

COLIN SELF
UNSEEN



Frith Street Gallery, London

FORWARD...

In the summer holiday at the end of my first year of art school, I went to see Colin Self's exhibition at the ICA (July 16 – August 31 1986). I must have taken the train up from my parents' house in Kent. By chance, Colin Self was in the gallery giving a talk and among those listening was the artist Peter Blake who was drawing him. I was so thrilled by the exhibition and my experience of that afternoon that when I got home, I stuck the ICA gallery guide on my bedroom wall and there it stayed for thirty years until the Blu Tack had gone hard and the house was sold.

There have been many times since then when I have brought up his exhibition with friends and fellow artists, some of whom remember it as I did. Apart from *Boy with Ideas October 1985*, the work illustrated on the cover of the gallery guide on my bedroom wall, I had no access to other images by Colin Self. It was pre-Internet and I was too poor and inexperienced to imagine buying the catalogue. Nor did I really remember individual works. All I knew is that something about that exhibition never let me forget it, and that the artist himself had seemed to have just disappeared. Then last summer, he came back and all my latent instincts about him as an artist could take solid form again.

Colin Self is not interested in the hierarchy of images. For him, the image on a biscuit packet has equal potency to the image of the *Mona Lisa*. This is not pejorative populism but a profound belief in how culture should get adjudicated. Every nation has its equivalent to the boy chasing the chick on a Cerebos salt tin or the full-masted square-rigger on a box of Ship matches. These images, or their equivalents, lodge themselves deep into our collective cultural memory and often resonate there more than the world's most famous paintings.

This belief in the democracy of images is not set against who makes them. In no way does Colin eschew the importance of art

and the role of the artist. In his view, there is nothing more integral to humanity than for us all to make pictures. However, what is truly radical about him as an artist is his desire to be valued more within the canon of the vernacular than within the canon of art history. When you believe this as an artist, you are truly and utterly free.

These deep-rooted democratic impulses also extend to his use of medium. Colin's 'waste not want not' use of materials gives form to his work. He's happier harvesting the wrappings from afternoon tea and biscuits than he is to go to his local art shop. He sees in the driftwood and pebbles that he finds on nearby Bacton beach the profiles of people and the shapes of animals. His collagist instinct identifies through assemblage the features of cartoon characters. It is not only that he makes use of what he finds, but what he finds propels the form and idea of the work itself: the genesis and manifestation of the work become one and the same thing. The mediums listed on his exhibition labels are where other artists go to admire and envy the full scope of his invention.

There is magician level magic in what he sees to transform and transforms (for us) to see. And there is never ever any medium or material too lowly for Colin. Few artists can make blue Bic biro drawings look so good, as anyone enamoured and disappointed by their own doodling can attest; the Bic biro is the most utilitarian and thankless of mark makers.

So, with his vernacular imperatives and virtuoso use of anything he finds, Colin then shows us what a master illusionist he is, while at the same time showing us exactly how he is making it. The illusion embodies its own artifice. He will, for example, depict a ploughman ploughing a field. We see in his picture the clods and furrows of the turned earth. We sense the sweat of the exhausted day as the sun sinks into the undulating landscape. We intuit the implied invocation of the decline of rural life and the pollution of

the English countryside with its piles of forlorn and rusting equipment left on crumbling concrete sidings. His ploughman images conjure all this, but what we are looking at is a corrugated cardboard field, a suncream packaging sun, and egg and milk cartons sprayed car enamel brown as rural decay. It is not that many artists have not used collage to similar sleight of hand in making an image but more often they use it to jar and jolt the illusion. For Colin, it is the illusion.

Colin was a war baby. He grew up under bombs in Norwich and tells a story of hitchhiking across America and being picked up by a German. When describing where it was that he came from, the driver said that he knew of Norwich because he had bombed Norwich. It is revealing what Colin is saying in the retelling of this story about the cycles within his own life.

A huge swathe of working-class kids went to art school immediately after the war. Art school was then a radical open society, and it went on to produce a great generation of British artists. One of them, David Hockney, once told me that he survived the Royal College of Art as a young working-class northerner precisely because he was better at drawing than all his southern peers and they all knew it, and he knew it. I suspect something of the same was true with Colin, who is also an expert draughtsman. His peers, Hockney and Richard Hamilton among them, recognised how good he was. But at a certain point, Colin got disappointed with the system and quit the art world but not, *never* did he leave art itself. Instead, he ploughed his own solitary furrow making art every day.

