

Beryl Cook 1926-2008

From hen-parties to pub-goers, it was the larger-than-life people of Plymouth that dominated Beryl Cook's colourful paintings and won her thousands of fans across the world. The sea-front city was her beloved home for many years, and it inspired much of her best-known work.

Writers and critics Jess Wilder, Bernard Samuels, Edward Lucie-Smith, Bernadette Casey and Babs Horton offer a unique perspective on the self-taught artist and a critical reassessment of her place within British Art. Illustrations of early and rarely seen work sit alongside some of her instantly recognisable paintings.

Authors: Jess Wilder, Bernard Samuels, Edward Lucie-Smith, Bernadette Casey, and Babs Horton.

"Beryl was a keen observer of life, had a sharp eye for detail and knew how to prick pomposity with her paintbrush and give us all a good time." Babs Horton

"Beryl changed the way we look at the world."
Jess Wilder, Portal Gallery

"Beryl loved things that were on the margins of society, not quite integrated into the general mass." Edward Lucie-Smith



BERYL COOK 1926-2008



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Jess Wilder Sarah Chapman

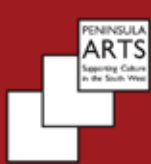


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My Fur Coat
1978

BERYL COOK, 1926-2008

Jess Wilder

Beryl Cook changed the way we look at the world. It is a tribute to her fame that when we see curvaceous girls all dolled up to go out on a hen night, or a pair of plump ladies gossiping over cups of tea and enormous cream cakes Beryl Cook is the artist who comes into our minds. Life is full of such 'Beryl Cook Moments'. Her perspicacious observations have become an integral part of British life. However very few people know very much about the artist who never sought publicity, never attended one of her own private views and who only gave interviews reluctantly. Ironically, in her rare appearances on television, she came over as a natural – articulate, amusing and totally unpretentious.

Beryl Lansley was born in Egham in Surrey in 1926; four years later her parents separated. Beryl, her mother and four sisters moved to Reading and they lived next door to a boy called John Cook. Beryl left school at 14 having shown no particular interest in art. In 1944, the family moved to London where Beryl took a number of jobs: as a showgirl in a touring production of 'The Gypsy Princess' and as a model for Goldberg's of Bond Street. In 1947, they moved to Hampton, just south-west of London, to a house by the river which they ran as a tea-garden.

John Cook and Beryl met up again after the war. By then John was an officer in the Merchant Navy. They married in 1948 and their son, also named John, was born two years later. John left the Navy and briefly they ran a pub on the Essex – Suffolk border but found quite soon that country life was definitely not for them. It is clear from Beryl's paintings that the city, and all it has to offer, has always been her inspiration.



Setting the Scene

Bernard Samuels

I first met Beryl Cook in the spring of 1975. Later that year I presented an exhibition of her work at Plymouth Arts Centre where I had been Director since 1971. It was the first ever showing of her work in a gallery. Thirty years on from then I have recounted the story many times: how I heard about Beryl Cook from an actor on tour in Plymouth who was lodging with Mrs. Cook; how it took me weeks to persuade her to let me put on an exhibition, but strictly on condition, laid down by Mrs Cook, that there would be no publicity; how I broke my promise and telephoned *The Sunday Times* who published a feature article, including a front page cover in February 1976 which made her world famous in a day which ended with a telephone call to my flat in Plymouth Arts Centre from Lionel Levy of the Portal Gallery, the gallery who have shown the work ever since.

Naturally, I have extremely vivid memories of first meeting Beryl Cook and her family – who must always be emphasized as they were so central to her life. My memories are key to my contribution to this book. However, this publication is also a good opportunity to go back and take a look at Plymouth as a context for the extraordinary phenomenon of Beryl Cook's first exhibition.

Like Beryl, I am not a local person. She and her family came to live in Plymouth in 1968. I came to Plymouth in 1956 to teach French at Plymouth College, the local direct grant grammar school. I grew up in Manchester in the 1940s where, in spite of the war, it was possible to enjoy a rich cultural life. Plymouth was still very much a city recovering from the Blitz and cultural life was scarcely on the agenda. Significant change at the civic level was extremely slow in coming. It came eventually in 1982, over 40 years after the Blitz, with the opening of the Theatre Royal.



