

THE SECRET TO  
A GOOD LIFE?  
GET A GOOD PENCIL!  
A 2B OR a 3B NOT an HB  
THEY ARE FOR ARCHITECTS  
BOB AND ROBERT SMITH

PATRICK BRILL

## The Secret to a Good Life

LONDON METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY  
THE SCHOOL OF ART, ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN

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Administration: Hannah Parr  
Concept Design: Lisa Wallius

Research Assistant: Hannah Parr

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Figure 2. Bob and Roberta Smith reading in front of painted panels, 2018 Image: Patrick Brill.

## Research content and significance

### DESCRIPTION

*The Secret to a Good Life* was commissioned by the Royal Academy (RA) to mark its 250th anniversary. Authored by Royal Academician, Patrick Brill under his pseudonym Bob and Roberta Smith, the exhibition used the work of his mother and father alongside several new pieces created in collaboration with his wife and daughter that question the historically strained relationships between women and the RA.

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How does sculpture and painting reposition gender within institutional narratives?
- What scope is there for defining a role - similar to that of a 'public intellectual' - for the artist: a 'public artist'?
- Inasmuch as artworks may function to celebrate everyday life, to what extent is the layering of biography and history in this work insightful?

### PROCESS

Brill's established visual methods problematise the inherent politics of institutions such as the RA, providing insights about our understanding of critique within art practice. The work extends its reach into new audiences via populist forms and articulated modes of engagement, by mapping his personal biography against a public and historical context.

## DISSEMINATION

Due to its national and international reputation, the Royal Academy welcomes 1.28M physical and 3.4M digital visitors per year. Footfall for this exhibition can be reasonably estimated at up to 300,000 visitors throughout its run. Brill ran a series of related workshops open to the public and published an accompanying book *Bob and Roberta Smith: The Secret to a Good Life*.

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The exhibition is a meaningful contribution to Brill's ongoing activism for access and equality in art education. When discussing art as advocacy in 2015 he said: 'Objects are very vulnerable when people have forgotten their stories'. By bringing to debate his own family story, he strengthens this agenda in relation to society, education, and our institutions today.

## Introduction

Commissioned to mark the Royal Academy's 250th anniversary, *The Secret to a Good Life* exhibition took place in the newly opened McAulay Gallery from 4 September 2018 to 3 February 2019. Brill used the framework of his family biography to question biased relationships between women and the Royal Academy over its history. The work of his mother Deidre Borlase from the mid twentieth century (1940-80s) sat next to a portrait of her by her husband (the artist's father, Frederick Brill) to explicate how adopting a non-gendered name enabled her selection in the RA Summer Exhibition – in contrast with her husband who had no trouble.

Three new sculptures included *This is Deirdre Borlase ARCA*, and sculptures of the Academy's female founders, Mary Moser RA and Angelica Kauffman RA, the latter created in collaboration with Brill's wife, Jessica Voorsanger, and their daughter, Etta Voorsanger-Brill. Also on display was a previously exhibited sculpture of the Academy's first president, Sir Joshua Reynolds PRA and painted text panels describing the family's narrative that were created for the commission.

The exhibition celebrates the 'everyperson' artist through the portrayal of his mother's life and struggles as a

female artist in post-war Britain. The show's title comes from a piece of advice given to the artist by his late mother. When asked for the secret to a good life, Borlase replied 'The secret of a good life is to get a good pencil: a 2B or a 3B, not an HB. HBs are for architects.' She taught him that art provides individuals an opportunity to find their own voice and it is this ability of the arts to emancipate oneself that is reflected both in Bob and Roberta Smith's extensive body of work as an advocate for the creative arts and within his own family life. The exhibition was described as a declaration of 'family values' and parenthood<sup>1</sup> teaching the next generation about the secret to a good life - freedom in opportunity and expression.

1. Buck, Louisa, 'Bob and Roberta Smith's Family Values and Pencil Power at the Royal Academy of Arts', *The Art Newspaper*, 2018, available online at: <<http://www.theartnewspaper.com/blog/bob-and-roberta-smith-s-family-values-and-pencil-power-at-the-royal-academy-of-arts>> [accessed 16 December 2020].





Figure 3. Painting of a 3B Pencil, 2018.  
Image: Bob and Roberta Smith RA.

