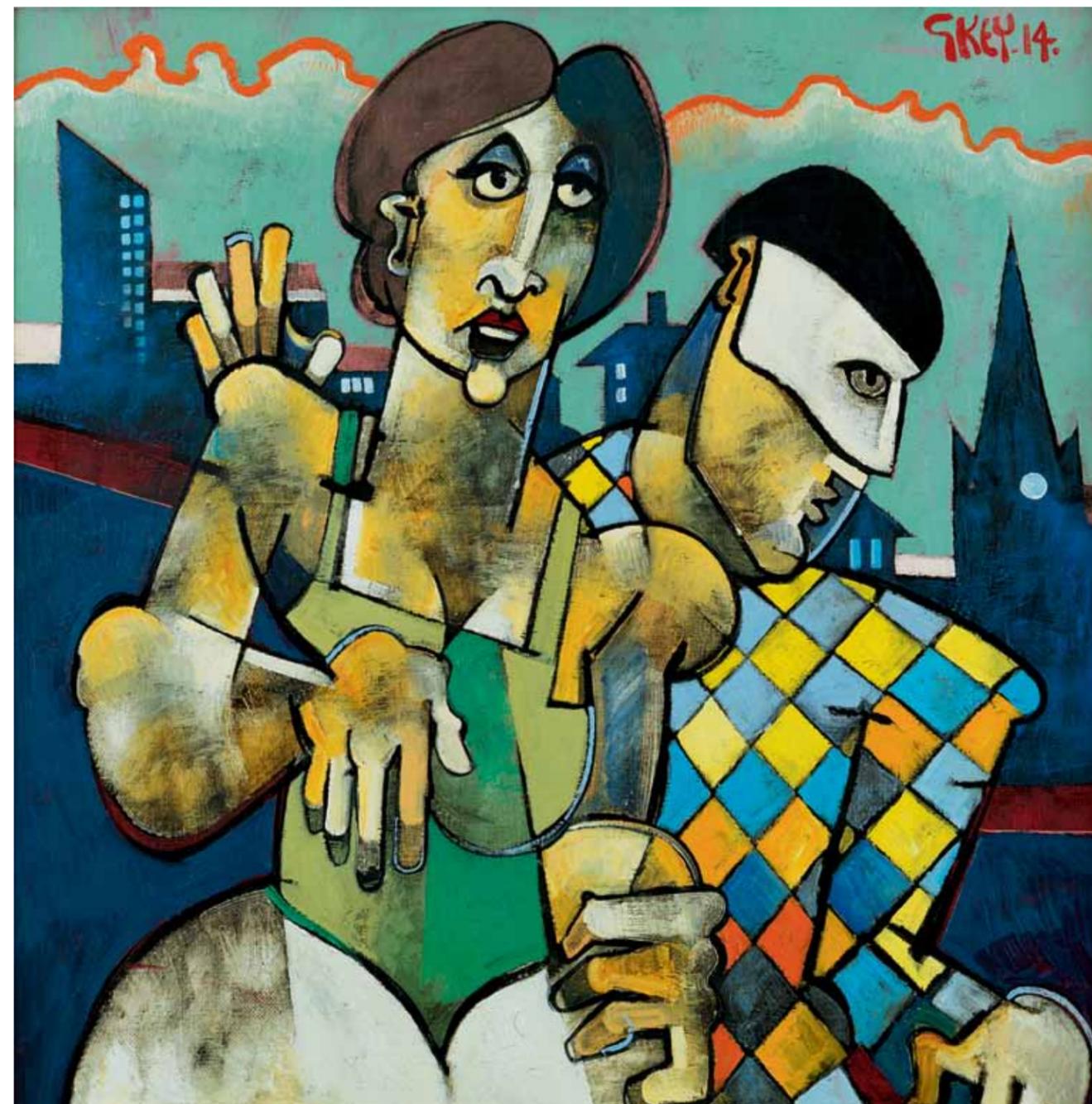
This ability to stylise form to the point of ambiguity or even metamorphosis continues (and is, arguably, best realised) in Key's still lifes, which, despite their evident simplicity, remain some of his most sophisticated compositions. In *Yellow Colander* (no. 37) a torso framed on a windowsill (actually one of Key's own wooden sculptures) answers the curves of an antique coffee-grinder. He uses the actual objects that inspire these works – the Delftware, salt-glaze pottery, treen and carved chairs that fill the Salford studio-home he shares with his wife, Judith O'Leary – as vehicles for pure form



