

THE COMING of AGE



Left: 'Charles Davey, aged 81' by Louise Courtnell, 2005.



Right: Charles Davey, aged 21.

LOUISE COURTNELL was born in Plymouth and is a full-time painter, living and working on the Rame Peninsula, south-east Cornwall. In 2003, she began *Project Lydos*, a series of 50 oil paintings of two generations born in the twin Cornish fishing villages of Kingsand and Cawsand, between 1910 and 1944. She wanted to make a visual record of her local community. An important part of the project was to include a youthful photograph, a brief personal history and memories of village life spanning half a century.

The paintings were done solely from life and required an average of sixteen hours of sittings. Some were painted in Courtnell's studio and the remainder in the residents' own homes. 'Teamwork and commitment are needed to paint a good portrait', says Courtnell, and she emphasised that she is 'indebted to the generosity and patience of the sitters, who were all first-time models!'

During the sessions, the painter recognized a common thread – that each sitter had a strong sense of identity and pride in their Cornish heritage and were pleased to be part of a project which promoted and celebrated their villages at a time when Cornish communities are diminishing.

Courtnell states: 'The paintings are quiet and contemplative, unsentimental and uncompromising.' Courtnell is attempting to capture something unmasked, in order to convey the personality and life of the sitter. She greatly reveres the portraits of Rembrandt, whose late self-portraits she considers to be the greatest and most moving paintings ever painted, reminding us of our own mortality and humanity.

Twenty-six of the Lydos sitters have died since the project began. Their portraits have thus an added sense of poignancy and power, which in some small way keeps their memory alive.

Courtnell feels privileged to have met all of them, hearing their personal stories and memories, whilst witnessing a nostalgia for a close-knit village life which was more respectful, supportive and selfless.

N.B. The name LYDOS derives from the name of a boat which belonged to Mike Thomas, (no. 15) when he was seventeen, and is an acronym for 'Lower Your Drawers or Swim!'

www.louisecourtneil.co.uk

ARTIST Louise Courtnell met Robert Lenkiewicz in 1987. He became her mentor and teacher and there followed an intensive two year 'apprenticeship' in painting, which concentrated on the understanding of tone.

Courtnell has run a painting class in Kingsand for 21 years and gives private tuition, following Robert's approach to painting. She feels strongly that there is a place for the observational painter in a world of the instant, digital image.

Her work includes landscape and still-life: however, she has always had a passion for portraiture. She has been a regular exhibitor at the National Portrait Gallery, (BP Portrait Award) from 1991 to 2001 and was commended for two self-portraits. Commissions have included Dr. Rowan Williams, (2002) and Robert, Earl of Edgcumbe, (2008).



'The Agony & the Ecstasy - Self-Portrait', 2019.
Louise Courtnell. 30 x 30 cm. Emulsion on board.

Painting demonstration
Sunday 6 Oct, 2-4 pm

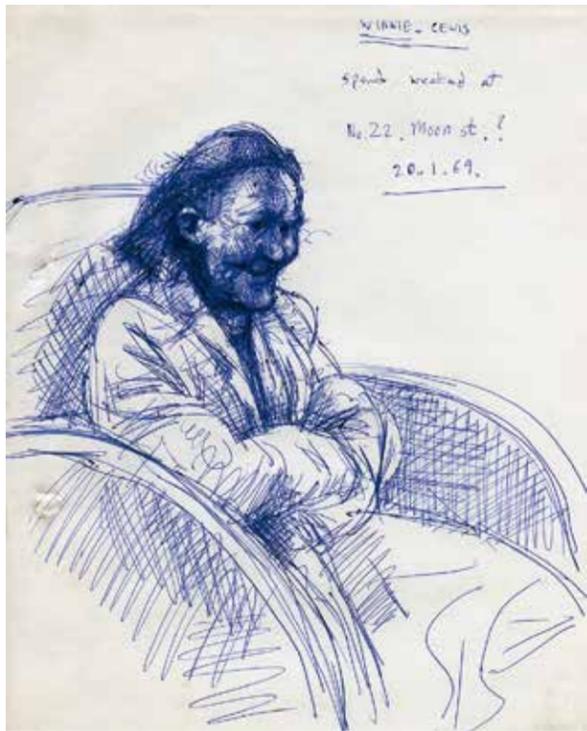
Louise Courtnell will return to St Saviours Hall on Sunday 6 October (2-4 pm) to give a demonstration of tonal painting of a still-life, explaining the techniques she learned from her tutor, Robert Lenkiewicz.

