

IKON

Exhibition Guide

Young Birmingham Artists
Ikon artists from the 1960s
11 July — 19 August 2018

Ikon has been formed because of the need for an accessible place where the exchange of visual ideas can become a familiar reality.

Ikon is intended as an antithesis to exclusive art establishments and galleries.

In 1965, Ikon's founder artists – Jesse Bruton, Robert Groves, Sylvani Merilion and David Prentice – published a prospectus that reflected their youthful idealism. Those who are still with us, now in their 70s and 80s, encourage us to continue in this same vein, combining artistic excellence with openness.

Before exhibiting in their first dedicated venue, an octagonal glass-walled kiosk in Birmingham's Bull Ring, Ikon's artists showed their work at the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists (RBSA) on New Street. This beautiful Victorian interior now has a new lease of life, relaunched as the Medicine Bakery & Gallery, and it is very fitting that the first exhibition here should celebrate the achievements of those once 'young Birmingham artists'.

David Prentice's *Wifely Beginning* (1962), seen here on the far wall of the gallery, is characterised by a confident and painterly abstraction out of everyday observation. It is located in the artist's early career somewhere between a more representational style, especially used to depict urban scenes, and his "field grid" paintings of the late 60s. Originally exhibited at the RBSA, these paintings signalled a new direction for Ikon's early collective.

The first exhibition at Ikon was of paintings by John Salt, of which we see one here, entitled *Silver Ghost* (1965). Salt's early

work consisted of paintings with sketchy archetypal motifs on an abstract ground – typically squares and diagonal stripes – built up by layers of canvas and metallic paper. Circles, containing smaller concentric circles, sometimes with spokes and intermeshed, suggest functional interrelationships as if some mechanical action would result from their coalescence. The artist himself refers to the rotational cutting blades of combine harvesters as a source of inspiration, perhaps prefiguring later photorealist work depicting large American cars.

Cars and car journeys, and landscape *vis-a-vis* abstraction, have much bearing on the nature of the artistic development of many other artists involved with Ikon during the 1960s. Jesse Bruton exploited the formal possibilities of the landscapes he visited, especially in Wales, to make vivid painterly translations based on a stringent palette of black and white. Bruton's later paintings are calligraphic, involving white bands meandering across black surfaces, modulated by texture through brushstrokes in different mixtures of medium and pigment. Their titles, such as *Way Ahead* (1967-68) and *Back-up* (1968-69), betray their origins in the long distance driving he undertook following a stint of teaching at the Bath Academy of Art.

Pamela Scott Wilkie also draws on the experience of travelling with a series of hand-pulled silkscreen prints titled, *Journey* (1972). The works evolve out of the serendipity of real experience, travel and the unfolding adventure of journeys, made during an overland expedition to India in 1970, via Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Nepal. Inspired by the landscapes and people of the countries she passed through, these prints were made in a makeshift studio in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, using the materials available.

Peter Berry's *Squares* (1967-2004), open sculptures, smoothly finished and painted white and yellow, follow an emphatic statement by the artist:

The square is used in its capacity to reproduce itself, for its non organic quality and for its

obvious easy relationship to the vertical horizontal axes of the normal environment, through its ability to stand, lie flat, or hang close against the wall surface.

Sylvani Merilion's paintings and prints, on the other hand, continued to examine 60s historical events and popular culture. In particular, Merilion's work was concerned with space travel, reflecting countless news stories and mass media prominence related to the space race. Here we see three untitled studies for *Space Programme* (c. 1964). It is not insignificant that one of Merilion's teachers in Newcastle was Richard Hamilton, always fascinated by cutting-edge science and technology.

Further along the same wall we see Trevor Denning's work, which follows another dominant 60s cultural trend – Pop Art. *Large Mouth* (1966), which happens to be based on photographs of Sylvani Merilion's mouth, illustrates the wit and sexiness of the movement. This magnification of an isolated feature is seductively shaped to the point of daring indecency. There is a smart confusion also between the representation of the mouth and the painting itself, as if to suggest pictorial flirtation.

Not only do the *Mouth* paintings fit neatly into a story of sexual revolution in the sixties, but also they are very consistent with a thematic thread that characterises Denning's work – many of his early paintings depict situations charged with eroticism.

Dinah Prentice's work was based almost solely on text even before the formation of Ikon. *A4* (1963), a small collage of newspaper headlines, and *Subjective Contour* (1982), a later textile work, are strong examples. The artist's method of cutting and pasting resulted in an agglomeration of illegible letter fragments, bits and pieces of the Roman alphabet in the various typefaces and fonts that characterised the pages of contemporary broadsheet and tabloid papers.

This exhibition concludes with a constellation of small golden paintings (c. 1965) by Robert Groves. They still shine with

a luminosity derived from the superimposition of thin layers of oil and lacquer on hardboard. The works reflect the artist's strong interest in Middle Eastern and South Asian culture, leading him to collect icons and in turn suggest the name 'Ikon' for the gallery. Groves recalls:

I was particularly interested in Russian or Greek – eastern orthodox – ikons, and thought well "Ikon" is a lovely word. When I mooted it the others said "Oh no, no really, no, not having any of that". After a few more beers everybody else's suggestions were shot down and they said "Oh well, I suppose it will have to be Ikon then".

This text is adapted from an essay titled *Some of the Best Things in Life Happen Accidentally*, available in a fully illustrated catalogue which accompanies the exhibition.

Stay in touch

Subscribe to our e-bulletin at ikon-gallery.org and find us on    [ikongallery](https://www.ikon-gallery.org)

Ikon Gallery
Brindleyplace, Birmingham B1 2HS
0121 248 0708
ikon-gallery.org

Open Tuesday – Sunday
and Bank Holiday Mondays, 11am–5pm
Free entry, donations welcome



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

Ikon Gallery Limited trading as Ikon.
Registered charity no. 528892.



**Birmingham
City Council**