10 **Harlequin with Hand Raised, 2014**
work on paper
57 x 38 cms 22½ x 15 ins

light, texting and flashing plastic, and if everyone is now 'connected', no one makes eye contact. On a different note, in *Jazz* (no. 40), Key captures the bittersweet thrill of a dance floor at full tilt, with various couples either in sync, at odds, or still finding their own steps.

Monumental citygirls run like chic maenads across a *Wildflower Meadow* (no. 44) in what would appear to be a straightforward nod to the 'modern antiquity' of pre-war Picasso, before re-emerging even more dynamically on the sands of *Windy Bay* (no. 48), one of several paintings inspired by Morecombe Bay. Located about 60 miles north of Salford, it is the country's largest area of tidal mudflats and until a few years ago, a gas field off Blackpool supplied much of Britain's gas. The Bay has been largely reclaimed as a nature reserve, although the shell-fishing industry endures, as it has done for generations. With his command of curves and parabolas, Key's brush reimagines the region's distinctive nobbies and prawners that variously bob at anchor or lean beached at low



11 **City Harlequinade, 2014**
oil on canvas
92 x 92 cms 36 x 36 ins



Poster for the 1977 exhibition at the Torr Top Gallery, New Mills.

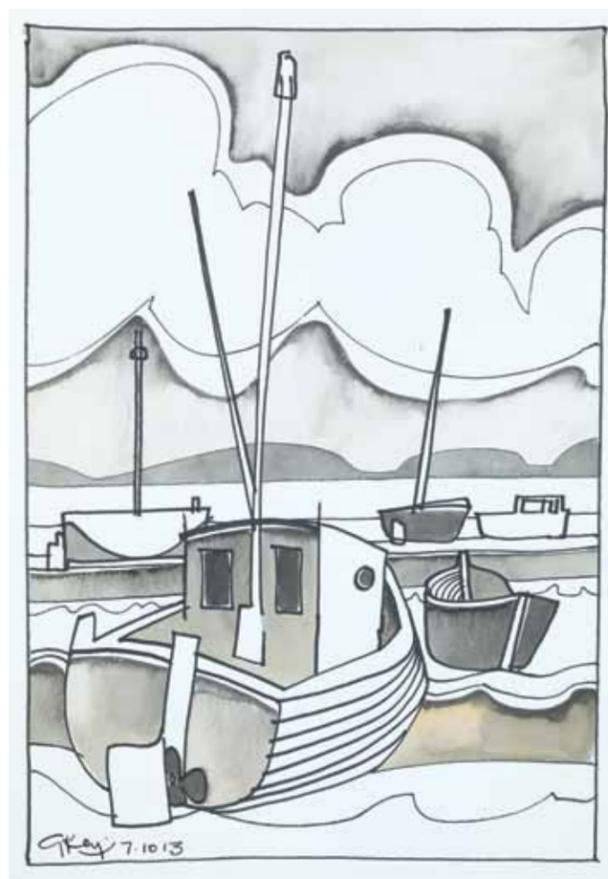
post-cubist style – a combination of rich impasto with tonal glazes, rhythmic patterns and contours, and forms reinvented through his own stored perceptions – these works (like his hugely successful ‘Clown’ series) engage the viewer on both an atavistic and a very modern level.