Seating is limited, so please contact us to reserve a place. **Admission FREE.**

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Winnie Lewis, 20.1.69. Pen & ink study by Lenkiewicz.

BETWEEN 1967-69 a radical social experiment in communal living took place, not in some sunny Californian utopia, but in terraced 2-bedroom homes in Plymouth's Clifton Street and Rectory Road, near the Brickfields in Devonport. On any given day, a visitor would have found themselves stepping over vagrants to reach the kitchen, with its perpetual simmering soup pot, crossing paths with Plymouth's local hippies and bohemians. At the centre of this impromptu homeless shelter were two young mothers, Celia Mills (known as Mouse) and Monica Quirk, raising Robert Lenkiewicz's young children Alice, Wolfe and Reuben.

Mouse recalls: *'There would be vagrants in the bathroom, under the stairs, in the airing cupboards.'* Monica remembers that: *'But these weren't young homeless people - they were elderly men who had lived rough a long time, plus one woman; dear old Winnie.'*

Lenkiewicz began compiling informal dossiers on his dossers, trying to keep track of their magistrate's court appearances, stays at Moorhaven Hospital, or difficulties at the local Salvation Army hostel, from which many had been ejected for poor behaviour. And of course, he drew and painted them.



Norman Shirley, 28.2.69. Pen & ink study by Lenkiewicz.

"We must be allowed, and allow ourselves, to be haunted by a sense of human/ness, a sense of tragedy in the deepest human terms. We must crave to see it clarified and composed."

Few people know why tragedy is a source of deep satisfaction: they invent all sorts of psychological explanations, from emotional catharsis to a sense of superiority because the hero's misfortunes are not one's own. But the real source is the joy of revelation, the vision of a world wholly significant, of life spending itself, and death the signature of its completion."

— Robert Lenkiewicz, lecture on the *Philosophy of Aesthetics*, 1986.

'All Are Welcome'



'Death of Mrs Plotnik at Hotel Shem Tov'. Ink & thorn study by Lenkiewicz when aged 14½ years.

In some ways, Rectory Road was a chaotic recreation of the family home in which Robert was raised from the age of nine. His parents, Jewish refugees from Nazi Europe, opened a kosher Jewish hotel in Cricklewood in London. Lenkiewicz recalled that: *'[It was] part old people's home, part asylum. Mother was a sort of nursemaid to about thirty people who paid her a nominal weekly rent for board and lodging ... people who'd been dropped by their sons and daughters because they weren't in control.'* The mostly elderly residents became the artist's first sitters, but also his first life tutors: *'I was introduced to all kinds of things - mental illness, human suffering and, above all, death - at a very early age and thought it salutary and thought provoking.'*

At the Hotel Shemtov, Robert encountered books by Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965), a privileged organist, theologian and polymath from Alsace, who re-trained at the age of 30 as a doctor, electing to treat tropical diseases and leprosy in Gabon, rather than the gout and dyspepsia of his well-off peers.

To the young Lenkiewicz, Schweitzer seemed to have evaded a common failing of western sages: the mismatch between lofty ethical pronouncements of universal brotherhood and their frequent hostility or indifference to individual persons in need of some small personal sacrifice by the philosopher. Young Lenkiewicz also considered medicine as a career, but since art had already claimed him, he sought instead a path that would combine a devotion to aesthetics and what Schweitzer famously called 'reverence for life'.

