



# ART WITH HEART

*During lockdown, isolated from friends and family, Geoffrey Key, who acts as judge for the Living Edge Schools Art Competition every year, was inspired to create a new body of work, *Isolated Heads*, a collection that speaks to us all*

**G**eoffrey Key has been called one of the UK's most important living artists. His talent might be God-given, but he learned his painting technique from celebrated artist Harry Rutherford, who was taught by Walter Sickert, who in turn had trained under Edgar Degas. Four names to make the art lover's head spin, yet each with very much his own, distinct, style.

Aged 79, and still reeling from the loss of his beloved wife, Judith, in 2019, when lockdown hit in March 2020, Geoffrey was suddenly stripped of the life

he had anticipated for the year ahead, including the making of a film about his life and work to be shown at an exhibition planned by Cheshire Art Gallery, in Bramhall. The creative soul always finds solace, however, and from potential disaster sprang a whole new opportunity.

'I never plan in advance what I am going to paint,' he tells me. 'I just let it happen. On the morning that the team arrived to start filming – Gaius Brown and his father Nick – they asked to do some footage in the studio. I just had a blank canvas and not a clue what I was going to do. I started

**ABOVE:**  
Isolated Head  
No. 19

painting this woman, which turned out to be a woman with a bird. When they were driving back, it was then that they heard the first announcements that there was going to be a lockdown.

'During that first lockdown I just continued to paint heads. As the weeks progressed it became clear that I was painting in isolation, so I called the series *Isolated Heads*. It was simply a coincidence that on that day I painted that first head, which I then worked through to a series. I always work in series until I have said what I want to say.'

Each painting is a dramatic



example of Geoffrey's unmistakable, bold style and is numbered from one to 30, each one untitled, to allow the viewer to make their own judgement.

'I think each head has something to say,' he muses, 'but I tend to leave that to the viewer. That's why, normally speaking, with my work titles are either pretty basic or ambiguous. I don't like titling something as a direct thing. I know myself, if I go to an exhibition and see a picture and am very impressed with it, and then I perchance to see what the artist has called it and what they have called it is often completely divorced from how I have received it. So I do like the viewer to make their own mind up about the work, rather than me pointing to something. At the end of the day, if I knew how to put my thoughts into words I would be writing books, rather than painting.'

His new series has an immediate impact on viewing, resonating strongly with anybody who has felt isolated by lockdown, whether socially or emotionally. The heads are endlessly fascinating and each one speaks a different story – some are feeling fierce, some are melancholic, some plain bored – every one of them reflects an emotion we are all familiar with, heightened no doubt by the frustrations of lockdown. There is no doubt however that every viewer will receive their own unique messages.



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**ABOVE:**  
Geoffrey Key at his home, with an early work and a piece from his Jesters body of work

**BELOW:**  
Isolated head  
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That's the joy of art, of course: some you like and some you don't, because, in essence, when you receive the message it becomes all about you, despite the fact that when it was painted it was all about the artist.

'That's how it should be,' Geoffrey says. 'There are artists I appreciate, but I don't like all their work. There are certain statements they make that will echo my own thoughts, and those pictures come off, whereas others are a bit more obscure.'

Could this be the difference perhaps between an artist who paints purely commercially, and one who paints because he or she is driven to?

'That's it. I am not producing a product. I am painting what I want to paint and if people are happy, and wish to have it, wonderful, but I can't paint to order. It sounds very selfish but I think art is, has got to be. It has to be a totally personal statement or otherwise it becomes a repetitive commodity, it loses its soul.'

Unlike many artists, Geoffrey never paints away from his studio,

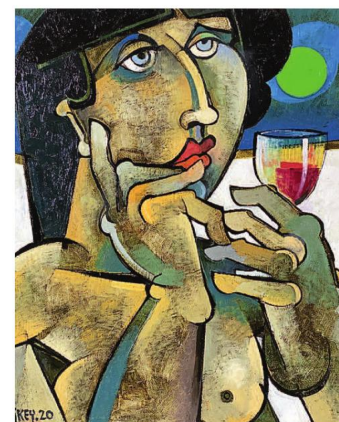
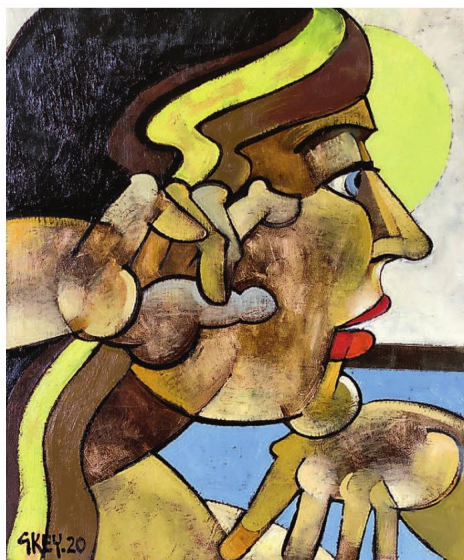
on the top floor of his home. He also never paints using models, photos or props.

'The memory is far better at distilling an object or scene, otherwise you're just copying what is there. If you just look at a display of flowers, for example, then put it away, your memory has distilled down to the essential elements of that still life, or whatever it may be. The mind is far better at creating a completely unique statement.'

It is this uniqueness and soul that has meant that Geoffrey's work is collected around the world and that exhibitions attract art lovers and collectors, old and new. A retrospective of Geoffrey's work across the last six decades was planned for May 2021, by owner of Cheshire Art Gallery, Matthew Leech. Sadly, due to the pandemic, this has been postponed temporarily.

Matthew says: 'At Geoffrey's graduation show in 1963, a large sculpture of a horse, which was Geoffrey's final degree piece, was snapped up by a private collector and has been unseen since. This sculpture, plus paintings from as far back as the 50s (including the first painting he ever sold) and works from every decade of Geoffrey's working life will feature in the exhibition. As we have some Key pieces that have been fundamental in Geoffrey's highly successful career this deserves a proper celebration, with no masks and no social distancing, so we are going to wait before we announce a new date – watch this space!'

**Find Geoffrey's work at [cheshireartgallery.co.uk](http://cheshireartgallery.co.uk)**



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