“The mind has a wonderful way of distilling an image down to its essentials”, he says. And it is by pruning his subject back to its basic forms, and then mining their possibilities for contrast and interrelation, that Key achieves works, which are dynamic and self-assured, expressing a genuine delight in what it means to live and work in modern, urban Lancashire.

Andrea Gates
Director

and pattern. In this respect, his still lifes are the legacy of his earlier fascination with the Nab; a distinctive fell near Glossop in Derbyshire. Key lived in Glossop for over two years after completing post-graduate work in sculpture. There, in an effort to divest himself of former influences (such as Pasmore, Nash and Vaughan, artists alongside whom he later exhibited at the Torr Top Gallery), Key made countless reinterpretations of the Nab and later described his obsession: ‘What really instigated it was the relationship of shapes and forms ... One key part was a strong vertical shaft of light above the hill and ... this form in relationship to sun and moon shapes has been through my work right up to the present time.’

In *commedia dell’arte*, the players are avatars, and as such, cannot rely on words to assert their identity, but must use postures and attitudes. In fact, their script can be completely ad-libbed, but each character has a specific shape and movement, which, if the role requires a mask, becomes further exaggerated. Realised in Key’s



12 **Morecambe Boats, 2013**

work on paper
53 x 36 cms 21 x 14 ins

Commedia dell’arte

13 Terrace Harlequin and Columbine, 2014
oil on canvas
92 x 92 cms 36 x 36 ins





14 **Pulcinello, 2014**
work on paper
40 x 30 cms 15¼ x 11¼ ins

15 **Moon Window, 2014**
oil on canvas
92 x 92 cms 36 x 36 ins





16 **Study for Harlequin and Columbine, 2014**
work on paper
54 x 37 cms 21¼ x 14¾ ins

