

# Versatile Artist at Three Highgate

by our Arts Correspondent



There is still time to view Three Highgate's exhibition, Ken Kiff – A Hundred Suns, which is open till Jan 5th 2025. Kiff, a Royal Academician, had a long-term association with this part of the world, studying at the Hornsey Art School and living nearby. In addition to being a painter he had a strong affinity with poetry. This exhibition combines his talents and creativity by not only displaying his art but publishing a volume of poetry – 'A Hundred Suns' – by Kiff's friend and fellow tutor Martha Kapos, Frank O'Hara and Mayakovsky.

To start with the artist. Highly versatile, he belies easy description. So go and see it! In acrylic, watercolour, dry-point, woodcut, or charcoal, he uses sometimes simple lines, sometimes colours, evocative images, whimsy, and is frequently enigmatic. 'Fantasy is a way of thinking about reality' he said. Alistair Hicks, whose essay runs through 'A Hundred Suns' says 'Kiff like Paul Klee before him took a line for a walk, and then another line, then yet another'. The title 'A Hundred Suns' comes from one of the poems of Mayakovsky in the book, translated into English by the gallery's founder Irina Johnstone. A major part of Kiff's opus is his numbered 'Sequence' of 200 acrylic paintings, and the Sun is a frequent and often cheery personage therein.

In some ways the Futurist Bolshevik poet Mayakovsky dominates both the exhibition and the book. The centrepiece in the gallery is a loan of Kiff's The Poet (Mayakovsky), one of the Sequence (no.164), and at first it is difficult to look elsewhere. The source of Kiff's

fascination with the poet is unclear - Kiff was born 5 years after the poet's death by suicide in 1930. But the image is unforgettable - 'Mayakovsky isn't dead, and the brains are flowers'.

I discussed with Irina how she judged the success of exhibitions at Three Highgate. She wants, she said, to do more than just conventional exhibitions of paintings, to create something extra. I felt that in this exhibition, not only showing the works of a British painter who



should be better known, but by producing a volume which constructs a dialogue between three poets intertwining with Kiff's art, she has certainly succeeded.



Three photos of Ken Kiff's paintings:  
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Top left: The Ladder  
Above: Man Walking  
Left: Dawn Chorus