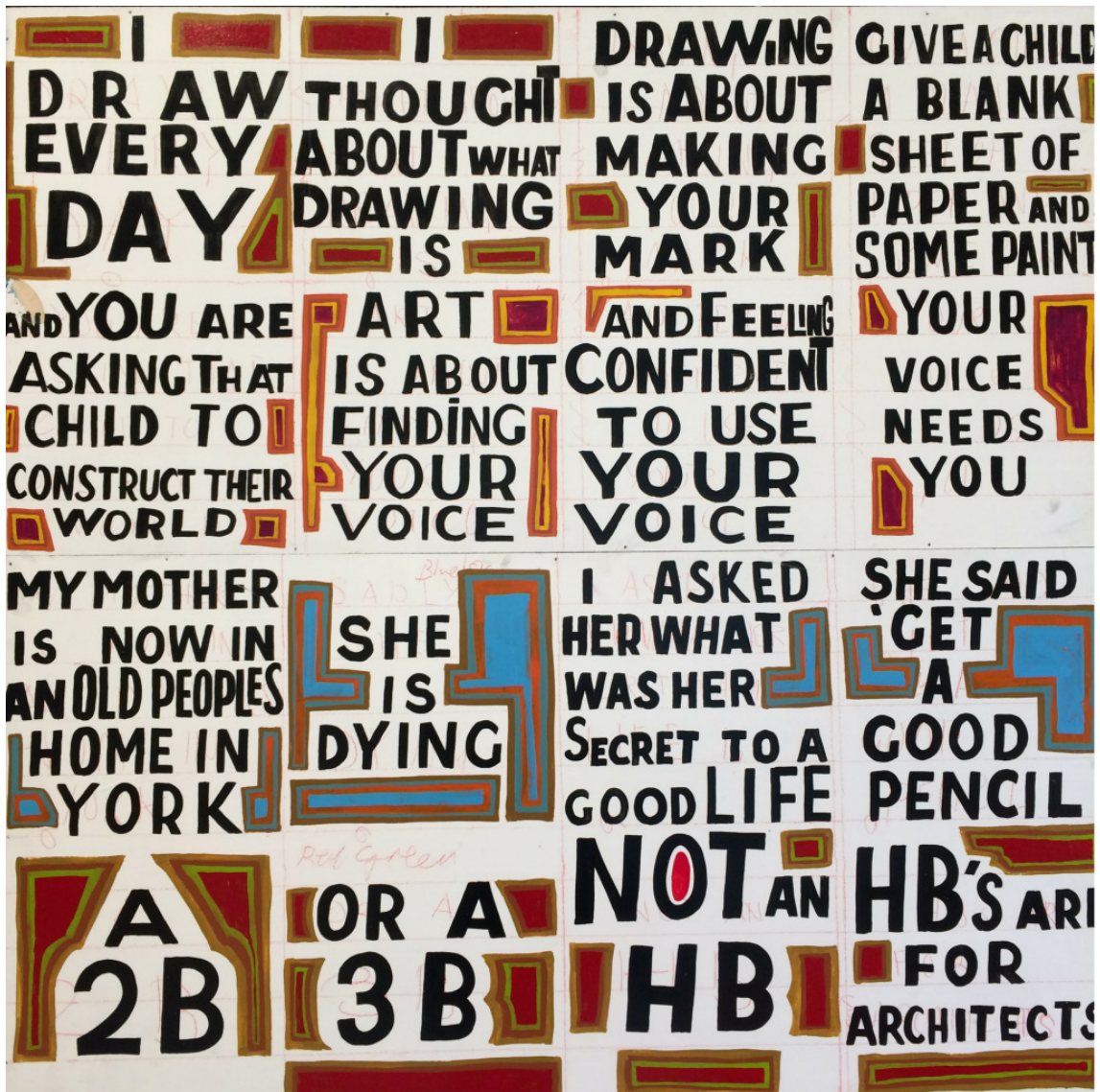


Figure 4. Painted panel, 2018. Image: Bob and Roberta Smith RA.



**THIS EXHIBITION**  
**IS A COLLABORATION**  
**BETWEEN**  
**JESSICA VOORSANGER**  
**ETTA VOORSANGER-BRILL**  
**FREDRICK BRILL**  
**DEIRDRE BORLASE**  
**A N D**  
**BOB AND ROBERTA SMITH**

Figure 5. Painted credit panel, 2018. Image:  
Bob and Roberta Smith RA.

## Research context

The Royal Academy of Arts was founded in 1768 by 36 founding members, two of which – Mary Moser RA and Angelica Kauffman RA – were women. While this was seen as something fairly radical at the time, the institution has had a self-proclaimed ‘chequered history when it comes to equality of the sexes.’<sup>2</sup> Moser and Kauffman were two of the most celebrated female artists of 18th century Britain and were highly respected in their field. Despite this, they remained to be treated differently from their male peers. They were excluded from classes and formal dinners, and were not permitted to play an active role in the institutions running.<sup>3</sup>

### WOMEN AT THE ACADEMY

Johan Zoffany’s group portrait *The Academicians of the Royal Academy* (1771-72) provides a suitably artistic demonstration of this factual disparity. The portrait, staged in the life drawing room at the Royal Academy, shows the male Academicians gathered around two nude male models. This was a time where social customs made it unacceptable for women to attend such a class and, because of this, their representation was reduced to portraits hanging on the walls.

The group portrait evidences and fleshes out the historical social context within the institution and was described as

an ‘icon of exclusion’ by art historian Angela Rosenthal.<sup>4</sup> Following the death of Mary Moser in 1819, another 103 years elapsed before the next female artist, Annie Swynnerton, was elected ARA, followed by Dame Laura Knight who became a full RA in 1936. Progress within this institution has been slow, and it is only in the last decade or so where we have seen some equality in its elected members.

Despite its institutional credentials, the RA has a long tradition of fostering social mobility. *The Summer Exhibition* is the world’s oldest and largest open submission art exhibition, carrying with it a certain democratic ethos that allows many artists from less privileged backgrounds to succeed. As Borlase found out however, the position of a woman within this process was much more complex. After deciding to sign her work in a manner that would not reveal her gender – D. Borlase – she found that she was accepted into the exhibition much more readily, and sold her work at a higher rate. Although it would be difficult to prove that her work would not be deemed admissible or worthy of purchase if she had emphasised her gender, what we can categorically surmise is that *The Summer Exhibition* jury and any prospective buyers would have assumed – when seeing her un-



gendered name – that she was a man. Her encounters with this kind of indirect discrimination stretched beyond her applications to the summer exhibition. At art school, Dierdre Borlase, along with countless other women artists, found themselves being steered away from painting, drawing and sculpture towards disciplines such as dress making. In the 1971 essay, *Why have there been no great women artists?* Linda Nochlin discusses the then accepted suggestion that the lack of great women artists is down to a lack of individual genius. She argued that the development of the artist and the art itself is in fact down to ‘the nature of given social institutions’ and the restrictions that were imposed upon women trying to practice.<sup>5</sup> This essay called for a radical shift in gender analysis within both artistic production and its historical discourse and was followed by a momentous exhibition and catalogue *Women Artists 1550 - 1950* which gave visibility to women artists globally.<sup>6</sup>

The contribution of Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Mathews at this time framed aspects of the revision of institutional attitudes to understanding their own historical positions.<sup>7</sup> For Brill, *The Secret to a Good Life* aims to contribute to this long standing debate but in a way that fleshes out his artistic identity (as Bob & Roberta Smith) while

framing the parochial prejudices of our institutions as part of the wider set of social assumptions that dictate family life while failing to truly understand it. In the work, the question of the role of women in the Academy and beyond becomes a question of family dynamics played as the story of a mother who taught the artist how to draw, reimagining the institutional history of art and its reproduction as a personal story: as family life. We can agree that much has progressed with regards to gender and art since Dierdre Borlase’s celebrated outing at *The Summer Exhibition*, but Brill’s claim in this work and in his wider practice argues for the difficulties and complexity of the social context surrounding art education.<sup>9</sup> Creativity has been sidelined by a technocratic elite, and Brill’s oeuvre rehabilitates art, putting it back at the centre of both actual and political life.

2. Sawbridge, Peter, *A Little History of the Royal Academy* (London: The RA, 2018)

3. Wickham, Annette, ‘A “Female Invasion” 250 Years in the Making’, The Royal Academy, 2018.

4. Rosenthal, Angela, *Angelica Kauffman: Art and Sensibility* (London: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2006)

5. Nochlin, Linda, ‘Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?’, *ArtNews*, 2015.

6. Gouma-Peterson, Thalia, and Patricia Mathews, ‘The Feminist Critique of Art History’, *The Art Bulletin*, 69.3 (1987), 326–57

7. *ibid*

8. Demonstrated by the artwork by Brill ‘Letter to Michael Gove’ (2013)





Figure 6. *The Academicians of the Royal Academy*, 1771-72. Image: Johan Zoffany.



### THE GOOD LIFE

What Brill is doing, by telling his own artistic story (as Patrick Brill, with his wife and daughter) yet presented through the practice of Bob & Roberta Smith, is layering the narrative of the exhibition on top of and against his biography as Bob & Roberta Smith: as the story of (or secret to) his artistic persona. Growing up in the 1970s meant that *The Good Life* was on TV in the form of the much loved parody starring Richard Briars as Tom and Felicity Kendal as Barbara.<sup>9</sup> The show detailed the highs and lows of Tom and Barbara's effort to escape modern commercial living by becoming self-sufficient in their suburban. This emphatically picture of everyday life seen through the lens of goodness – of the attempt by the mid-life crisis protagonist to get off the pointless treadmill and rather orient life towards higher virtues – is both ordinary and rarefied: a philosophical question.