17 **Harlequin with Olive Branch, 2014**
oil on canvas
92 x 92 cms 36 x 36 ins





18 **Pulcinella & Harlequin, 2014**
work on paper
43 x 38 cms 16 7/8 x 15 ins

19 **Harlequin with Girl, 2014**
oil on canvas
92 x 92 cms 36 x 36 ins





20 **Harlequin, 2014**
work on paper
40 x 30 cms 15¼ x 11¼ ins

21 **Pulcinello with Nude, 2014**
oil on canvas
92 x 92 cms 36 x 36 ins





22 **Pulcinello with Birds, 2014**
work on paper
40 x 30 cms 15¼ x 11¼ ins

23 **Harlequin & Columbine, 2014**
oil on canvas
92 x 92 cms 36 x 36 ins

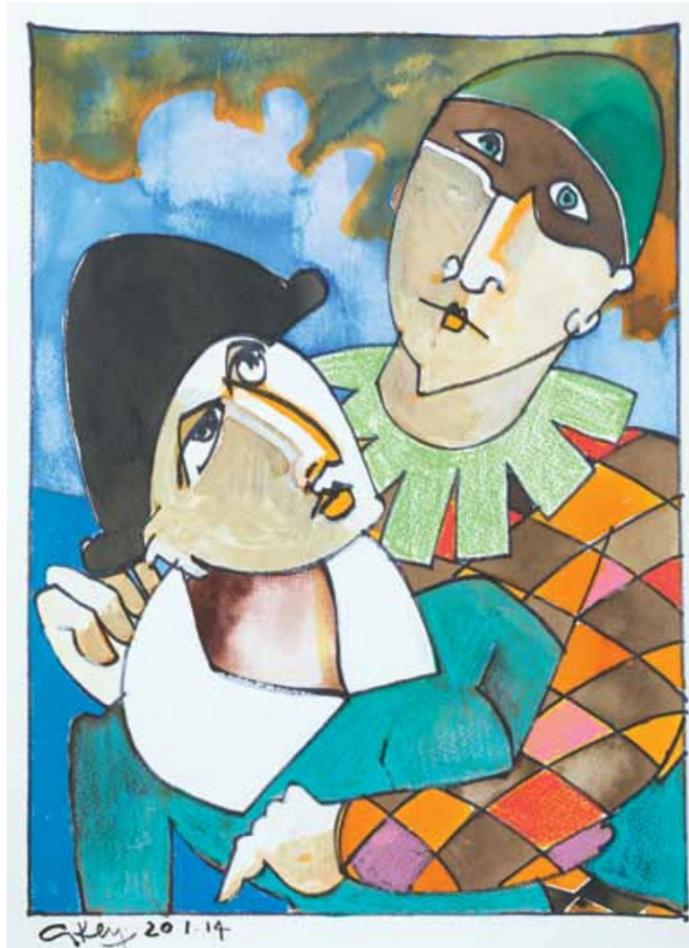




24 **Harlequin and Columbine I, 2014**
work on paper
51 x 39 cms 20 1/8 x 15 1/2 ins

25 **Harlequin with Lute, 2014**
oil on canvas
92 x 92 cms 36 x 36 ins





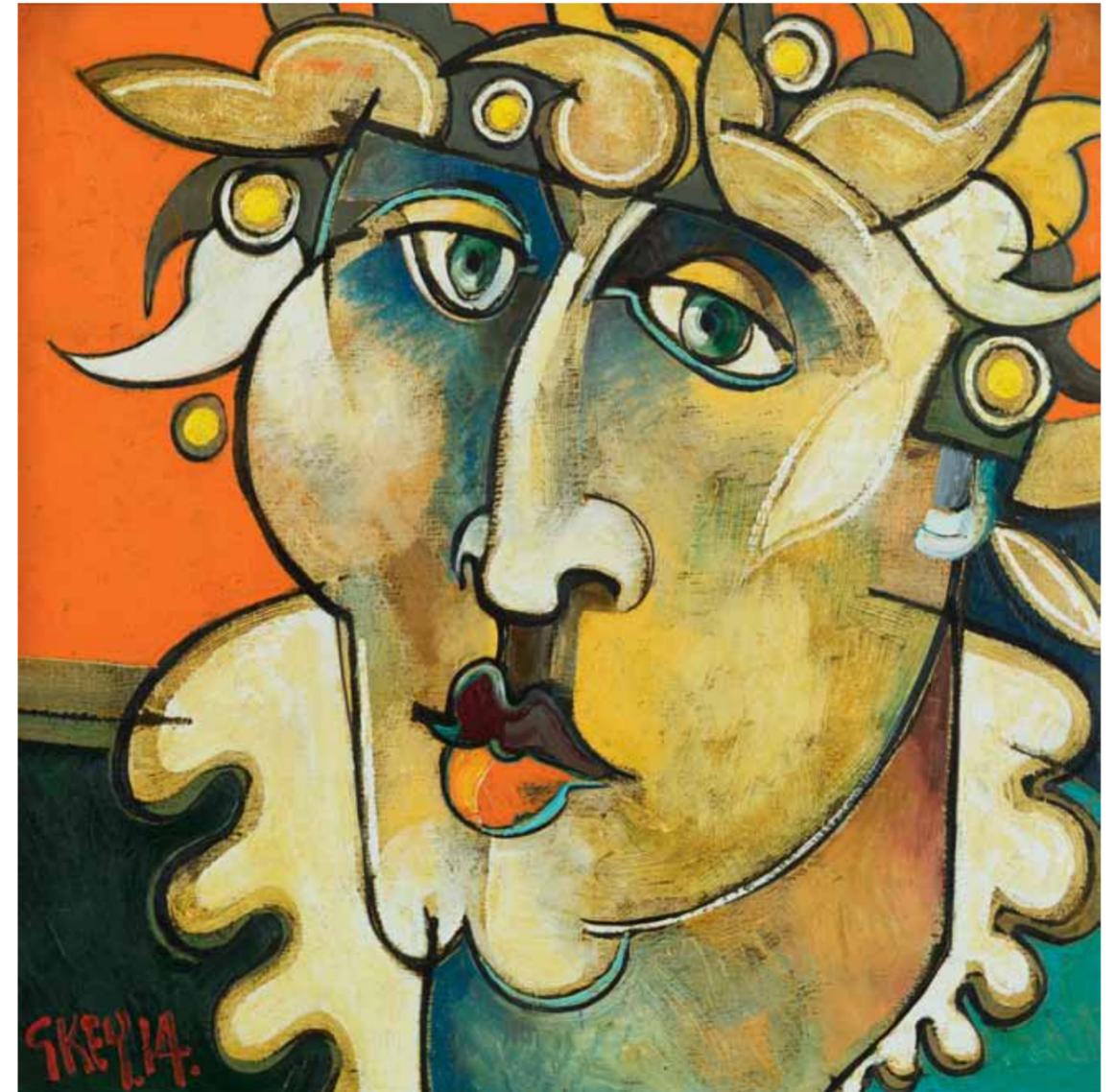
26 **Harlequin and Columbine II, 2014**
work on paper
56 x 41 cms 22 x 16½ ins