Lenkiewicz would recount how, during one Passover feast, he took literally the tradition of performing an act of generosity towards a 'schnorrer' (Yiddish for beggar) by inviting a foul-smelling tramp into the family hotel. Robert's younger brother, Johnny, is adamant that this tale is apocryphal; but it encapsulates an important principle for the young artist - that aesthetics, liking or not liking a person, should not override humane behaviour. Lenkiewicz had resolved that one could not pick and choose who was worthy of a full measure of equality but instead that *'all are welcome'*.



'Corky', 20.10.69. Pen & ink study of the vagrant Jeremiah Crone by Lenkiewicz.

MRS KATHLEEN BINNS, who was 95, confided in Lenkiewicz: *'They selected me as an example of a woman who enjoys old age, but it's not true ... I don't! You can enjoy life, but not old age – too many frustrations!'*

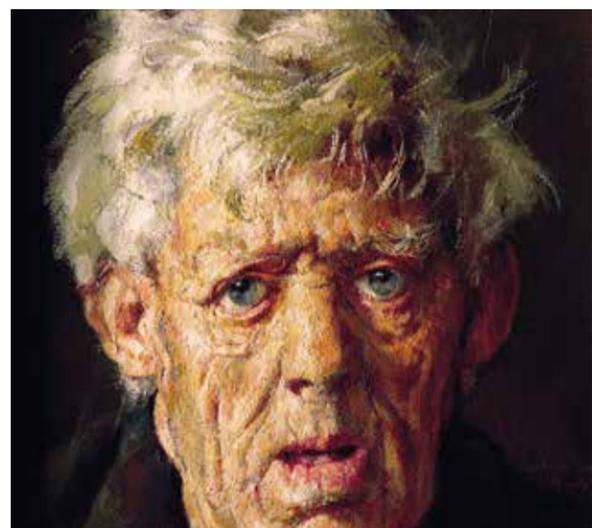
At the Plymouth Age Concern day centre, which helped Lenkiewicz recruit sitters for his project on *Old Age* in 1979, Mrs Binns' view might have been regarded as apostasy against Age Concern's jaunty philosophy of a 'green old age'. The phrase is a translation from Homer – 'A green old age, unconscious of decay, that proves the hero born in better days' – and evokes the image of sprightly seniors enjoying an active, fruitful life.

But Lenkiewicz, in academic research that lasted several months, had gathered together a compendium of quotations by artists, scientists, writers, theologians, composers, philosophers and psychologists – all of them commenting on their own experience of growing old – that gave little comfort to those about to enter into the 'third age'.

Lenkiewicz said, to an audience of old people: *'An open-eyed visit to an old folks home or hospital ward soon makes one lose patience with those who philosophize about the beauty of a green old age. Ageing is loss; it is not ripening.'* He quoted a favourite Yiddish proverb: *'To die while young is a boon in old age.'*



'Group of Old Women (associated with Franz Hals' 'Alms-House' Painting)'. 169 x 234 cm. Oil on canvas.



'Study of Old Snowy', 1979. 30 x 27 cm. Oil on canvas.

Shortly after the exhibition opening his diary notes say: *'I am unexpectedly muted by the Old Age Project. Once set up and hung it looks singularly uninteresting ... to me. The bound book of notes of some value.'* Unusually for the artist, he comments frequently upon individual paintings in progress. As the study of 'Old Snowy' drew to a conclusion, Robert wrote: *'Getting stronger and stronger. To wrap one's mental eye around the illusion of form like a lover; Pull the string bag of one's bright idea tight ... and, nothing there as ever! The true magic trick all experienced painters know.'* He added a caveat: *'Strong inch by inch – weak 3 inch by 3 inch.'*

One of two large canvasses 'associated with Franz Hals' 'Alms-House' paintings' drew qualified praise: *'Highly accomplished, but illustrational. Completed the life-size study [Mrs Mitchell, seated, right]. She posed so well. Complete body-arms, silvery blouse, hands, etc. Tour de force stuff.'* To those who know Robert's views on art, the term 'illustrational' is particularly cutting. Nevertheless, he was

satisfied with the reference to Hals' work, quoted dimly in the background: *'Hals arrangement adequately transcribed: the clenched fist; the begging hand; the hand like a knife.'* Hals, 82, destitute and unlikely to survive another winter, painted the work 'The Regentesses of the Old Men's Almshouse' (1664) for the wealthy patrons who made life or death decisions on admission to Haarlem's old men's home. Lenkiewicz observes that the governesses in Hals' original have been rendered as 'five black carrion crows.'

