

THE ARTS

# Fenny Stratford's *Tecton Art Centre*



JOHN BEST, CHAIR  
ARTS GATEWAY MK

This month I want to look at a small arts centre tucked away in Fenny Stratford, where it has built a niche over many years and survives against the flow. Tecton Arts Centre is the unusual brainchild of an unusual creative, who I have known for a few years – Tony Keller. It's an excellent example of how the creative industries can support practising artists.

**Location**

Fenny Stratford is one of Milton Keynes' forgotten corners. I've written about it in the past, and lamented the fact that so few people know and recognise it compared to the fortunes of its big sister in the north, Stony Stratford. Both were medieval coaching towns set up on Watling Street, the old Roman route between Dover, London, St Albans and the Welsh border, but Stony Stratford has long been the better known of the two, more successful as a local town centre and has seen considerably more investment over the years. Fenny Stratford, the poor relation of the two, is known for the Fenny Poppers, six small early 18th Century cannons used for ceremonial purposes, for its place on the Grand Union canal built in the late 18th century, and the invention in Denmark

Street of the 'Diesel Engine' (two years before Rudolf Diesel) by Herbert Ackroyd Stuart in the late 19th century. So Fenny has Roman relics, medieval history, industrial heritage, its own railway station on the Marston Vale line, and an embryonic creative sector today.



Tony Keller



'Aix' by Sam Shane



Tecton creative interior

**Tectonics**

Good projects seldom happen by accident and more often than not they're the product of a single champion. Tony Keller is the person who created Tecton as a spin-off from his architectural practice, Building Tectonics, set up 35 years ago when he moved to MK. From his office nearby he knew the current building, formerly a Salvation Army chapel

and by then occupied by an upholstery company. He spotted the chance to design his own studio for his practice, made them an offer and moved in shortly after the conversion. He has created a mixed-use space with designer-friendly workspace upstairs, and the arts centre on the ground floor over which he keeps a watchful and enthusiastic eye. As well as his own practice, with regular

throughput of school-leavers and apprentices learning skills and customer care, the space also accommodates other micro-businesses including the regional office of the Royal Voluntary Service, a legal executive and, until recently, a nationally successful fashion designer. There is a two-way flow of influence between the two floors, with the young-workforce learning how artists work, and occasionally using the ground-floor space, and the artists occasionally benefiting from commissions from Tony's architectural clients. The ground floor meeting space is also used as a resource for local projects in the Fenny Stratford community. Permeability rules!

**Arts Centre**

Early on in his occupation Tony was approached by a local artist with an offer to hang art on the walls of his studio workspace. In no time at all the place was a gallery and the design concept was nearly complete. It took little time for the final step, to create working artists' studio space, and fill it. Over the ensuing years the arts centre side has been managed by a succession of dedicated artists and crafters, led at various times by Nick Packham, Sara Young and more recently Lynda Colley. The current complement includes three resident artists Lynda Colley, Alan Moore and Sam Shane, supported by a number of others who share the task of opening up and staffing during hours of opening.

**Tecton's Creative Programme**

Revamped in 2013, the space now offers workspace for three artists, meeting and exhibition room, gallery space in the entrance foyer, along the main corridor and around both stair wells. This richness

belies its unassuming exterior. The resident artists are:

**Lynda Colley** – Abstract acrylics, coloured pencil drawings and prints of endangered wild animals.



'Amur Leopard Cub' by Lynda Colley

**Alan Moore** – Abstract oils, wooden tribal statues and jewellery. More on him below.

**Sam Shane** – Pop art, realism, abstracts in acrylics, oils and watercolours.

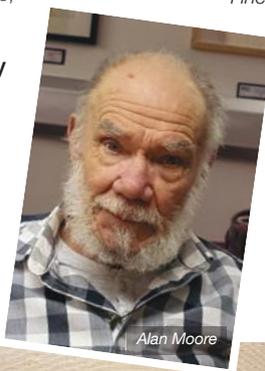
There are in addition displays of wood-turned objects by Bill McClure, jewellery by Fiona Baker, paintings by Julie Tebbutt, Janet Churchill and



Adrian Watts, and many more. Tecton's programme reflects the energies of whoever is providing the volunteer fuel to support this estimable not-for-profit: recent months have seen school exhibitions, handmade craft weekend, quilting exhibition, support at Fenny Poppers Festival, participation in MKArts Week 2016, and a continual stream of visitors on-site, including me.