27 **Late for the Ball, 2014**
oil on canvas
92 x 92 cms 36 x 36 ins





28 **Scaramouche, 2014**
oil on canvas
51 x 61 cms 20 x 24 ins



29 **Scaramouche II, 2014**
oil on canvas
61 x 61 cms 24 x 24 ins



Still Life

30 **Pulcinello, 2014**
oil on canvas
51 x 61 cms 20 x 24 ins

31 **Lilies, 2013**
oil on canvas
61 x 92 cms 24 x 36 ins



32 **Tulips, 2014**
oil on canvas
61 x 61 cms 24 x 24 ins



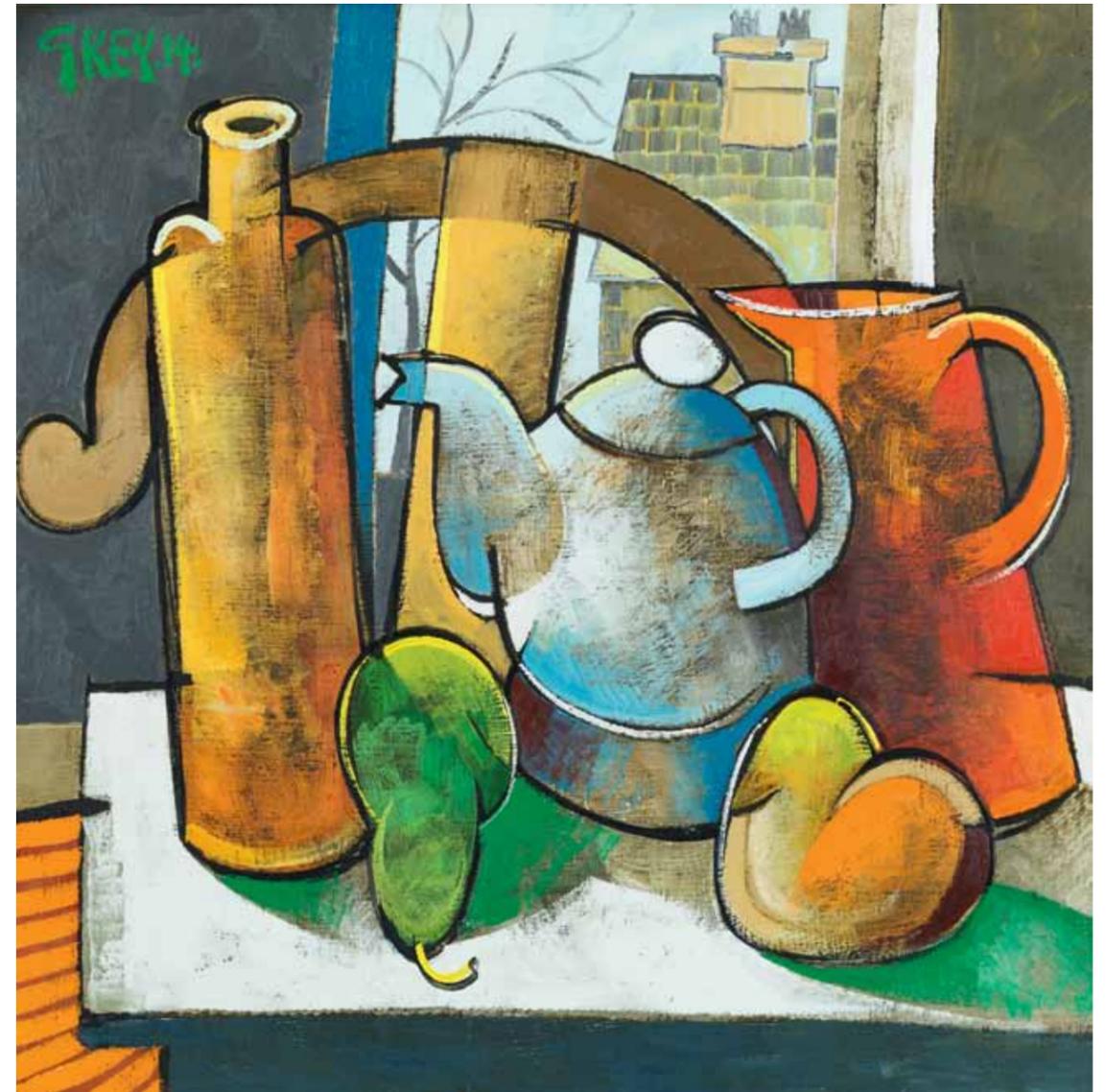
33 **Salt and Pepper, 2014**
oil on canvas
61 x 61 cms 24 x 24 ins