The philosophical problem of the 'good life' is typically traced to Aristotelian virtue ethics and traditionally cited as the idealised basis for political life. In key texts, with the *Nicomachean Ethics* central among them, Aristotle exhorts us to 'live well'.<sup>10</sup> The way to do this is framed in his philosophy according to 'goods': apparent goods as well as real goods, and he described these in three

categories – bodily goods, external goods, and goods of the soul. This foundational discourse on 'the good life' as an aspiration and also a political model is an anchoring dimension of the context for Brill's work *The Secret to a Good Life* because it treats the fundamental problem of our orientation in life – of the 'human nature' that drives us or that we seek to fulfil – as a question to which there is a positive, aspirational answer. If we accept, after sociologist C. Wright Mills, that a broad impact of the expansion of society, and in particular the rise of the metropolis, has been to widen the gap between a sense of one's personal problems and the public issues of the day, we can appreciate the extent to which the ability to chart a meaningful pathway towards a 'good life' – one in which one is not disorientated – can be framed as a 'secret' worth knowing.<sup>11</sup>

9. ScreenOnline.org, *The Good Life* (1975-77).

10. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. and trans. Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

11. Gane, N. and Back, L, 'C. Wright Mills 50 Years On: The Promise and Craft of Sociology Revisited', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 29(7-8) (2012) 399-421.





Figure 7. The Secret to a Good Life Painted Doors, 2018. Image: Tincture.

## ART POLITICS ACTION

To properly understand and appreciate this exhibition in context, one needs to have a grasp of the Bob & Roberta Smith oeuvre, its character and mode of dissemination. Brill's research can be characterised as practice-led action research in that, for him, art is an activist, live endeavour. The distinctive and widely celebrated projects take the form of campaigns, characterised by slogans, manifestos, rabble-rousing songs and political action. In 2015, for example, he stood against Michael Gove as an independent candidate in the constituency of Surrey Heath, and shared his manifesto in many publications including *The Guardian* (2014).<sup>12</sup> This oeuvre constitutes an influential body of practice over a lifetime of artistic productivity. Key impacts include public debate about the value of art in education, and the importance of placing creativity at the centre of a developmental and culturally-anchored model of education (expressed in his book *You Are an Artist*, 2020). The research argued consistently for creativity, arguing that this fundamental aspect of the human spirit has been sidelined by a technocratic elite. Brill's oeuvre rehabilitates art, putting it back at the centre of both actual and political life.

As a Royal Academician, Instagram

aficionado, and National Society for Education in Art and Design (NSEAD) patron, Brill has been a tireless campaigner – a 'thought leader' but also an 'action leader'. His overall output has had broad impact framed by its research objectives, yet he tends to step away from defining the work as research. This anti-academic stance chimes with the anarchic, protest-led aims of his work to destroy or at least unsettle the problematic foundations of art institutions and the contemporary art industry: to bite the hand that feeds him.

This fundamental principle of resistance has a long tradition behind it – including Fluxus, surrealism, Dada and other movements.<sup>13</sup> The orientation of this particular exhibition to the concept of 'the good life', and of others to 'freedom' and 'human rights' places it in close alignment with the tradition of the 'public intellectual'. In a sense one could say that Bob & Roberta Smith is a 'public artist'. This says more than just that he is celebrated; he is a thought leader and cultural ambassador.

12. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/dec/08/2015-vote-creativity-not-austerity-standing-against-gove>