Dyno-Rod
1999



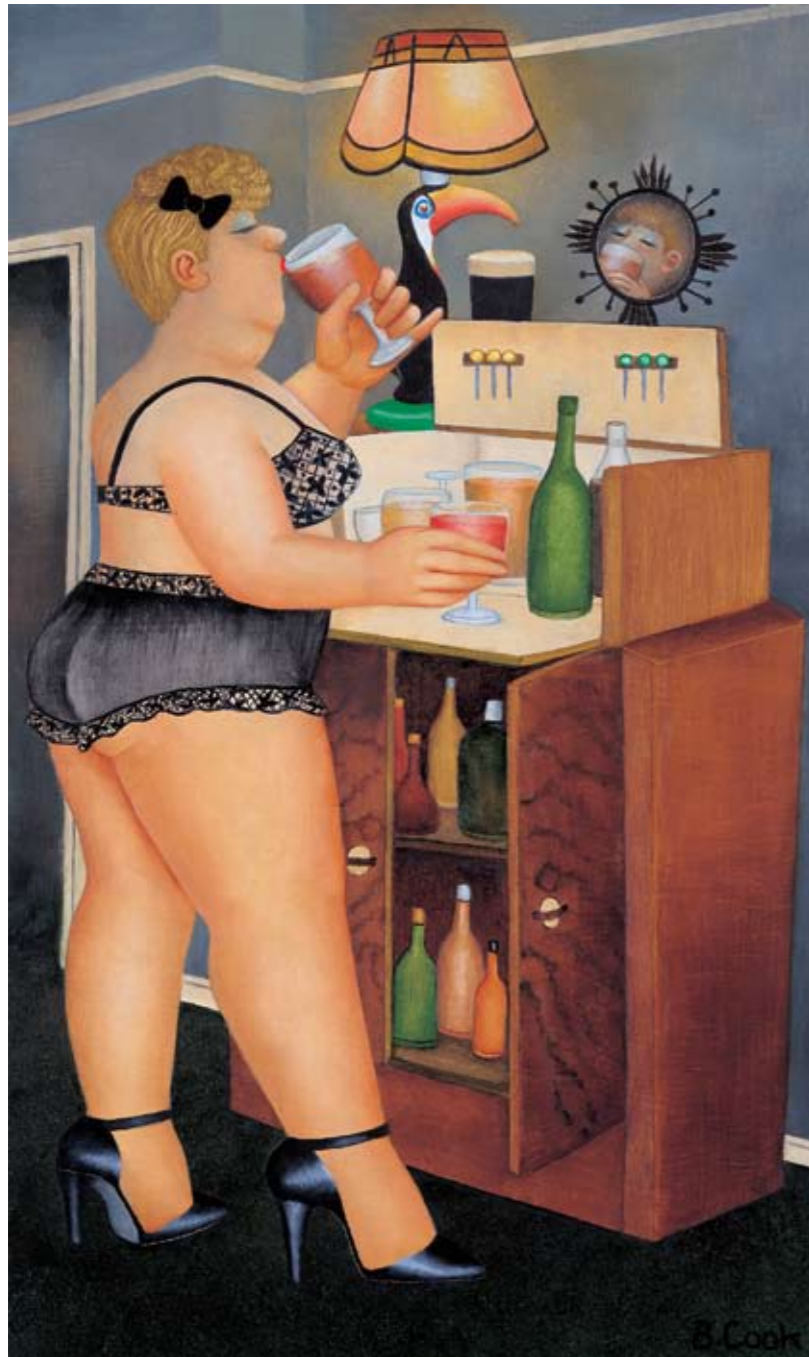
Road Sweepers
1996



Big Shoes
2006



Dancing the Black Bottom
2006



Drinkies
2007



The Allotment
1992



Bernie and the Vibes
2004



The Bijou Trio
1997



Tic-Tac Man
1987



Punks on Plymouth Hoe
1996



Central Park
1983



Feeding the Tortoises
circa 1974



Sunbathing
circa 1974



Teresa in a Fox Fur
circa 1974



Talking about Art
2006

Heightened Reality

Edward Lucie-Smith

When Beryl Cook died, she was the subject of a large number of obituaries. Some of them were predictably condescending, which I suspect she would not have minded a bit. The really telling thing, however, is what has happened since then on the Web. If you go to the site maintained by *The Times*, still regarded as the British paper of record, and look for the paper's Obituary Archive, you will find a section within it devoted to 'Artistic Genius'. The subtitle is 'Artists and makers who changed the way we see'. And what is the illustration that the site's designers have chosen to head this section? A self portrait by Beryl Cook.