**Alan Moore and his journey**

I selected Tecton partly for the creative industries crossover it illustrates; partly because it shows that active creative groups can be found in out-of-the-way places; but mostly because it is where Alan Moore has his studio. Alan was completely



Alan Moore



'Hope Springs Eternal' by Alan Moore

unknown to me until I dropped by unannounced during Milton Keynes Arts Week and was blown away by a thoroughly refreshing conversation with him. So I went back for more, and this is his story.

Now in his late seventies, Alan was born in Boston, Massachusetts, of Jewish/Irish/Russian parents – they met when his Irish father was playing banjo at a party, so creativity was in the genes. Alan came early to art, remembering pencil sketches to the sounds of air-raid precautions during WWII, but had no formal artistic training. He nourished his artistic side while living off an unusual sequence of jobs. He lived in New Hampshire for a while and moved to New York, all the while developing a very practical if narrow specialism in dough for bagels (itself very singular) and the machinery for mixing dough in industrial settings. There was nothing he didn't know about equipment for making great bagels and he sold to satisfied customers all over the east. By the late 1960s he was living in the Bronx, with stories of mafia networks hustling supposedly authentic sharp Italian suits from the backs of trucks... All the while art was a sideline, as he grew a family.

He moved to Connecticut, now with a wife and three children but after a few years his life went downhill, the relationship ended and, with his two

sons, he struck out to make a new life in California. This was a turning point for him, his family and his art. He worked in a variety of fields, starting with bagel-making which he new best, moving on to driving a breakdown-truck and for several years making, selling and distributing ice-cream. But that business came to an abrupt end in 1983 and he made another change. He was by now painting, drawing and sculpting much more, bringing in his practical approach, re-purposing found objects. He had added jewellery-making, incorporating precious material in mixed pieces. Because it was San Francisco, he was showing in public spaces and around the city, joining the *Artist Guild of San Francisco* in 1991, the *San Francisco Society of Fine Arts* in 1994 and then, in 2001, the *breakaway Red Umbrellas San Francisco*. He was selected in juried exhibitions across California and Nevada. He was an active figure in the San Francisco Street Arts Programme from 2001, and in shows in the city's Recreation and Parks system. Oh to be in a sunny climate!

During this time, as he flourished as an artist living in Marin County in his chosen



'Untitled' by Alan Moore

city, his life took another turn. Alan, when he tells of meeting his current wife, comes over as seriously romantic. The two, with two children apiece, decided to combine their family, and lived on the

*continued over...*



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west coast for several years. By 2009 his British wife was becoming homesick, and California's loss was our gain. Alan and his wife moved to Woburn Sands. Through local gallery-owner Edward Durdey, Alan found a studio in Aspley Guise, in the former Powage Press building. When that was redeveloped a chance reading of *MK Pulse* (the earlier article on Fenny Stratford, would you believe) brought Tecton to his attention in 2013 and the rest, as they say, is history.

One of the hardest things for arts organisations to do is to keep up-to-date with new arrivals in the area: who they are, what they bring and what they

need. Alan is a significant addition to the creative community, bringing a diverse practice and an exotic back story. He's no passenger, and has taken on a significant role in helping to make Tecton a success. I certainly think he should have more exposure, and Arts Gateway will look for ways to help not just him, but the whole Tecton creative team.

### Conclusion

This quick look at MK's most under-recognised gallery shows three things: firstly it's as good an example as you'll find of an individual, in this case

Tony Keller, successfully acting as an enlightened patron, making things happen: we want more Tonys. Secondly, what he has created at Tecton shows very clearly how links across creative industries can create something larger than the sum of the parts: success in itself draws in the efforts and energies of many to sustain the project.

And finally Tecton is a great example of what creativity is out there for the discovering, even in the most unfashionable, out-of-the-way places. I wonder how many readers knew of local artist Alan Moore... Well, you do now. ■



## NEWS FROM ARTS CENTRAL

This year is well and truly underway and we look forward to celebrating MK's big 50th birthday in even more projects and events than usual. We also think it may bring some extra work for us. This month we say goodbye to *Clyde House* our fifth Arts Central premises.

We're busy getting everyone out, clearing out the furniture and cleaning the place up before we go. Meanwhile we're negotiating for two buildings which, if they come off, will be AC 6 and 7.