13. Rogger, B., J. Vögelli & R. Widmer, eds *Protest: The Aesthetics of Resistance* (Lars Muller Publishers, 2018).

**LETTER TO MICHAEL GOVE MP SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EDUCATION**  
 25 JULY 2011 IN MEMORY OF LUCIEN FREUD AND AMY WINEHOUSE WHO DIED THIS WEEK END  
 DEAR MICHAEL GOVE ART IMAGES ARTIFACTS SONGS CULTURE ARE THE PRINCIPLE MEANS BY WHICH HUMAN BEINGS DEFINE  
 THEMSELVES. MICHAEL A LOOK AT YOUR TIE AND SHIRT COMBINATION IN IMAGES OF YOU ONLINE INFORMS ME YOU ARE  
 NOT A VISUALLY MINDED PERSON YOU DO NOT CARE HOW YOU LOOK LOOK AROUND YOU WHAT DO YOU SEE?  
 EVERYTHING IS MADE EVERYTHING HAS BEEN FASHIONED BY HUMAN BEINGS WHO HAVE CONSIDERED ALL  
 ASPECTS OF WHAT THEY HAVE MADE IMAGE IS EVERYTHING VISUAL WORTH COMMERCIAL VALUE  
 MORAL VIRTUE AUTHORITY AND INTEGRITY FROM BIRTH HUMAN BEINGS SEEK TO UNDERSTAND FIND THEIR PLACE  
 IN SOCIETY AND CONTROL THEIR WORLDS THROUGH LOOKING AND UNDERSTANDING THE CHILD INTERPRETS  
 THE WORLD GIVE A CHILD A PIECE OF PAPER A BRUSH AND SOME COLOUR AND YOU PUT THEM IN CONTROL  
 CHILDRENS ART IS SO APPEALING BECAUSE THEY HAVE NO PROBLEM WITH BEING IN CONTROL OF IMAGES AS SCHOOL  
 PROGRESSES POOR TEACHING IN SOME SCHOOLS IMPRESSES ON THE CHILD THAT THEY ARE NOT IN CONTROL NOT  
 ONLY ARE THEY NOT IN CONTROL BUT THEY ARE THE MOST INSIGNIFICANT COG IN A SYSTEM OF CONTROL IN WHICH THEY MAY  
 NEVER PLAY AN IMPORTANT PART FROM GALILEO TO DARWIN FROM CARAVAGGIO TO AMY WINEHOUSE CREATIVITY IS  
 REBELLION YOUR INITIATIVE AWARDS CONFORMITY AND WILL CAUSE STAGNATION THE REBELLIOUS CHILD THE ARTIST  
 THE INNOVATOR THE INVENTOR THE ENGINEER THE ARCHITECT CLINGS ON TO THEIR PROWESS WITH PAPER DOES ART & MUSIC AT  
 SCHOOL GOES TO ART SCHOOL OR STUDIES DESIGN AND CONTRIBUTES TO THE LIBRARY OF IMAGES AND FORMS THE RELATIONSHIP  
 BETWEEN SHEETS OF BLANK PAPER PENCILS AND INNOVATION IS UNDENIABLE ART SHOULD BE THE CENTRE OF A  
 NATIONAL CURRICULUM BASED ON CREATIVE THINKING PITY THE OBEDIENT CHILD IN A SYSTEM OF EDUCATION  
 OBSESSED WITH VOCATIONAL SKILLS HE OR SHE CAVES IN THE CHILD WHO BECOMES INHIBITED IS INDUCTED INTO THE MEDIOCRE  
 MAJORITY OF THE VISUALLY ILLITERATE OF WHICH YOU MICHAEL GOVE (IN YOUR ILL FITTING SHIRT AND UNMATCHED TIE) ARE A PART BUT EVEN  
 THOSE WHO HAVE CREATIVITY BEATEN OUT OF THEM BY EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS OF THE TYPE YOU ADVOCATE NEED ENJOY AND  
 CONSUME IMAGES EVERYTHING IS VISUAL ART YES BUT ALSO DESIGN MONEY NUMBERS EVEN THE EBB AND FLOW  
 OF COMMERCE HAS TO BE MADE VISUAL IN RECENT YEARS CHINA HAS OPENED 400 SCHOOLS OF ART AND DESIGN  
 YOUR GOVERNMENT HAS WHITTLED BRITAIN'S ONCE DIVERSE VARIED CULTURE OF SCHOOLS OF ART TO JUST 12  
 INSTITUTIONS THIS REDUCTION IS A DISASTER FOR BRITISH DESIGN BRITISH COMMERCE BRITISH ART AND BRITAIN'S  
 ABILITY TO COMPETE IN THE WORLD  
 TAKE ART OUT OF SCHOOLS AND YOU SHUT THE DOOR ON CHILDRENS DEVELOPMENT AND EMASCULATE  
 BRITISH CULTURE WHERE ARE OUR FUTURE DESIGNERS ARCHITECTS CRAFTSMEN WOMEN ENGINEERS TECHNICIANS SOFTWARE  
 DESIGNERS AND MATHEMATICIANS GOING TO COME FROM IF NO ONE CAN DRAW? YOU SHOULD REALISE BRITAIN IS  
 AMAZING IN CULTURAL VISUAL DEMOCRATIC MUSICAL DESIGN PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT AND LITERARY TERMS BRITAIN  
 IS A GIANT ART IS NOW PART OF THE LANGUAGE OF FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY REPRESSIVE  
 IDEOLOGICAL REGIMES RESTRICT ARTISTS YOU MUST REALISE THAT ART IS NOT A  
 CHOICE MADE AT SECONDARY SCHOOL RATHER WE ARE ALL CULTURAL BEINGS TO REMOVE  
 THE REQUIREMENT OF SCHOOLS TO TEACH ART TO KIDS AT PRIMARY LEVEL IS QUITE WRONG  
 THE ITALIANS CRAM THEIR CHILDREN INTO MUSEUMS THEY SAY LOOK THIS IS ITALY THIS  
 IS YOUR CULTURE YOU ARE ITALIAN HUMAN BEINGS HAVE CULTURE YOUR  
 GOVERNMENT'S DESIRE TO MONETIZE THE EPISTEME WITH ITS ASSAULT ON THE  
 ARTS AND HUMANITIES COUPLED WITH YOUR INCLINATION TO REMOVE ART  
 FROM THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM IS DEEPLY CONCERNING YOUR REFORMS WILL  
 CRIPPLE FUTURE BRITISH DESIGN IN ADVANCE OF YOUR REFORMS UNIVERSITIES  
 OFFERING CERTIFICATES IN TEACHER TRAINING ARE WITHDRAWING THEIR COURSES IN ART AND DESIGN  
 TEACHING THIS IS DISGRACEFUL YOU WILL BE OPPOSED BY ALL PEOPLE INTERESTED IN ART  
 DESIGN FREESPEECH FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY AND PROBABLY ALSO BY A FEW BANKERS  
 AND INVESTORS INTERESTED IN BRITISH PRODUCTS AND EXPORTS WHO ARE  
 CONCERNED ABOUT THE COLOUR OF THEIR MONEY YOU PREACH AUSTERITY AND DESPAIR  
 GOVERNMENT NEEDS TO DEVELOPE A DISCOURSE OF HOPE AND CREATIVITY WHERE HUMAN BEINGS  
 FEEL EMPOWERED TO USE THEIR INGENUITY TO GET THEMSELVES OUT OF THE CRISIS WE FACE  
 THE LONDON RIOTS WERE A RESULT OF A YOUTH CULTURE THAT HAS HOPELESSNESS AND AUSTERITY  
 FORCED UPON IT GOVERNMENT OFFERS YOUNG PEOPLE LITTLE TO LOOK FORWARD TO DESPAIR LACK OF  
 OPPORTUNITY LACK OF HIGHER EDUCATION LACK OF JOBS YOU ARE REMOVING ALL THE LADDERS  
 TO THE DISENFRANCHISED YOU NEED TO RETHINK THE ROLE OF CREATIVITY IN SOCIETY AND  
 REALIZE INNOVATION COMES FROM OPTIMISM CREATIVITY RISK TAKING AND **ART**  
 BOB AND ROBERTA SMITH

Figure 8. Letter to Michael Gove MP, 2011.

Image: Bob and Roberta Smith.



