

OBITUARY by Dr. PETER WAKELIN

The artist and teacher Eugene Fisk, who has died aged 79, spent a lifetime watching and considering. A fascination with people and places in particular drove him to look beyond their surfaces for their inner qualities. The results throughout his long career were insightful, vital portraits, whether of people, animals, buildings or townscapes.

Eugene, as most knew him, was in fact christened Dennis Peter Fisk. He was born in Dagenham in Essex in 1938. His father, Charles, was a bricklayer, like his own father before him. In common with many successful artists, Eugene seems not to have shone at school and was consigned by the eleven-plus exam to his local secondary modern. But the better part of his education was in the hands of his parents. He would go to the cinema with his mother, Ellen, at a time when the star system was at its height: and the iconography of the screen goddess, of individuals who were made greater than their selves, went deep into his imagination. His parents also took him as a child on expeditions into London and the great galleries. He found he wanted to sit down and draw the paintings on the walls, and he discovered how much was to be gained from quiet study; from taking the time to look deeply.

At 15 he took a job with the repertory company at Northampton Playhouse and learned about back-stage operations and the creation of the stage picture. Then at 18 he was conscripted into the Royal Army Ordnance Corps. It turned out to be the beginning of his irrepressible commitment to portraiture: from 1956 to 1958 he spent much of his time drawing his fellow recruits. Although nothing in his family background would have suggested it, on leaving the army he converted to Roman Catholicism and became a monk in the De La Salle teaching order. He took the religious name of Eugene, which he was to keep for the rest of his life.

At De La Salle College in Jersey Eugene learned much from the painter and art master Frederick Sands (1916-1992), whose vibrant colour and precision of form must have appealed to him. He subsequently taught in the Xaverian College in Brighton and De La Salle College in Hove. The brotherhood allowed him to study at Farnham School of Art in 1962 and then Sussex University, where he took a degree in Art and Philosophy in 1968. He was then asked to take on a role at an approved school in Yorkshire instead of continuing to teach art. It is hard to imagine Eugene's gentleness and bohemian delicacy fitting in with the discipline of a school for young offenders, and in due course it was agreed that he might instead teach art at Barlby School near Selby. He was described as a wonderful teacher who enthused his students, many of whom went on to become artists themselves. However, the Order subsequently felt that his commitment to art did not conform with its ethos and asked him to consider his position.

In 1976, Eugene decided to concentrate on his work as a professional artist and illustrator, initially for projects connected with architecture and the environment. This put to use his extraordinary facility for drawing in ink with a continuous freehand line. It was as though his pen danced around buildings and streetscapes, accurately capturing their details in leaps and pirouettes. Over the years, many small books of such drawings were produced in which he celebrated the built environment and the communities that lived in it, often in aid of local preservation societies. Among them were Broseley: A Personal View (1978), In Praise of Monumentality (1979), Milton Keynes: A Personal View (1981), Abingdon: An Appreciation (1981, subtitled 'a walk through the town described and illustrated') and People in their Place: Milton Keynes (1985).

In the early 1980s, the development corporation of Milton Keynes in Northamptonshire was weaving together several older settlements into Britain's first 'new city'. For a year Eugene became an observer to the process. It was here that he met the love of his life, the artist Elizabeth Organ, who was recently divorced from the society portrait painter Bryan Organ. He supported her as she rebuilt her life after a breakdown brought on by the divorce, which had led her to decide that her own painting career was too painful to continue. In 1984, they moved together to Clyro near Hay-on-Wye, where they restored Ashbrook House, the former home of the diarist-curate Francis Kilvert, and created both a remarkable home and a beautiful gallery open to the public.

Eugene became both Çtular and literal 'arÇst in residence' at the Kilvert Gallery from 1986 unÇl it closed in 2009. Among many arÇsts who showed alongside him and who oNen visited were Roger Cecil, Maryclare Foa, Clive Hicks-Jenkins, David Inshaw, Robert Macdonald, Charles Shearer, Sarah Thwaites and Rachel Windham. It was first and foremost Lizzie's creaÇon, but Eugene was essenÇal to its make-up, whether working in the studio at the very top of the tall house or welcoming the many visitors who explored the lower floors. His calm appreciaÇon of people perfectly complemented Lizzie's more wary view, and they became the sÇll centre of an extraordinary community of creaÇve people and appreciators of the arts. He thought the world of her, as did many arÇsts, for whom she became an eccentric, unpredictable fairy godmother. Friends called in all day long, always welcomed into the lĩĩ le painted kitchen to sit down for coffee or a scratch lunch. Eugene became a well-known figure on his walks with Spot, his springer spaniel, in the countryside around Clyro: elegantly garbed in rich colours with a variety of disÇncÇve hats, and slight with a neat beard and flowing locks.

