

THE ARTS

Pulse on *Phipps*



JOHN BEST, CHAIR
ARTS GATEWAY MK

Water Run by Leroy Phipps

This month I look at a rather extraordinary artist now living in Milton Keynes. Every once in a while you come upon a creative individual living in obscurity and hiding a major talent. Leroy Phipps, who I have known for over a decade, is just one of those. Several years ago Arts Gateway awarded him a small grant for framing and presenting some of his earlier works. Last month he opened his first major exhibition of the work he specialises in. Leroy is a pencil artist.

Leroy's journey

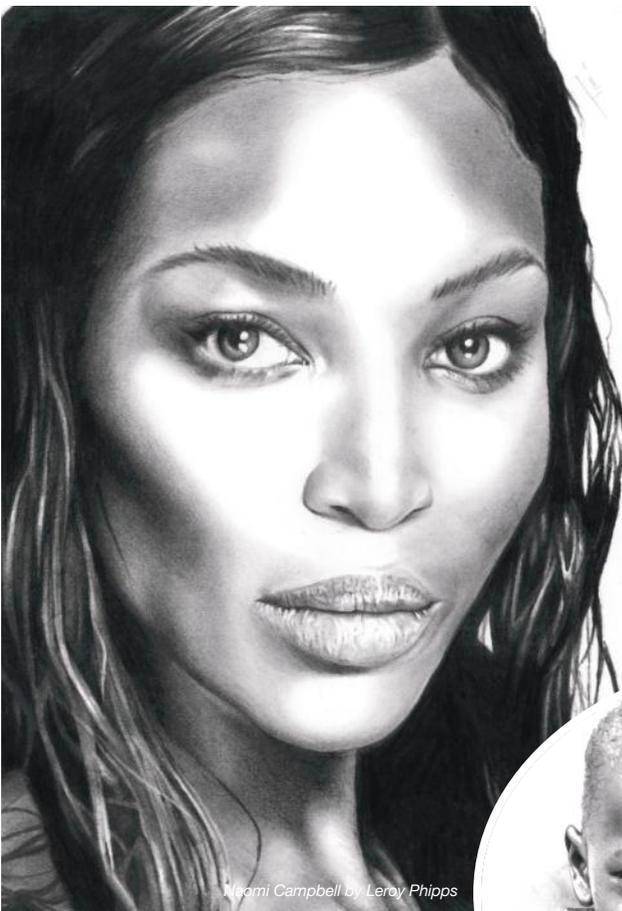
Leroy is world-travelled. Born in Brixton in 1960, he moved when he was eight with his parents, brother and two sisters back to Jamaica. Around that time he realised he wanted to be an artist. After school in Jamaica he spent two years at the Jamaica School of Art and Craft, Kingston, before moving to the Cayman Islands, working on the beaches and helping his father in his carpentry business. The young artist mixed with other artists on the islands, including Margaret Barwick wife of the Governor of the British Virgin Islands. She encouraged him to travel to the United States, to attend the Art Students League of New York, an independent art school providing atelier studio art classes in painting, drawing, sculpting and other artistic genres, where she had herself taken courses.

For several years Leroy took drawing and life drawing classes by night, while working by day as property handyman for 'Tony the Greek' and his portfolio of rental properties to pay his bills. Returning to England he found no work so in 1984 followed many others to Germany where the work was. For nine years he worked as an industrial and civil engineering painter in Cologne, earning good money and teaching himself German. But Art took a back seat: modern art was the vogue and Leroy did not see himself as a modern artist. Missing the language and the telly, Leroy returned to the UK in 1993, making his home in Milton Keynes and picking up his pencils. All through this time he has worked in manual jobs, helping to keep the place clean and safe, in various low-paid occupations. His art has been a well-kept secret.

Leroy's practice

Leroy has been practising as a pencil artist for over 20 years. His fine, detailed work is the result of many hours of careful craft, capturing the character and form of his subjects.

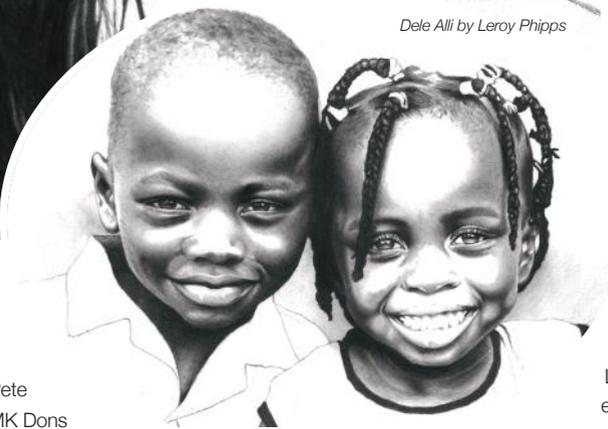
Starting from photographic images, he works painstakingly with successive layers of pencil strokes to create the light and depth of his images, some of which can take 40 or 50 hours to complete. His collection, always portraits of people, is in two distinct series of drawings. From the outset he has drawn authentic African subjects – stunning, dense and brimming with warmth. More recently he has produced a second series, portraits of people in the public eye, particularly where they have an association with Milton Keynes.