So now, having seen more of his work, I know why I remained so fiercely loyal to the memory of his ICA exhibition. He is passionately and enviably inventive: an artist unbound by the normative orthodoxies around art practice that places misguided over-lauded

value in the idea that artists need to show consistency in their output. And that a complexity of form, medium and subject display an amateurism that might complicate the work's reception.

Colin is an artist who has instead chosen freedom: freedom to move lightly and easily between his mediums with great faculty. Freedom to use drawing, painting, frottage, collage, spray painting, casting, moulding, screen printing or any technique that he chooses to adopt. He chose freedom of principle and the freedom to depict his vision of the world and to follow his own lores. Therefore, to experience an exhibition by Colin Self now is to experience a journey set apart from his contemporaries. The work is fresh, generated from itself for itself, and connects through place and history to Colin's sense of the local and what constitutes home.

Colin has let so much into his work over the years: he has let in the fig packets and chocolate wrappers, and the dust and the straw. He has let in the desolate beauty and destruction of his native rural Norfolk landscape, which often manifests as exquisite charcoal drawings and watercolours. He has let in the vernacular and the stuff of nature too – the flotsam and jetsam of culture as well as the beach. He has also let in humour and the magpie joy of finding things, and the pleasure in making things out of things. But what one can't avoid perceiving is everything that he has *not* let in. He has not let in the cynicism and the self-consciousness, nor is there the arch awareness of an audience beyond his own... And he has not let in the judgement of his peers.

Colin Self's work is sui-generative and stands apart, and to experience it now is to feel something completely different and irreducibly genuine.

Tacita Dean



The Ploughman, 2007



365: *A journey in that direction*, 2000–2026 (detail)



Humanity Hanging by a Thread, from 'The Stations of Life', 1962

... BACKWARD

'I think it's Colin who is the greatest living British artist.'

Marianne Faithfull

Back in the 1960s Colin Self was the only Pop Artist on either side of the Atlantic to address the nuclear menace. His singularly creative career over seven decades, finding a peaceful and even paradisaal response to threats of annihilation, has renewed resonance amid current global tensions.

'Drawing for me is an art,' he wrote in a catalogue note for his first solo show in London, at the Piccadilly Gallery in 1965. 'Also skating, fishing and putting the fish into a glass case for immortality.'

The eldest of nine children, with a painter and decorator, sign-painter and pub-musician father, is all about art. Original and open, there was always an exquisite and surreal precision in anything he said and touched. 'Art is everything in my life,' he says now. 'It's what runs through my arteries.'

Turning 85 this year, Colin Self was born between bombing raids on our native city of Norwich and just before fields beyond his family home were swallowed by a huge US airbase. He retains a sense of living on the edge – between city and countryside, land and sea, nature reserves and rubbish dumps, peace and war, past and present, truth and myth.

Aware of a primeval time when what is now Norfolk and the Netherlands were joined by Doggerland, Pop Art's country cousin has a time-travelling and universalist vision. He knows that migrant waves such as the Angle North Folk shaped East Anglia. Swept by American popular culture and consumerism, our home county all but adopted Country and Western as its folk music in Colin's childhood. Mickey Mouse preceded the GIs into Norwich; Hollywood glamour filled the city's 13 cinemas. This maelstrom mixed into Self-made art.

For all his creative connections – dubbed by Richard Hamilton 'Britain's best draughtsman since William Blake', providing water-

colours for Marianne Faithfull's final album – Colin has been a solo explorer operating mostly below the art-world radar while quietly amassing 76 usually unseen works in Tate. His 1966 model *The Nuclear Victim (Beach Girl)* – a mannequin dressed in layers of cinders and black paint, right arm truncated at the elbow, left leg at the knee, in the Imperial War Museum – is a shocking partner to the incinerated *Hot Dog* sculpture of 1965. The latter piece is among Norfolk Museums Service loans to this tribute exhibition.