Further down the computer screen are Robert Rauschenberg, Jörg Immendorf, Sol Lewitt, Bernard Meadows, Patrick Caulfield, Eduardo Paolozzi, Agnes Martin, Allan Kaprow, Nam June Paik, but Beryl lords it triumphantly over them all. Without, I think, actually meaning to tell us this, *The Times*, in its Internet incarnation, has made a valid point. Beryl was one of the most completely recognizable artists of her epoch – at any rate here in Britain.

I can vouch for this from personal experience. Like many art critics, I have a motley collection of paintings, drawings and photographs hanging on the walls of my flat. Many of my visitors are not denizens of the art world. Newcomers drift through my rooms. "I like this," they say. "Who did it?" Or "I couldn't live with that." Beryl's work elicits only one comment: "Oh, you've got a Beryl Cook."

One asks oneself how this has come about? There are several answers, more complex than they seem at first. The first is that Beryl's work presents people with scenes and incidents they think they know. Nevertheless, it is a heightened reality. The everyday world acquires hallucinatory quality. It is more itself in Beryl's paintings than it would be if we observed the people and



Interior with a Pork Pie
2000

Unruly Pleasures: Beryl Cook's popular appeal

Bernadette Casey

There is no doubt that Beryl Cook has, over a number of years, become a much loved figure within British popular culture. Her pictures have gained huge recognition and admiration from a public that extends well beyond the UK.¹ Whilst the paintings have sold well as originals, they have gained even more enormous success in their mass-reproduced, popular forms: greetings cards, prints, posters, calendars, illustrated books and so on. It is Cook's significance within popular culture, as well as the popular response to her work that will be the main focus of this essay. I intend to explore some inter-connecting themes, using concepts from cultural theory to open up debate about a range of ways in which we may experience Cook's work. Space is limited so I am going to concentrate on a small number of areas of discussion around the social context of Cook's work and on her representations of the body, particularly the female body. In doing so, I will utilize the concept of the 'carnavalesque'. In focusing on these areas, I will also include commentary on the divisions, actual and perceived, between Cook's critics and her admirers by examining directly some of the responses to her work.

In approaching Cook's work in this way, I want to challenge the often explicitly made assertion that Cook's art is at best a bit of fun and at worst worthless, and I want to contest the view, more implicitly held, that her fans are philistines or dopes. If we consider the work in its cultural and social context and if we think about the ways in which the work communicates, it is possible to regard

¹ Postings on 'The Times Online' website in response to Cook's obituary in *The Times* included contributions from fans in Australia, the USA, Germany, Spain and Hungary, as well as from many parts of the UK. One Russian woman, posting from the USA, referred to her getting to know Cook's work via "a greetings card that somebody sneaked to Russia in the late 80s".



Aboy There!
2003

LIFE WITH LAUGHTER

Babs Horton

I first found a Beryl Cook card in a shop in Plymouth many years ago. I stared down at it in fascination, laughed out loud and bought it for my sister's birthday because I knew instinctively that as an artist she would appreciate Beryl's work. My sister was duly delighted, Beryl Cook became a firm family favourite and we rejoiced in her success and growing fame. The card that gave me such delight was called 'Sabotage'. Bowls had always seemed so staid and boring to me up until that point. 'Sabotage' was a picture of three ladies on a bowling green, one lady poking her opponent unceremoniously up the behind in an attempt to put her off her stroke. I have often tried to put my own finger on exactly what it is about Beryl Cook's work that has enthralled me for so many years. I think it is because she was able to infuse an absolute joy and vitality into all her colourful work. She captured wickedness, mischief, the *joie de vivre* that was all around her in the pubs, clubs, cafés and open spaces of Plymouth. Beryl was a keen observer of life, had a sharp eye for detail and knew how to prick pomposity with her paintbrush and give us all a good time. Beryl effortlessly exaggerated her characters and captured so many lovely moments for all of us to share.

If I stare for a long time at her pictures I can conjure up conversations between her characters, can hear the sound of their high heels clattering as they teeter across the damp cobbles of the Barbican, the tinkling of glasses in The Dolphin and the raucous unbridled laughter on the night air. I can smell the beer, the hairspray and the perfume, the sweat and the mingling of cigarette smoke. Beryl Cook was a wonderful, eccentric individual, a talented artist who saw the world with a wry sense of humour and was able to translate her vision and communicate with the public. She took everyday scenes of Plymouth and its people, images which would otherwise be forgotten but which were and are familiar to all who frequent the Barbican and bars of Plymouth. The colour and fun of her work is attractive to the eye and uplifting to the spirits.