The 'bound book of notes' to which the artist refers consists of more than 200 illustrated pages, largely portraits of historical figures sketched from contemporary paintings or photographs, with notes on their response to ageing. It was inspired by the classic study of old age and gender, *The Coming of Age* (1970), by

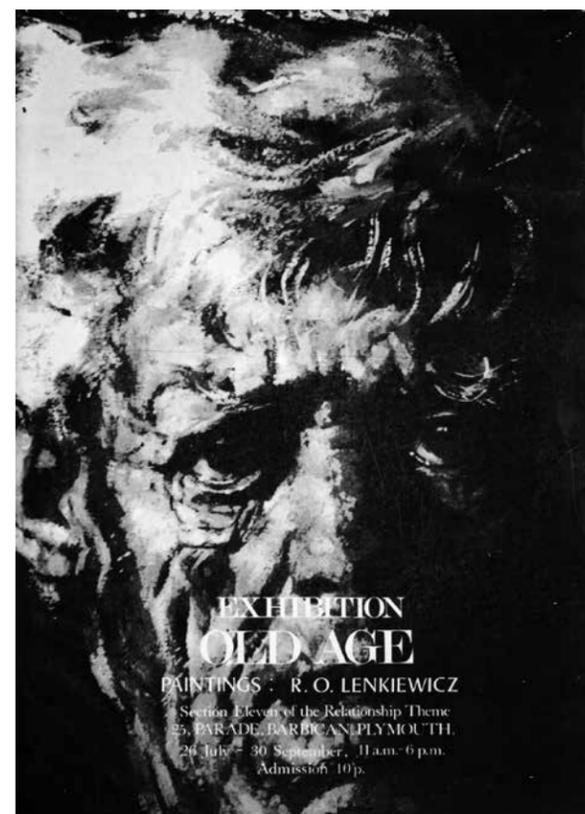
This warning resonated with the lessons learned by the young painter at the Hotel Shemtov, but he had taken a radical step further: Lenkiewicz concluded that this renunciation of life could affect people at any age. He would explore this theme in the next Project, on *Suicide*, developing the idea that the routines and compromises of modern life in service to 'commerce' so stifled the creative impulses that whole populations had rendered themselves 'dead, whilst still alive'.

Simone de Beauvoir had words of hope for just one class of creatives: *'Painters are less hampered... by the weight of the past and the brevity of the future ... each time they stand in front of a virgin canvas their work is a series of fresh beginnings.'*



'Study of Florence Kate Harvey, aged 103', 1979.

author Simone de Beauvoir, who was 62 at the time of publication. Lenkiewicz was especially interested in her observation of the 'passive attitude of renunciation' that age and physical weariness could bring. De Beauvoir writes: *'A consequence of biological decay is the impossibility of surpassing oneself and of becoming passionately interested with anything; it kills all projects.'*



Exhibition poster for Project 11.

'A Dance to the Music of Time'

The indoor mural (below) at Elspeth Sitters House on The Barbican was commissioned by Plymouth Age Concern in 1982, and spans 10.6 metres of the canteen wall. Lenkiewicz worked with the charity's ethos of a 'green old age' and painted elderly revellers enjoying the fullness of life.

To the right, he references Nicolas Poussin's 17th century painting 'A Dance to the Music of Time', showing the stages of life as seasons personified, with the Roman god of pleasure, Bacchus, leading the knees-up.

Elderly sages Socrates and Albert Einstein also appear.

However, the mural's colour scheme proved too vibrant for the canteen users and following complaints it was hidden behind a curtain for over 35 years, inadvertently protecting it from damage and extending the mural's life-span.



The 'Harry & Billy' lecture

In November 1979 Lenkiewicz was invited to present a lecture to the Age Concern audience at Plymouth Medical School and set out to deliver something more thought provoking than the usual practical topics of health or housing.