34 **Tea and Coffee, 2014**
oil on canvas
61 x 61 cms 24 x 24 ins



35 **Still Life with Gin Bottle, 2014**
oil on canvas
61 x 61 cms 24 x 24 ins



36 **Cut-Glass Decanter, 2014**
oil on canvas
61 x 61 cms 24 x 24 ins





37 **Yellow Colander, 2014**
oil on canvas
51 x 61 cms 20 x 24 ins

38 **Jug and Bottle, 2014**
oil on canvas
51 x 61 cms 20 x 24 ins



City Life

39 **The Credit Card, 2013**
oil on canvas
92 x 122 cms 36 x 48 ins



40 **Jazz, 2013**
oil on canvas
92 x 122 cms 36 x 48 ins



41 **Mobile Trio, 2013**
oil on canvas
92 x 122 cms 36 x 48 ins





42 **Girl with Long Hair, 2012**
work on paper
34 x 17 cms 13 3/8 x 6 3/4 ins

43 **City Girls, 2013**
oil on canvas
51 x 76 cms 20 x 30 ins



44 **Wildflower Meadow, 2013**
oil on canvas
51 x 76 cms 20 x 30 ins



Working Boats



45 **Fishing Boat, 2013**
oil on canvas
51 x 41 cms 20 x 16 ins

46 **Bay with Boats, 2013**
oil on canvas
51 x 41 cms 20 x 16 ins



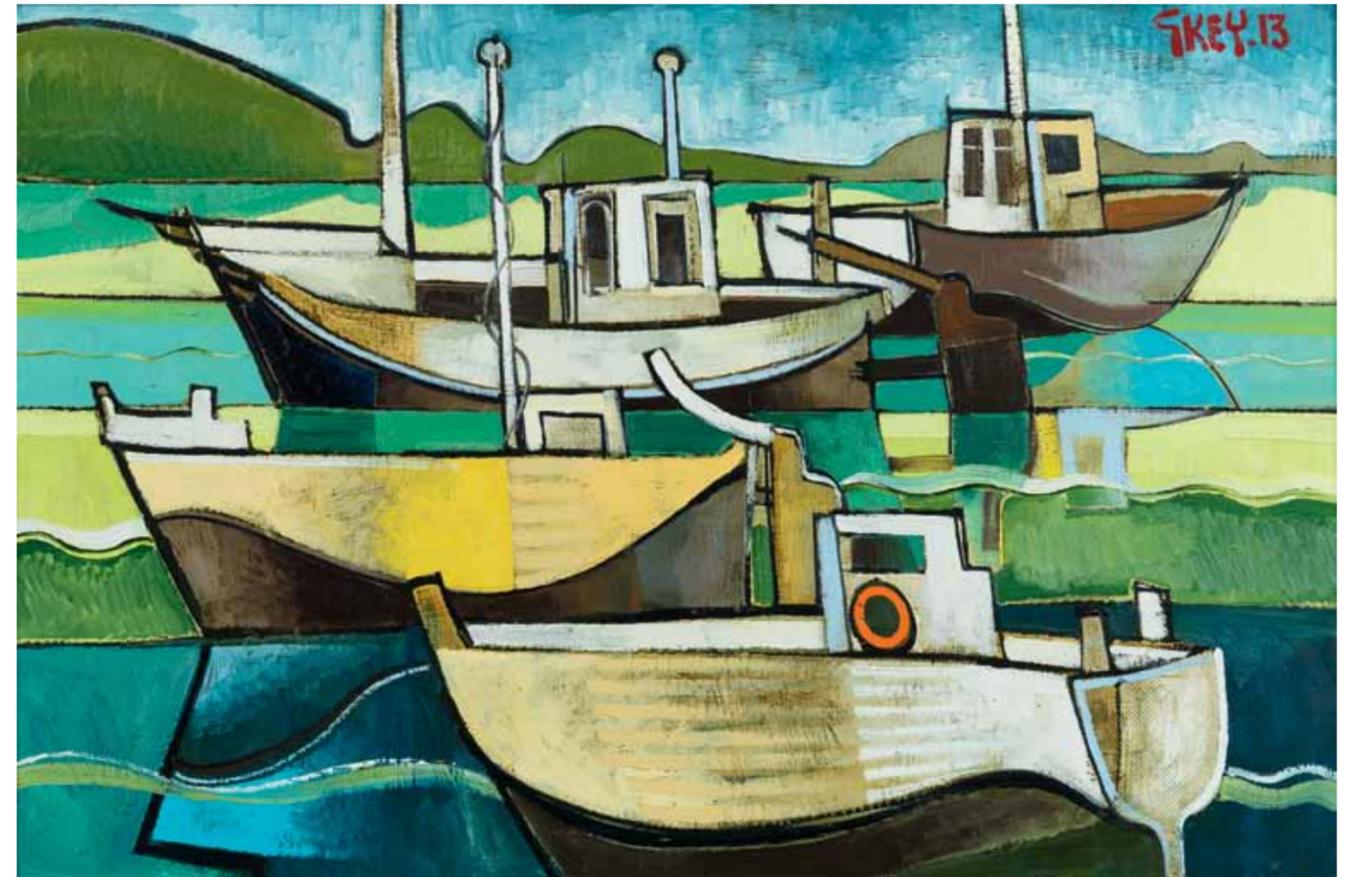
47 **Bay Railings, 2013**
oil on canvas
92 x 122 cms 36 x 48 ins