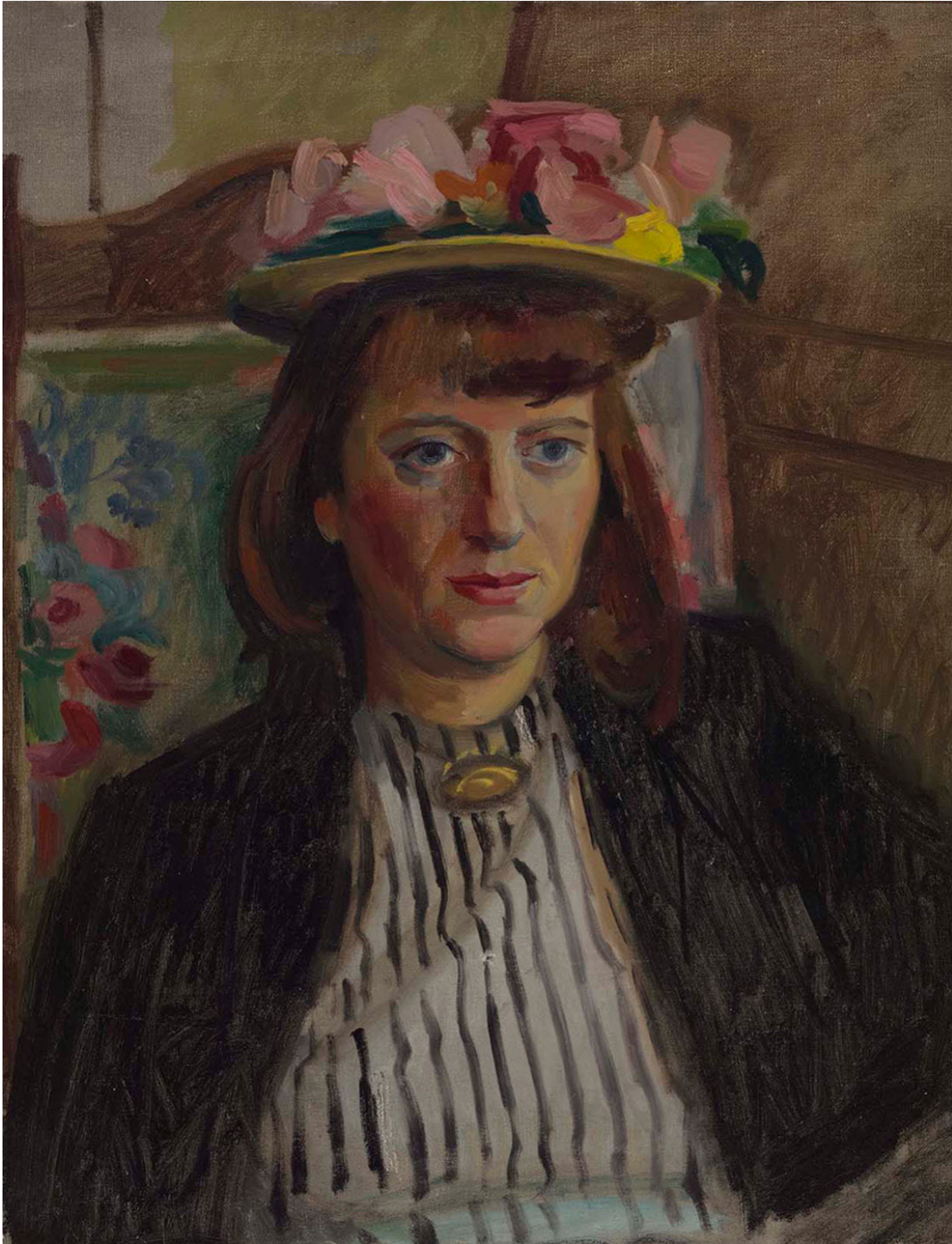


Figure 9. Portrait of Deirdre Borlase ARCA, 1945. Image: Frederick Brill.

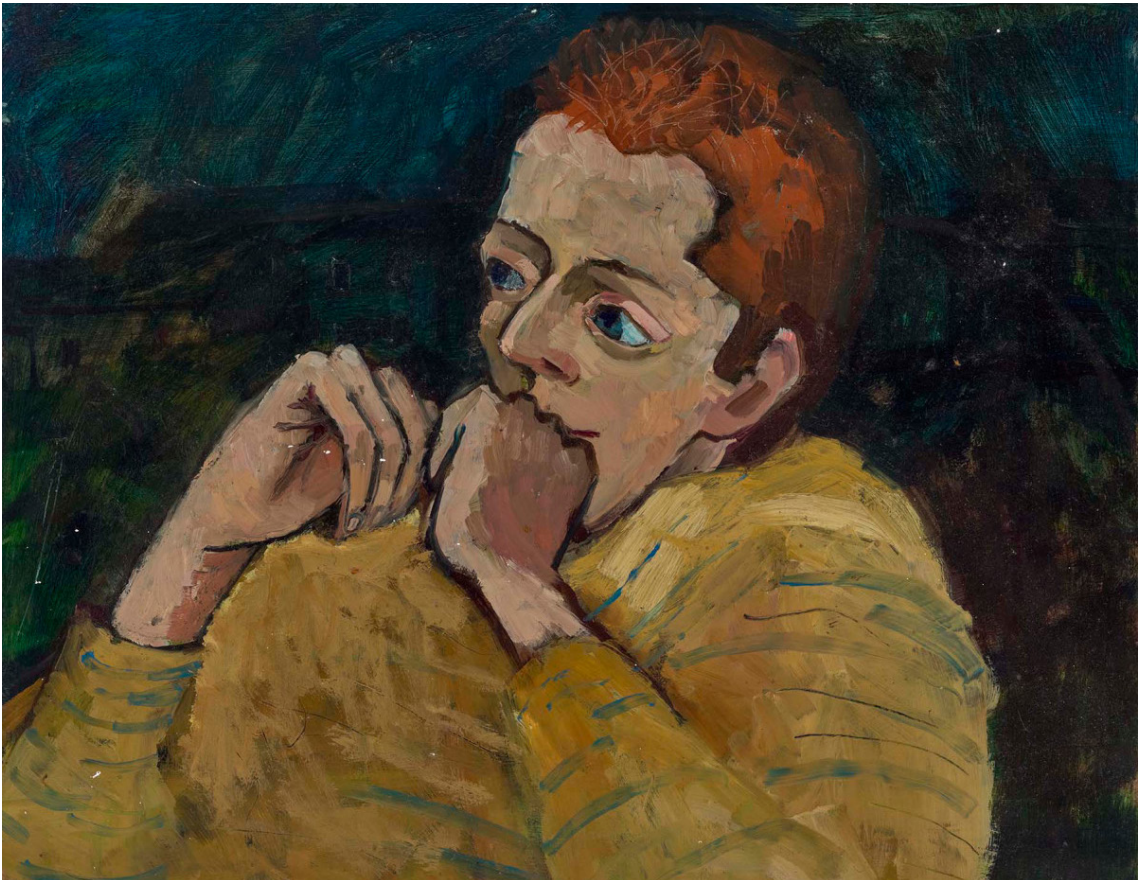


Figure 10. Portrait of Bob and Roberta Smith, 1982. Image: Deirdre Borlase.

## Research process

Brill's established method of deploying popular strategies problematises the inherent politics of institutions (such as the Royal Academy), providing insights about our understanding of critique within art practice. The work extends its reach into new audiences via his populist forms and articulated modes of engagement, mapping his personal biography against a public, historical context. The use of direct and colourful forms in sculpture and painting alongside his family anecdote delivers a relatable and comprehensive critique of gender politics, and a glimpse of the artist's rationale for assuming a pseudonym.

Sitting alongside Brill's painted panels are four sculptures in the form of totem poles that represent different characters with a relationship to the Royal Academy: Sir Joshua Reynolds PRA, Angelica Kauffman RA, Mary Moser RA and his mother, Deirdre Borlase.

*This is Sir Joshua Reynolds PRA* was positioned on the Weston Bridge connecting Burlington House and Burlington Gardens. Bob and Roberta Smith previously exhibited this 'votive' style figure of Sir Joshua Reynolds at his 2005 *Art for All* exhibition at Yorkshire sculpture park. When there was an invitation from the then Head of Collections, Maurice Davies for a shrine

to Sir Joshua Reynolds to celebrate the Royal Academy's 250th anniversary, discussions began on how it was not possible to celebrate this anniversary without critique. The focus shifted then and the exhibition became a celebration, not of the institution, but of the thousands of artists each year that submitted to the summer exhibition, with or without success. Thus, the story of Brill's mother emerged.