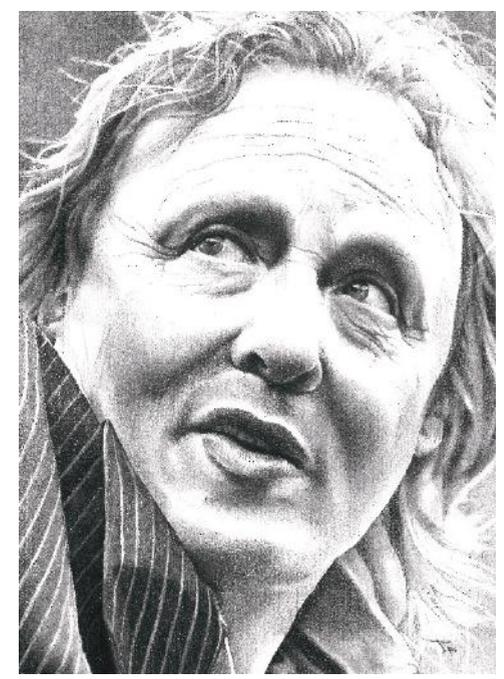
Miami Campbell by Leroy Phipps



Dele Alli by Leroy Phipps



School Friends by Leroy Phipps



Pete Winkelman by Leroy Phipps

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'Art from a point of view' exhibition

For several years Leroy had been looking out for the right photograph of local hero Pete Winkelman, chairman and power behind MK Dons and their stadium complex at MK1. Last year he found it and it became the basis for a striking pencil portrait. Last month the portrait was presented to Pete Winkelman, on the pitch before a match covered live on TV.

To coincide with the presentation, Arts Gateway supported Leroy in mounting a 24-portrait exhibition of his work titled Art from a point of view, from both the African and Portrait series. You can see it until 6th November, in the foyer of the Doubletree by

Hilton hotel at *stadiummk*, and in their new V7 restaurant, themed around key people and moments of MK and open every evening from 6pm except Sundays.

The opportunity of Art

Leroy's work and practice brings out several lessons. First of all, the lesson to keep looking for unrecognised talent: like a treasure trove, it's there

for the finding. And when new talent comes to the surface, people's delight is palpable. Secondly, the lesson not to jump to conclusions. Leroy is one of the most unassuming people I've ever met. His severe dyslexia means he has never aimed for a well-paid career, but it clearly doesn't get in the way of his talent which is articulate beyond words. And thirdly, it's always worth asking. We had no expectation that a busy hotel would set aside staff time and space to exhibit an art exhibition, let alone 24 pencil portraits in prominent places. With 10,000 visitors every home match, and over 300 rooms in constant use, that's some footfall. Thank you Doubletree by Hilton. Leroy's work is on show for you all in the hotel foyer and the V7 restaurant. Drop in and see it. ■



NEWS FROM ARTS CENTRAL

Well, we recovered from the rigours of *Milton Keynes Arts Week* which finished at the beginning of October, closely followed by the *South Northants Arts Trail* run by South Northants artists. MKAW 2016 made an excellent start, with around 100 artists exhibiting in open studios or group shows; over 500 attendances at the various performances, including 300 at the Festival of Nations opening event. Over 50 performers took part over the nine days including 16 professionals. And feedback on the week was very encouraging. We learnt many lessons for the future and have already started planning for 2017.

There's quite a lot of reading and writing going on in November. *Nanowrimo*, National Novel Writing Month, kicks off for us at a 29th October event and carries on through November. We're developing a literature programme under Arts Central literary residents *Ariel Pimentel* and *Scott Dorland* that includes a book group on the last Tuesday of each month starting in October. Open to the public, the November date is 29th, 7.30pm at Norfolk House.

And we haven't forgotten the visual arts. The excellent *Transformation* exhibition of textile and fabric artists brought together by *Mix3d Stitch* continues through October at our AC at the *Cornerstone Gallery*. From 1st November it'll be replaced by *Aspects of Ourselves*, from *Pandora Diverse Arts*, *Open Door* and artist *Kevin Mortimer*.

The latest exhibition at *Arts Central Gallery* at Norfolk House shows *The Art of Joss Whittle* until the middle of the month, with a Private View planned for 15th November, 7.30pm. Joss is another example of high creativity travelling under cover of darkness. Joss came to us as a volunteer handyman, concealing the fact that he had studied fine art at Brighton and taught it at Tunbridge Wells. Given the unavoidable pressure of being given his own platform, and with the exhibition elegantly hung by the artist himself, his pedigree shows. From 25th November Joss cedes place to watercolourist and AC resident *Louise Thomas* who takes the next Norfolk House gallery slot. Norfolk House now has only desks available, but we have studio space for visual artists at Clyde House Studios, CMK and at Horncastle Barn, just beyond Newport Pagnell. And we're taking performance propositions for our next Creative Arts Showcase, planned for Thursday December 15th.



Brad's Studio, Joss Whittle

AS ALWAYS... For those who would like to get involved in any of these projects, either in MK or Northampton, you can sign up on our website at www.artsgatewaymk.org.uk email me at john.best@artsgatewaymk.org.uk or call the office on **01908 241122**. We'd like to hear from you, wherever you're based.