Colin Self trained at Wymondham College, Norwich Art School and the Slade School of Fine Art. The friend of David Hockney from student days in London, admired by Michael Andrews, Peter Blake and Allen Jones, made prolonged trips to North America and continental Europe. He roamed from the Atlantic to the Pacific and studied ceramics in Germany. But after painting sublime watercolours while 'living wild' in Scotland, he reclaimed East Anglian roots – a constantly questing modernist honouring past masters such as Cotman and Constable in ever fresh images.

Spilling over painting in oil and watercolour, drawing, print-making, frottage, collage, sculpture and ceramics, the art of Colin Self is endlessly inventive, gently subversive and profoundly playful. It stands for humane optimism in the face of oblivion. The autonomy of a stand-alone artist is permeated by partnership and parenthood, kinship and friendship. There are no ivory towers in Norfolk. The best thing that ever happened to Colin was meeting Jessica Prendergast, in Norwich, in 1978. She has done so much to make this exhibition possible. It's dedicated to her.

Scandalously, this is also a first London retrospective since the landmark *Colin Self's Colin Selfs* show at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1986. It follows a magnificent 2025 presentation *One Self: The Creative Life of Colin Self* at Norwich Castle Museum, curated by Giorgia Bottinelli, and stands in for the national tour of public galleries which should have been but never was. As well as

works from public and private collections, our survey includes a first showing of *365: A journey in that direction* – a sparkling multi-media mosaic evolving since the millennium.

A pictorial diary has not stopped at the Self-imposed limit suggested by the title. Speeding up through lock-down, the idea of the days of a year represented in 365 20x20cm canvases is now exceeded. At this moment of writing, the journey in the direction of wherever inspiration leads comprises 372 visual and thoughtful stepping-stones in a series still in progress.

Every 365 picture has a story, hidden or revealed. Here are ironic nods to giants – a Dali-like Self-portrait with joke-shop swivel eyes; a boyhood photo set in a Mondrian grid (*Broadland Boogie Woogie*). A Wymondham College scarf has been cut into seven collaged pieces. Wooden birds spring from a dismembered cuckoo clock.

The latest tile in the mosaic, ending a full-wall Frith Street Gallery display, depicts Aloka the rescue mutt peace-walking with Buddhist monks through America. It is the antidote to *Guard Dog on a Missile Base No. 1* – beastly teeth reflected in a line of rockets – with which, in one of the 20th century's most powerful drawings, and a Tate loan to this show, Colin Self referenced the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.

Colin amazed me recently by saying that while making 365 he had often thought of my father following a memorable meeting of many years ago. My dad – boat-builder, angler, Jack the Lad – had sustained an unlikely war injury around the time of Colin's birth. He was shot in the arm by a military patrol when poaching pike for a Broadland fish and chip shop.

Returned to peace-time Norfolk from delayed service in the Merchant Navy, dad caught a record bream which ended stuffed and cased behind a pub bar. Colin Self has secured a broader immortality by remaining wholly free.

Ian Collins

List of Works

Humanity Hanging by a Thread, from 'The Stations of Life', 1962, oil on canvas

Leopardskin Nuclear Bomber No. 2, 1963, wood, aluminium, steel and fabric

Guard Dog on a Missile Base No. 1, 1965, graphite, ink, watercolour and crayon on card

Hot Dog, 1965, fibreglass

Study for Cinema 14, 1965, pencil on paper

Peacock (Power and Beauty No.6), 1968, photo screenprint on paper

The Baedeker bombing of Norwich (1942?) My mother going 'up the City' with me in my pushchair – seeing the devastation, 1970–1990s, pencil frottage drawing from woodblock on paper

Prelude to 1000 Temporary Objects of Our Times No.1 (Blackbird 2), 25 August, 1971, etching on paper

Prelude to 1000 Temporary Objects of Our Times No.7 (Nude Triptych), 1971, 3 etchings on paper

Across Garryhorn's Moor, Kirkcudbrightshire, Scotland, grasses blowing, 1974, watercolour on paper

Camped beneath Craignelder Gairy, at dawn by the Bloody Mires of Torrs, 1974, watercolour on paper

"Carlin's Cairn", Rhins of Kells mountains, Scotland, 1974, watercolour on paper

Meikle Craighaughton, Cliff by Bryan's Heights, Ayrshire, evening, 1974, watercolour on paper