48 **Windy Bay, 2013**
oil on canvas
92 x 122 cms 36 x 48 ins



49 **Morecambe Boats, 2013**
oil on canvas
61 x 92 cms 24 x 36 ins



50 **Shoreline Figures, 2013**
oil on canvas
92 x 61 cms 36 x 24 ins



51 **Approaching Tide, 2013**
oil on canvas
61 x 92 cms 24 x 36 ins



52 **Four Boats, 2013**
oil on canvas
51 x 61 cms 20 x 24 ins



53 **Sea Wall Sunset, 2013**
oil on canvas
51 x 61 cms 20 x 24 ins



Geoffrey Key

Geoffrey Key was born and educated in Manchester, in the North West of England. The decades of his professional career as an artist thus far encompass a phenomenal body of work and a serious following amongst collectors. His earliest and self evident abilities led to a sound academic training from the beginning; his tutors formed part of the artistic lineage of the most important British painting and sculpture of their time. He has continued to build on this legacy. His first post-academic aim, achieved through concentrated work on a single landscape subject, was to divest himself of all but the creative toolkit of his training, and so establish his own artistic language.

50s – 60s

Manchester High School of Art, Regional College of Art, Manchester. Awards included National Diploma of Design, Diploma of Associateship of Manchester, Guthrie Bond Travelling Scholarship, Heywood Medal for Fine Art, Postgraduateship in Sculpture.

Major exhibitions: City of Salford Art Gallery (continuing with periodic solo shows through to 1990); University of Sheffield.

Major commissions and collections: Mather & Platt, City of Manchester Art Gallery, Rutherford Loan Collection, Salford City Art Gallery, Bolton Art Gallery, North West Arts, New Salford Players Theatre, Wilsons Brewery, National Westminster Bank

1970s

After a few years working as an art teacher by day and a painter and sculptor by night and at all other free moments, Geoffrey Key relinquishes the security of a salary and embarks upon a solo career. He begins to show work more widely with exhibitions in the UK and in Europe, where he is asked to represent the UK at art events in France.

UK exhibitions: Salford Art Gallery; White Rose, Bradford; Turnpike, Leigh, Lancashire; Pitcairn, Cheshire (annual solo shows continued until 1990); .

European exhibitions: Vision 35, Nancy, France; Salon d'Automne, Clermont Ferrand, France; Gallery Tendenz, Germany.

1980s – 90s

While work continues to be represented and collected in the UK, Geoffrey Key is invited to participate in further European exhibitions, and for the first time, in Hong Kong, where a series of successful solo shows take place. Visiting the Far East for the first time brings a heightened and more intense experience of colour and light in nature, which influences Geoffrey Key's palette from then on.

Solo shows UK: Carlisle Art Gallery; Harris Museum & Gallery, Preston; Harrods Gallery & ICAF, London; Arley Hall, Cheshire; Portico, Manchester; Millyard, Uppermill, Lancashire.

International: Galerie Unip, Lausanne, Switzerland; New York Coliseum; Powerscourt, Dublin; 25th Salon, St Ouen, Barbizon & Moret-sur-Loing, France, (a landscape commission from Societe Roquefort followed); Damme, Belgium; Joshua Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur; Carol Lear, Sydney, Australia; Mandarin Gallery, Hong Kong.

2000 & onwards

During the most recent decades, solo shows have continued, most recently in London, and a number of books have been published on the subject of Geoffrey Key and his work. UK solo shows have also taken place in Lancashire, Cheshire and Tyneside, while major international solo shows have included Sandra Walters Consultancy, The Rotunda, Hong Kong; and the Oriel Gallery, Dublin.

In 2012 Key made a move to larger studio space; this fulfilled an ambition to concentrate on work of a larger scale than hitherto. In achieving this, he has developed new subject matter, especially the estuary boats of Morecambe Bay. He has also amalgamated earlier themes, resulting in seminal works of the series based on the *commedia dell'arte*.

These notes give a brief illustration of how Geoffrey Key's career path has evolved in the wake of his dedicated output; itself a continuum of work that has been informed and influenced by his own experience and surroundings.



Geoffrey and Victor Brox – a chance meeting, 2014

Back Cover

54 Gulls, 2013

oil on canvas

51 x 76 cms 20 x 30 ins



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