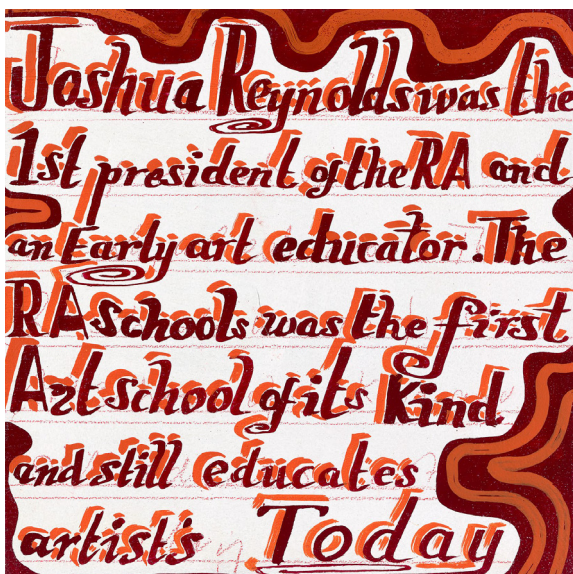


Figure 11 & 12. Top: Alfred Drury's Sir Joshua Reynolds, 1931. Image: Troxx. Bottom: *This is Sir Joshua Reynolds*, 2005. Image: Bob and Roberta Smith.

Figure 13. 1931 Sir Joshua Reynolds / 2005 Sir Joshua Reynolds. Image: Bob and Roberta Smith.

The artist made three new sculptures from reclaimed timber and invited his wife and daughter, (Deirdre Borlase's granddaughter) to collaborate in making the works tell the story of the two female founders of the RA; Angelica Kauffman and Mary Moser. *This is Angelica Kauffman RA* is a collaboration with Brill's wife, Jessica Voorsanger. The sculpture is covered in 15 portraits of inspiring female artists starting with Angelica Kauffman as the head followed by Laurie Anderson, Sofonisba Anguissola, Sonia Boyce, Claude Cahun, Mona Hatoum, Frida Kahlo, Lee Krasner, Yayoi Kusama, Edmonia Lewis, Ana Mandieta, Alice Neel, Georgia O'Keefe, Lorna Simpson and Kara Walker. *This is Mary Moser RA* is a collaboration with Brill's daughter, Etta Voorsanger-Brill who explores the use of ephemera (through a fanzine) to create awareness of the female artists' lives that have been erased throughout history.



Figure 14. *This is Angelica Kauffman RA*, 2018. Image: Bob and Roberta Smith RA and Jessica Voorsanger.



Figure 15. This is Mary Moser RA, 2018. Image: Bob and Roberta Smith RA and Etta Voorsanger-Brill.



Figure 16. Etta Voorsanger-Brill with This is Mary Moser RA, 2018. Image: Bob and Roberta Smith RA.





*This is Deirdre Borlase ARCA* is Brill's own homage to his Mother. Situated in the gallery between her two more illustrious fore-mothers, the Deirdre Borlase sculpture was seen as a relatable figure. The exhibition positions Deirdre's work including *Portrait of Bob and Roberta Smith* (1982) alongside Brill's original sculptures and paintings. Presenting this very personal narrative gives us rich insight on the social context in which they occurred. A quote from his mother is painted onto the statue; 'Art is an invitation. Let's invite everyone to the meal' hints to Brill's ongoing public debate that challenges elitism and advocates the importance of democratic creativity in politics and education.

Figure 17. *This is Deirdre Borlase ARCA*, 2018. Image: Bob and Roberta Smith RA.

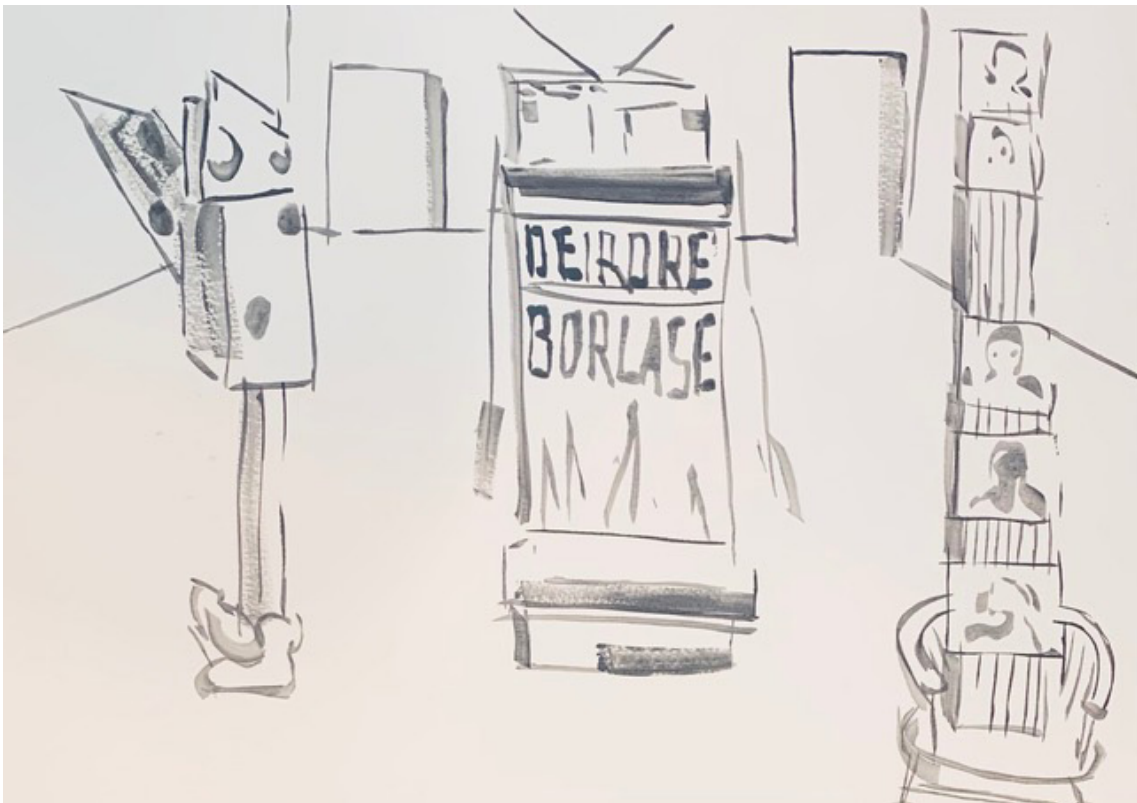


Figure 18. Sketch of Mary Moser, Deirdre Borlase and Angelica Kauffman, 2018.  
Image: Bob and Roberta Smith RA.