As a painter Eugene developed a style that was bold and expressive yet showed great sensiÇvity to personal character or the spirit of place. He was an expert colourist, and he someÇmes described himself as a Fauve, aNer 'wild-beasts' of emoÇve colour such as MaÇsse, Gauguin and Dufy. His painÇngs brought some Mediterranean heat to the muddy fields of the Welsh borders. They could elicit an impression like the excitement when the curtain first goes up on a floodlit stage, but they were refined and subtle, informed by his knowledge of how colours act on one another. He wrote:

*And my influences? I was especially interested in icons, because they were not a delineadon of observed reality, such as I had been trained in. In the same way, I was drawn into the world of the Fauvists, because of their colour harmonies, and aÈerwards admired the freedom and fluidity of Chaĩm SouDne. A more direct personal educaDon came from my associaDon with my partner Elizabeth Organ. Her extraordinary discernment in art maGers has been a fundamental influence on countless arDsts.*

His work was appreciated and enjoyed but Lizzie and he were both frustrated someÇmes that it was not acquired by public collecÇons and that he was not represented by major dealers. His painÇngs were not for everyone – they might have been championed more readily in the heat of southern France or among the ScoJ sh Colourists, perhaps, than in mid-Wales. The relaÇonship with the Kilvert Gallery may have made other galleries less inclined to approach him. But in the end both of them were always far more interested in the creaÇve process than in sales. They branched out into running courses in drawing and painÇng in places where they loved to be: Manorbier in Pembrokeshire, Sussex, Provence, Venice. They also established the remarkable Art of Living fairs as open-air showcases for arÇsts and cranNspeople carefully selected for originality and quality, first at Eastnor Castle in Herefordshire and later at Hever Castle in Kent.

Eugene described Lizzie as a 'hierophant', someone who interprets sacred mysteries. His choice of term perhaps expressed at least as much about his own quest, which was to find the inner truths in what he saw. He never leN the mysteries of his monasÇc life enÇrely behind. Albeit that he was so fascinated by goings-on and personaliÇes around him, he preserved an other-worldly distance from the daily experiences of most. In conversaÇon, he would oNen show no sign of having heard a quesÇon, then give his considered reflecÇon or ask an incisive quesÇon of his own some minutes later. Indeed, he generally spoke sparingly, choosing his words for accuracy. He preferred to listen and absorb. Laĩ erly, he used a hearing-aid with a remote microphone that he would push around the table so as to hear every bit of conversaÇon.

He would ask strangers who came into the Kilvert Gallery to sit for him simply on the strength of the impression they made on him at first sight. When chaJ ng to one such person who had agreed to come to the studio while holidaying in the area he remarked that she had film-star looks; it was only later that he discovered he had been painÇng the actress Miranda Richardson. He wrote:

Where the need to draw and paint comes from, I have never discovered, only that, like many others, I couldn't live without it. Existence could be managed, but minus the vital life. Psychological balance requires it. Thus it always comes as a surprise when someone asks me "Are you still painting?" "What else would I be doing?" I think to myself. It is a life of response like a conversation. How strange and exceptional is a familiar view, there, but always changing. How mysterious is the person seated opposite to me or glimpsed in the street. Something must be done about it.

Many portraits were done entirely for himself; others were for friends such as the industrialist Sir John Harvey-Jones and Jeremy Sandford, writer of *Cathy Come Home*, neighbours and fellow artists; but there were commissions too, in which clients made emotional investment of their own that had to be treated with care. He learned some methods to satisfy them. One was to paint two pictures simultaneously, so that when the sitter felt self-conscious discomfort on first sight of the result he could produce the other; a choice that seemed always to end in satisfaction. Another practice came from his discovery that, whether sitters were 20 or 70, their self-image was of their prime: he found it best to aim for a consistent 35.

He enjoyed working in series for projects that were greater than the sum of their parts, often in collaboration with friends who were writers or campaigners. This approach he applied to holy wells around Wales, to the travels of Giraldus Cambrensis, to a residency behind the scenes at the Welsh National Opera that led to an exhibition at Cardiff's St David's Hall. He also continued to cherish the places and communities that he loved, producing several more books of drawings: *Clyro* (1988), *Hey Days in Hay: An Affectionate Record* (1992, with Jeremy Sandford) and *Kilvert's Clyro Now* (1995), which in part contrasted the beauty of the village with the hideous excrescence of road-signs and clutter installed by the highway authority on the main road. He published a book about the French village of Azincourt, site of the medieval battle, in 1999, and in 2015 another book on Hay, *Oh Happy Hay! A Pamphlet on Seeing*.

After Lizzie died in 2009 he moved across the river Wye to Hay, compressing the vast contents of the Kilvert Gallery into a much smaller house. He continued to be part of a rich artistic community, which drew itself around him. One of his last projects derived from his lifelong concern with how the creative potential of individuals might be either frustrated or enabled, this time focused on the predicament of asylum-seekers stranded in an alien culture. He became a founder member of Hay, Brecon and Talgarth Sanctuary for Refugees, which among other things welcomed visits from a major settlement project in Swansea. His role was to draw portraits of the refugees, to give them a sense of being seen as individuals, recognised for who they were. He knew it was something he could do to ameliorate people's dissociation from their previous lives, as he had done for fellow conscripts during National Service. He used art to enrich life. A book of his asylum-seeker portraits, *Only Connect*, came back from the printers the day he died.