View towards Cairnsmore from the track – night, 1974, watercolour on paper

Craignelder Gairy, Rhins of Kells, Scotland, 1975, watercolour on paper

The Water of Deugh & Brockloch Bannan, twilight, Scotland, 1978, watercolour on paper

Craignelder Gairy & Carlin's Cairn, 1st snow, undated, watercolour on paper

Moonlight, Whitlingham, 1979, watercolour on paper

Waterlilies, Brundall – aka But Home is where the Heart is [1/3], 1979–1980, watercolour on paper

Waterlilies, Brundall – aka But Home is where the Heart is [2/3], 1979–1980, graphite and pastel on paper

Waterlilies, Brundall – aka But Home is where the Heart is [3/3], 1979–1980, watercolour on paper

Crepuscular Iris, 1981, oil and turpentine on paper

Mickey Mouse in Norwich, 14th July, 1982, collage on paper and card

The Caravan Down the Garden, Thorpe, 2nd September, 1982, oil, gouache and raw pigments on paper

The Caravan Down the Garden, Thorpe, No.2 [sunset], 1982, household paint and pure pigment on paper

The Caravan Down the Garden, Thorpe, No.6 [snow], 1982, household paint and pure pigment on paper

The Hill at Postwick Grove from the River Yare, 19th August, 1982, watercolour on paper

Ploughman, 1983, mixed media on paper

Tethered Goat, Upgate Common near Swannington, 31st July, 1983, indian ink on paper

Cornfield with Bales, Plumstead, Norfolk, Looking East, 1984, oil on board

Jack Ellgood Ploughing, 1984, oil on board

Large Harvest field with two Hay Bales at Happisburgh, Norfolk, Wednesday, 19th September, 1984, oil on hardboard with some straw

Norfolk Landscape with Cow, 14th September, 1984, mixed media, oil and model toy on plywood

North Sea from the cliffs at Trimmingham, 1984, driftwood

The Marshes at Postwick Grove being a Rubbish Dump, the lights of expanding Norwich, 1984, household paint on hardboard, both found at the site

Double Crossing (level crossings at Bungalow Lane, Whitlingham [Nch], Norfolk) [The day my auntie Eva died. (My father's sister)], 1985, charcoal on paper

There are Places I Remember... (A place in the road from N. Walsham to Bacton, Norfolk – at a crossroads from Edingthorpe to Honing and N. Walsham to Bacton: – Edingthorpe Green?), 1985, charcoal on paper

World War II Pillbox in Harvest fields, Bacton, Norfolk, 1985, charcoal on paper

Peace on Earth, 1986, oil, charcoal and collage on paper

The Acle Sale, from Inside my Van, about to Draw, 25th August, 1988, collage and charcoal on paper

The Tourist (At the Pyramids of Giza in Egypt), 1997, frottage, pencil and coloured pencil on paper

The Tourist (On the Shore, Sunset), 1997, frottage, pencil and colour pencil on paper

The Tourist (In the Woods behind Greenborough Road), 1997, frottage, pencil and coloured pencil on paper

Cyclops from 'The Odyssey' suite, 2002, multi-plate etching on paper

The Ploughman, 2006, collage

The Ploughman, 2007, collage

Dead Dove of Peace (Springs fireplace Road series), 2009, etching and drypoint on paper

Ferns, from the Voltaire suite, 2020–2021, spray paint on canvas

Golden Rod No.2. 'Energy Flows through a field' (Captain Beefheart), from the Voltaire suite, 2020–2021, spray paint on canvas

365: A journey in that direction, 2000–2026 Mixed media on canvas

Published to celebrate the exhibition

Colin Self: Unseen

Frith Street Gallery, London,
18 September – 7 November 2026.

Curated by Ian Collins.

Dedicated to Jessica Self.



365: A journey in that direction, 2000–2026 (detail)



Peace on Earth, 1986

All works by Colin Self.

Texts by Tacita Dean and Ian Collins.

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Front cover image

*365: A journey in that direction,
Broadland Boogie Woogie: A Self Portrait
at 8 Years Old, 2000–2026*

Back cover image

*Prelude to 1000 Temporary Objects of
our Times No.7 (Nude Triptych), 1971*