## Research insights

This exhibition represents the function of art in the public sphere in a manner that resonates between and across audiences, while also operating at and articulating between several levels of embodiment and expression. Four key insights emerge as key discussion points, enable an appreciation of both the depth and the extensity of this contribution – both to the discipline, and in regard to the artist’s aspiration to contribute to public life:

- Gender and the institution;
- Family and concept of ‘art as life’;
- The sociological principle of a reciprocity between biography and history;
- The foibles of democratic culture and the troubling irony of the goal of ‘art for all’.

### GENDER AND THE INSTITUTION

In a film about the exhibition made at the time, and released on YouTube and via social media (2018), Jessica Voorsanger characterises the exhibition – in relation to its function, sentiment and artistic intention – as a ‘lament’ about the fact that women artists and the discourse of women in art had been so poorly served.<sup>14</sup> Not only had women, their role in the world of art and in national culture, been let down by the Royal Academy but indeed by

the entire disciplinary discourse of art, its manifestation as public culture, and its embodiment in the artefacts and institutions of the nation.<sup>15</sup> The exhibition (and in particular the interaction between three pieces – the sculptures of the two female founding Academicians Mary Moser RA and Angelica Kauffman RA, and the sculpture of the first RA president Joshua Reynolds) brings this ‘lament’ into focus as an assemblage of regret, lost opportunities and traces of past appreciation (as embodied in the ‘fanzine’ pages used as papier mâché on the sculpture). None of this is presented as pitiful or in a spirit of victimhood; rather the ingenuity of women in history, many of whom adopted a *realpolitik* approach to obtaining a platform for their creativity, and their insistence upon claiming their capabilities – in the tradition of George Eliot – is an important aspect of the claim to which this work subscribes.<sup>16</sup>

### FAMILY AND CONCEPT OF ‘ART AS LIFE’

One of the ways that this exhibition contributes is in its layering of biography and history in an effort to make sense of and locate the artist in public life. Bob and Roberta Smith RA shares with his audience his own family story – a family of artists – and in this story his mother emerges as heroic whilst reinforcing her role and distinction as a mother; not just



any mother but his mother, the ‘mother of the artist’ who is herself an artist, an artist adopting a pseudonym in order to more effectively and competitively practice her art.

This retracing of the arc of history, itself an alternative history of art that can be aligned with the feminist and postcolonial project of critiquing or ‘decolonising’ the curriculum as a family anecdote, echoes the lessons of another parent – the so-called ‘father of sociology’ Charles Wright Mills, who wrote: “ ... and ‘The Sociological Imagination’ ... presents a model of analysis for the interdependence of subjective experiences within a person’s biography, general social structure and historical development”. For Mills, institutional structures mediated between public issues which underwrite the narrative accounted for by history, and personal problems that we may think of as our own stories: as biographical. While this exhibition does not attempt to tell its audience what to do, it adopts the principle of the nesting of biography within history, thereby providing its audiences with a mimetic pathway by way of the artists experience for understanding the issues at stake.

14. ‘The Making of “The Secret to a Good Life”’, Royal Academy, 28 Nov. 2018, available online at: <<https://youtu.be/84xe34JqPow>> [accessed: 10.10.20]

15. The admission of Laura Herford to the Royal Academy in 1860 was met by the claim, according to George Dunlop Leslie, that the institution was being ‘invaded’ by women: see Leslie, G.D. (1914) *The Inner Life of the Royal Academy*.

16. George Eliot is the pen name of female author Mary Ann Evans who was a leading English novelist of the Victorian era. She chose to publish under a man’s name in order to claim her place in history, aware that as a woman her voice would not be listened to.

## BIOGRAPHY AND HISTORY PRINCIPLE

Patrick Brill's approach to the production and dissemination, to the pedagogy and politicising of art, does little embrace or represent the traditional, somewhat patriarchal, and often macho concept of the 'artist as genius'<sup>17</sup> – a heroic figure often depicted as blessed with insight and bound by a divine duty to share it, leading to the aesthetic or even spiritual edification of the wider public (or at least those who go to galleries).<sup>18</sup> For the 'public artist', this duty has translated into public commissions such as statues in parks, objects of commemoration, and inhabitable artefacts. In so doing, the 'heroic' artist is seen to intercede between the divine or absolute realm of pure inspiration, a context in which the 'forms' of which Plato wrote to represent the ideals of ideas (εἶδος or eidos), and the realm of the ordinary and mundane. Reciprocity between the ideal and the actual traditionally defines the metabolism of artistic inspiration as summarised by the concept of mimesis; a translation between celestial ideals (typically in the form of nature) and the work of art. In this model of the artwork, Brill is less the 'genius' figure but he does, nevertheless, represent to an audience not just 'everyman'<sup>19</sup> but also an artist who is both man and woman, and who does not exist except as an idea: the

figure of Bob and Roberta Smith. As an artist positioned as both 'everyman' and 'everywoman', yet also an artist who is an individual – Patrick Brill – the artist-as-hero image is both claimed and inverted. Brill adopts the ambiguity of this role with a nod to precursors in the British tradition including J.B. Priestley.<sup>20</sup>

17. Jaffe, K. 'The Concept of Genius: Its Changing Role in Eighteenth-Century French Aesthetics', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 41.4, (1980) 579-599.

18. McLaughlin, R. and R. Cork 'Is there such a thing as artistic genius?', *Royal Academy Blog*, 2020, available online at: <<https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/is-there-such-a-thing-as-artistic-genius>> [accessed: 12.11.20]

19. Sutcliffe, Tom, 'Everyman, Far from the Madding Crowd, Empire, Anne Enright, Christopher Williams', *Saturday Review*, BBC Radio 4, 2 May 2015.

20. Many of Priestley's works adopted the strategy of the 'everyman hero' to address moral issues framed by class division; examples include his play 'An Inspector Calls': see Cullingford, Alison 'An Inspector Calls and J B Priestley's political journey', *British Library Online Resource*, 2017, available online at: <<https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/an-inspector-calls-and-j-b-priestleys-political-journey>> [accessed 11 October 2020]



Figure 19. Bob and Roberta Smith at the opening night of the exhibition, 2018. Image: Patrick Brill



## FOIBLES OF DEMOCRATIC CULTURE

Although not a publicly supported museum,<sup>21</sup> few institutions better represent the principle of the democratisation of art than the Royal Academy – and specifically in its celebrated Summer Exhibition: a yearly event as embedded in the cultural lore of the land as *Morecambe and Wise* or *The Great British Bake-Off*.<sup>22</sup> A purportedly democratic ‘open submission’ competition, in which a nation of amateur artists are invited to submit their works for curatorial consideration alongside Academicians and leading practitioners in an industry worth over \$65 billion,<sup>23</sup> closer reading of the Summer Exhibition reveals that if it indeed represents popular taste and the profile of UK artistic talent, art is practised less successfully by women and ethnic minorities than by white men. This observation – that in the 21st century we still have uneven representation of the British public exhibiting at the *Summer Exhibition*, and that this unevenness fairly reflects the submission statistics – gives rise to difficult questions – especially at a time when the Academy itself is sporting positive figures about gender parity.<sup>24</sup> What happens to institutional responsibility if it turns out that popular taste, and the art ‘from below’, is not what the elite – or even the well-intentioned democratic leadership – had

hoped it would be? What if most people are comparatively narrow-minded or traditionalist, not as interested in concepts such as ‘inclusion’ or ‘equality’, and indeed tend towards becoming defensive or even xenophobic when it comes to questions of ‘national culture’?