The audience was introduced, therefore, to the elderly Professor Jeremy Jacobson, who tottered onto the stage and delivered a commentary on 'Geriatrics versus Gerontology':

that is, living well vs. living a long time. The professor also informed his audience that the consensus view of the wise and the learned throughout history was that the coming of old age was nothing short of calamity. As Voltaire wrote: 'The heart does not grow old, but it is sad to dwell amongst ruins.'

Of course, Prof. Jacobson was none other than Lenkiewicz himself, expertly disguised with theatrical make-up. At the end of his lecture he pulled away his disguise, becoming

in a single instant both the most popular and most reviled speaker ever at such an event.

The artist's serious point was that society would inevitably find itself with an unprecedented abundance, if not an unwelcome surplus, of old age as demographics, medical progress and gerontological research drove up human life-spans.

A few of Robert Lenkiewicz's remarks are reproduced below.

"To ask whether to live longer is desirable is to ask whether LIFE is desirable. The wish to see the next day at 15 is the desire to live longer – the same wish operates at 30 and at 60.

At 15 there is the all-absorbing stress of the class bully or the faithless girlfriend. At 30 it may be the stress of alcoholism or creative impulses or the rates bill. At 60 the all-embracing stress is OLD AGE.

At 15 there is no hesitation in the desire to thrash the bully or replace the girlfriend – at 30 no hesitation in leading the bailiff a merry dance. We do not question the natural impulse to change what is undesirable into something desirable.

Old age is undesirable – we live in a youth infatuated world. We learn palliative techniques which can soften the edges of age – and in a final charge at the ranks of pleasure try and compromise and adjust in the shade of the eccentric tree of wisdom. It doesn't work.

Old age has for centuries been the last but one God in our lives – we have believed in him for a long time. He has been worshipped resentfully; we have accepted him with an angry but resigned heart. The time is coming when we will lose faith in him; we will no longer believe in his authority. It is not unreasonable to visualise a time when he will be just another dead god.

We have a life-span of 28,000 days – after that, not one more day. Everyone in this room will die: we know that.

But there is a second date before our death, roughly 20 years earlier when we shall be alive, but not fully. Age is a condition from which we will all suffer. Ageing is impairment: it is the progressive dissolution of what we have built up through our lives. We deal with that by talking about something else or by talking about the compensations of age. As Professor Alex Comfort once said: 'One doesn't ask for compensation, unless one has been run over'.

An open-eyed visit to an old folks home or hospital ward soon makes one lose patience with those who philosophize about the beauty of a green old age. Ageing is loss; it is not ripening.

St Beuve wrote: 'If this deterioration is really inevitable, then we'd better accept it with dignity, or we shall increase our misery.'

But the evidence suggests that in due course it will probably not be inevitable, and we live in a generation where we may see the sign of this intolerable and diminishing change pushed back. And people should know this – they should be told that science will suppress causes of premature death and postpone the ageing process.

There is active research on ageing, the effect of which will postpone changes, roughly in step, across the board – everything from

tumours to pedestrian road accidents (which are highly age-related), would occur at later ages. There is a good chance of postponing all of the ageing causes. What is important to realise is that the period of senility would not be prolonged; in other words, you would become older later, you would not be old for longer. To prolong quality of life so that it takes 80 years to get to be 60.

Ageing research is going to get funded whether we like it or not. Those who are responsible for financing projects are usually elderly – they are likely to sympathise. We always fund things that seem like magic. A project that establishes power and authority over something or someone always gets funded. Institutional psychopathy (like some politicians and spiritual leaders) usually get their way. The only projects that run a close second for success are miracle-type ones.

The delay of ageing will be very popular; it will bring profound social changes. Some of them might even seem constructive. After all, if we live longer better we will have a greater stake in respecting our own skins.

Old people have to contend with natural senescence, inflation, poor social attention and endless forms of obsolescence. We should remember, in our society 'achievement' is always in the future. The old know only too well – past achievement doesn't score. Everything is forgettable." (Lenkiewicz, 1979).