

The Artists` Tale

Gordon Faulds & Alex Leadbeater

A new city needs people who are prepared to put down roots, but it also needs a transient population if it is not to become stagnant.

Gordon and Alex make no excuses for the fact that, for them, Milton Keynes is a stepping stone. Meanwhile it affords them a lifestyle in which everything is geared to their artistic careers. The sacrifice they make is in the sheer hard work which is necessary to maintain their independence.

Gordon: After we left Art College we opened a group studio in Lancaster for up to seven artists, called `Start studios'. Then we worked as handyman and housekeeper for an estate agent who had a large house outside Lancaster. It was quite dreadful and after a year we decided to leave. Alex had a show at the Serpentine Gallery in 1981 and as a result was asked to show with the Anne Berthoud Gallery. Given that we wanted to be artists we felt that it would be advisable to move nearer London to be in closer contact. It wasn't a difficult decision as we had no social life in Lancaster. We selected several places within reach of London the two main contenders were Bristol and Milton Keynes which we had come across on Woman`s Hour programme. I had also been particularly impressed by the sewage works when I'd driven past on the M1 and wanted to find out more about the place. We had seen the adverts on the Underground and at Euston and we were interested by the contemporary architecture. So we phoned up the Development Corporation who put us on to Paul Barry who was then due to become director of Linford Arts Centre and he gave us a favourable tour of Milton Keynes. He showed us all the best bits. Generally we were convinced by the optimism because the place was still developing, especially after the decay of the north. We knew that we couldn't afford to move straight into London And Milton Keynes looked promising.

Alex: The day we came to look around was a Thursday and I loved the market in the city centre.

Gordon: We got this house on Fishermead in April 1982 with very little trouble although we were offered one in Conniburrow....

Alex: But we turned it down because of the horrible imitation brick archway in the entrance hall.

Gordon: More because it didn't have a garage.

Alex: We were offered part-time teaching at the Arts Centre and started there in September with a Still-life drawing course.

Gordon: It was very early days at the Art Centre and they were having all kinds of problems. The classes were very small, we only had about eight students and they were all interested in different things so it was very individual which was quite fun.

They were all beginners – a large proportion were middle aged women who wanted to take up painting as a hobby so really they just wanted to know the basic foundations.

Alex: We put a load of junk on the floor and said ` This is very interesting to draw. Draw it!` They all shuddered at first and then gradually accepted it.

A Logical Extension

Gordon: We enjoyed the experience of teaching but by the summer term we were only teaching one class of perhaps three people. The Arts Centre was running into problems of its own by this time so we decided that if it was going to continue in this form we wanted to stop doing it. So we started the stall on the antiques market in Central MK which all tied in and was a logical extension of what we were already doing. We didn't like the clothes available from shops because they were poorly made and we didn't like the styles. So we tended to buy things from jumble sales and junk shops. We also furnished where we lived, throughout college and in Milton Keynes, with things that we came across from the same sources. Each activity is part of a whole concept. We began to process the items we acquired separating them into different categories – things which we would sell straight away on the market to provide us with an income, things for us to keep, like tables and chairs or anything useful for our house and other articles that we would take into the studio and develop into works of art. Eventually we gave up the teaching and expanded the market stall. When we started the stall we relied on our own instincts and collected the sort of items we'd choose for ourselves. Obviously, things that didn't fit us or we particularly didn't like, we'd sell. But as you do it more you learn what people want to buy. From all the jumble we're confronted with we try and select items of particular quality – natural fibres like cotton, wool or silk – essentially because those items have lasted and will last.

Doing a service

Alex: It has to be said that we don't get that much from jumble sales nowadays. We might go to 12 jumble sales in a day and come back with three items that are any good. We mostly buy from people who bring things to the stall and we travel to other markets. We also know several people who are designing and making clothes which we'll sell for them on a commission basis. That works quite well.

Gordon: We see ourselves as doing a service. We're going out and doing all the hard work and anyone can come along to us and know that the items we've selected are likely to be what they want and are going to be to a certain standard so there's some sort of guarantee in coming to buy from us.

Alex: Milton Keynes has a good market because it's right next to the shopping centre and people walk past and just come to browse. A real cross-section of people buy from us in Milton Keynes. We get middle-aged professional people buying suits and anybody who wants quality clothing but can't afford to buy it new. People are very complimentary about the stall and often comment about our display. Sometimes

we get criticised by people who say “I could have got this from a jumble sale” and we have to point out that they are paying our hard work as well as our judgement.

Alex: It's very doing the market and being an artist at the same time.

Gordon: At the moment time is so tight for us. Monday morning is generally used for administration matters – debts usually! Then as soon as possible we try to get into our studios which are the other two bedrooms in our house. Generally we spend Tuesday in our studios as well. Wednesday is half and half, some of the time spent pricing the stock and packing the van. We get up at 6 o'clock on Thursday morning to do Milton Keynes market. On Friday when we do Portobello we have to leave at 5 a.m. to get to London by 6, so we have to be out of bed by four in the morning. Portobello finishes at about lunch time so we might go and sort out any business like buying material and travel home in the evening and if we're lucky there might be a jumble sale or an Auction in the evening. Saturday we spend all day out buying, travelling all about the area and Sunday is pretty much a recovering day – we like to try to catch up on our sleep.

Still Very Young

The next step for us is to get shop/workshop premises as the markets are taking up too much time and it seems like most of it is spent either packing or unpacking. We've chosen to get somewhere in London rather than Milton Keynes because we want to open the shop to sell a combination of clothing and artwork. You can't sell paintings on a market stall but it would be quite acceptable to sell them in a shop. Also you can't survive as an artist selling in Britain alone and to sell internationally you really have to be in London.

Alex: Unless we find somewhere to both live and work, which is almost impossible we would continue to live in Milton Keynes.

Gordon: We only ever anticipated being in Milton Keynes for a couple of years so we've never really settled or gone out of our way to become members of the community. We're more socially involved in London.

Alex: Most of the socialising here involves going to other people's houses for drinks or a meal.

Gordon: I like spontaneity in my social life. I don't like formally organising things and this place definitely lacks potential instant nights out. All these things will come in time, the city is still very young, it's a case of being here to see it. I'd love to come back in ten or fifteen years to see how it's developed.