

ArtSeen

## People of the Otherworld: Ken Kiff in Dialogue

By Alfred Mac Adam

They are thin on the ground, wild and wooly, the Rose Wylies, Victor Bouletts, and Ken Kiffs of Great Britain's chaotic art history. These three share specific traits and in themselves constitute a mini-tradition: a tendency toward figuration, a slapdash attitude toward pictorial verisimilitude, a drift toward narrative, vivid color. Seemingly autochthonous, they nevertheless have affinities with continental movements, Expressionism and its direct descendant, the COBRA group. COBRA's relationship with a folkloric tradition is another important factor. Carl-Henning Pedersen, for example, found inspiration in fairy tales, and Kiff (1935–2001) himself illustrated *Folk Tales of the British Isles* in 1977. At the same time, Kiff's work as an illustrator also harkens back to a British tradition of caricature, specifically the work of George Cruikshank.

Curated by Kathy Battista, *People of the Otherworld*—the title derives from one of the stories included in the 1977 volume of folktales—has multiple intentions. First and foremost, it introduces Kiff's work to a New York audience unaware of his existence. This it accomplishes in grand style by amassing twenty works produced between the 1960s and 1990s. It also seeks to show Kiff's affinities with ten younger artists, including some who are not painters: Elif Uras, with bizarre stoneware pieces, and Kathy Ruttenberg, with an eerie sculpture, *Spider Bite* (2023). One spectacular success in that experimental colloquy is Kim Dingle's 2017 *Untitled (lost her head)*, an uncharacteristic oil on plexiglass. Particularly in the works she produces blindfolded, Dingle harmonizes perfectly with Kiff.

Where Dingle paints blind, Kiff, in *Man Painting, on Yellow* (1965) embraces a meta-artistic mode. First, he isolates an artist in a yellow void, perhaps a hint about where the artist stands while creating: outside any context but his own mind. Then we see that the artist paints himself as he paints his own self-portrait. The brush is loaded with yellow paint, but the face in the painting-within-a-painting is pink—the yellow paint the depicted painter applies is found, instead, on his own face. This brilliant, self-reflective work is an overt statement about the autobiographical nature of art, that it must inevitably return to its creator, that the relationship between artist and work is a closed circuit. This autobiographical theme reappears in *Shadow*, from the early 1980s. The goofy figure on the right, accompanied by a serpent and other monstrosities, corresponds to Jung's idea of the shadow, the hidden, possibly monstrous self we conceal from others. So much of Kiff's work is fraught with the opposition between the monstrous and the socially acceptable that it's easy to imagine him dramatizing in his work the conflict between his own exterior and interior identities.

Small wonder then that one of the most amazing works here is *The Poet (Mayakovsky)* (S-164) from 1977. Mayakovsky killed himself in 1930, just before the Stalinist terror, but Kiff's point does not appear to be political. The poet blows his brains out, staring at us in abject terror, but out of his head pours a flood of Kiff grotesques. Kiff suggests that all artists commit a form of suicide by revealing their inner selves in their work, that artistic production is a form of self-immolation. We think of Kafka's "Hunger Artist," whose "art" is public starvation. Kiff's astounding acrylic takes us beyond contingency and into a zone where art takes place as a form of self-sacrifice. But the single painting here that most thoroughly brings the viewer into Kiff's artistic consciousness is *Goddess in Street (Narrow Version)*, painted in the late 1970s. Think of a blond-bombshell pinup transformed into a monster: a Kali with multiple arms, huge breasts, a slaving tongue. Is she menstruating or defecating? Hard to say, and that is part of Kiff's point: Kiff's goddess destroys so creation can take place. She is both clean and filthy, a mother but also

a devourer who must be feared and worshiped. She corresponds to the Jungian *anima*, the female identity within all men. This idea goes some distance toward explaining Kiff's notions of composition, how he often divides his canvas into opposing halves, often separated by water, as in *Two People* (1978–84), where on the left a bare-breasted female figure seems to gesture in welcome, while on the right a monstrous male mask glares at the viewer: these divided beings can never meet.

*People of the Otherworld* is a unique, perhaps once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see Ken Kiff's work, the artistic problems he set for himself, and its ramifications in the work of others.