Sadly our most exciting project, transforming the *Former CMK Bus Station* into a cultural flagship, looks at the time of writing unlikely to be accepted by

the building owners who have other priorities. We remain in the wings, happy to help if the opportunity arises.

We're currently recruiting for project managers to lead both the *Creative Workspace Network* second phase and *MK Arts Week 2017*. *Culture Challenge* will be rolling out sign-up by MK artists keen to work with schools. We're developing exhibition programmes for the whole year for both our galleries: *Norfolk House* and *AC at the Cornerstone*. This year, their 25th birthday, *Cornerstone* have an enhanced programme, with writer, story-teller and artist in residence, and hopefully much more besides.

For those who *really* want to know who we are, want to earn some money working with schools or lead a project, or want to take some of our new studio space both to the west and the east of Milton Keynes, you can sign up at [www.artsgatewaymk.org.uk](http://www.artsgatewaymk.org.uk) email me at [john.best@artsgatewaymk.org.uk](mailto:john.best@artsgatewaymk.org.uk) or call the office on **01908 241122**. We'd like to hear from you, wherever you're based.

## BOOK REVIEW

### The Power by Naomi Alderman

"When God created man She was only joking!"

This novel asks the question: "What if the world was controlled by women?" There are those who maintain this is already the case, albeit jokingly and there are those who maintain in all seriousness that the 'Feminazis' have already taken control.

What Ms Alderman's novel suggests is that young girls suddenly and inexplicably develop the power to general an electrical force from within themselves and are then able to pass it on to their elders in some cases. This power is initially no more than a plaything to be used, for example, for lighting cigarettes, but it becomes apparent quite rapidly that it can also be a force for harm, especially against males.

The plot brings us four women and one man and takes us gradually into a dystopian world, a world with which, in the early stages, Ms Alderman has a little sly fun at the expense of organised religion, "She calls to your attention to that which you have forgotten. Jews look to Miriam, not Moses for what you can learn from her... Christians pray to Mary for your salvation" so says Allie, an abused girl who grows to become the 'Mother Eve' a spiritual leader. The 'She' being, of course, God. The other women involved are Margot, an ambitious small-town politician, her daughter Jos and Roxanne the daughter of a London gangster. The single male is Tunde, a handsome young Nigerian who becomes

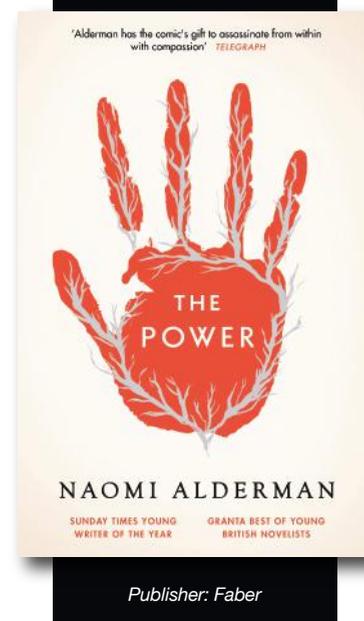
a journalist and records many of the cataclysmic events which take place.

Some readers might be slightly confused, as was your reviewer, by the fact that inside the book is called 'A Historical Novel', that it counts down from ten years and is credited to 'Neil Adam Armon', but all is gradually – and shockingly – revealed though hints are given by the line drawings which occur periodically.

The power referred to in the title is of different types; there is the literal power which the girls possess which has a visible manifestation and the symbolic, that is political power or that of sexual attraction. In each case it is shown that with power comes responsibility and repercussion and it is the use of that power which interests Ms Alderman and which kept this reviewer turning the page. One of the early repercussions, for example, is that in Margot's town education becomes segregated for boys and girls – for the boys' protection. Riots break out in Riyadh and Delhi, two places in which women have been particularly oppressed. As the novel moves forward it becomes darker and more tensely disturbing, a Bacchanalian forest ritual in particular is frankly, frightening.

Admittedly certain characters are less well-drawn than others, particularly Bernie Monke and his sons who could have stepped straight out of 'EastEnders' but this is a minor cavil, it is a novel

MALCOLM ALSOP  
reviews



which fits well into the canon of speculative fiction created by writers such as Ursula K Le Guinn and especially Margaret Atwood.

I understand that options have already been taken on this novel and this reviewer would advise you strongly to read this at the earliest opportunity.