If the truly democratic view of art – of ‘the paintings I would hang on my wall’ argument – reinforces stereotypes, such as the idea that the best artists have been and will be men, the aspiration of democratising culture becomes one that will likely put traditionalist and typically conservative values before those represented by avant garde, experimental or progressive artistic ideas. This troubling irony, which reflects the reality of how many ‘ordinary people’ view the highfalutin world of art – a world which they assume does not include them – is captured in the complexity of relationships considered in *The Secret to a Good Life*. The dimension of critique addressed by this installation gives us pause for reflection on the genuine struggles and challenges faced by the institution, but also on the conflicts naturally embedded in a trajectory of success for any ‘populist’ artist.

21. The Royal Academy is an independent charity and does not received government funding:  
<https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/about-the-ra>
22. RA website history of the Summer exhibition: <[https://se.royalacademy.org.uk/?\\_ga=2.195273580.1987292977.1609108927-1183405651.1608929921](https://se.royalacademy.org.uk/?_ga=2.195273580.1987292977.1609108927-1183405651.1608929921)>
23. 'The Art Market 2019', Art Basel, 2019, available online at: <<https://www.artbasel.com/news/art-market-report>> [accessed 16 December 2020]
24. In her article 'A "Female Invasion" 250 Years in the Making', Annette Wickham reports: 'In the past decade, the Academy has elected more women than ever before and seems on course to achieve equal representation in its membership.'

## Dissemination

### EXHIBITION

The commission exhibited for four months and is archived on the RA website accompanied with a Making-of film. The Royal Academy welcomes 1.28M physical visitors and 3.4M digital visitors per year. Footfall for this exhibition can be reasonably estimated at up to 300,000 visitors throughout its run. Due to its national and international pre-eminent reputation the audience is constituted by a huge range of age and nationalities. The accompanying gallery guide contained an essay by Annette Wickham, the RA's 'curator of works on paper' on the place of women at the RA throughout its history.

*The Secret to a Good Life*, The Royal Academy of Arts, London. (4 September 2018 - 3 February 2019)

Royal Academy of Arts. *The making of 'The Secret to a Good Life'*, online video recording, Youtube, 28 November 2018 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=84xe34JqPow>> [accessed 14 December 2020]

Wickham, Annette, *The Secret to a Good Life, Gallery Guide*. (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2018)

### BOOK

An accompanying book *Bob and Roberta Smith: The Secret to a Good Life* was published exploring the role of women artists, the sexism of the art world and the benefits of drawing every day, including documentation, images and visual painted essays from Brill.

Brill, Patrick, *Bob and Roberta Smith: The Secret to a Good Life*. (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2018)

### EVENTS PROGRAMME

The RA ran a collaborative event programme open and free to the public during the exhibition which disseminated the research questions further through a set of practical and inclusive participatory sessions. This included a takeover of the RA shop, Taster talks from a member of the RA and the My Favourite Things, family workshops that were inspired by the exhibition for children with special educational needs and disabilities. As a celebration of Brill's mothers outlook on art and life, families were



invited to create collaborative pieces inspired by the colourful messages in the show and your own favourite things in life.

*Bob and Roberta Smith RA takes over the RA Shop*, The Royal Academy of Arts, London. (2 November 2018)

*My Favourite Things: Family Workshop*, The Royal Academy of Arts, London. (20 January 2019)

*RA Taster talk: The Secret to a Good Life*, The Royal Academy of Arts, London. (22 January - 2 February 2019)

*Christmas pudding drawing with Bob and Roberta Smith RA*, The Royal Academy of Arts, London. (17 December 2019)

*You are an Artist with Bob and Roberta Smith & The Big Draw*, The Big Draw. (10 November 2020)



Figure 20. The Secret to a Good Life book, 2018. Image: The Royal Academy.



Figure 21. Gallery Guide for exhibition, 2018. Image: Bob and Roberta Smith

## Impact

Patrick Brill (Bob and Roberta Smith) undertakes practice-led action research. For him, art is an activist endeavour to be played out in the real world, every day. His distinctive and widely celebrated projects take the form of campaigns, characterised by slogans, manifestos, rabble-rousing songs and political action. The oeuvre of Brill constitutes an impactful body of practice over a life-time of artistic productivity.<sup>25</sup> Key impacts of this body of work include the contribution to the public and community debate about the democratic importance of art, equality in art education, and the value of placing creativity at the centre of a developmental and culturally anchored model of education.

The power of storytelling is as relevant to political strategists as it is to the activist; stories can serve as a vehicle for successful social and political transformation.<sup>26</sup> Through the narrative of his family history in this exhibition, Brill has created a relatable and meaningful addition to his body of work, giving us an insight into his motives as an artist, activist and father. The critique embedded in the work started an open dialogue about art equality within the specific context of the institution. During his speech to open the exhibit, the institution's artistic director Tim Marlow revealed that over the past 12 years,

42% of its elected members have been women.<sup>27</sup> Following the exhibition, Annette Wickham recalled George Dunlop Leslie's memorable phrase in her piece for the RA entitled *A "female invasion" 250 years in the making* which tells much the same story, offering more historical detail and thus filling out the background to a message of self-examination that can be seen to be institutional on the part of the Academy.<sup>28</sup>

It also represents the progress, not only in the access to art education (through the narrative of Mary Moser and Angelica Kauffman) and the access in being able to exhibit (through the narrative of Deirdre Borlase) but also in the public access to art. *The Secret to a Good Life* was the first exhibit in the newly opened McAulay Gallery designed by David Chipperfield. It marked a shift from exhibitions at the Royal Academy solely being behind a paywall to presenting collections to the public for free, supporting Brill's stance on Art for All.

25. 'Ten Facts About Bob & Roberta Smith', Artfund Profile, 2017, available online at: <<https://www.artfund.org/get-involved/art-happens/folkestone-is-an-art-school/ten-facts-about-bob-and-roberta-smith>> [accessed: 10.11.20]

26. Sergeant, P. *The Art of Political Storytelling: Why Stories Win Votes in Post-truth Politics* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020)

27. Buck, Louisa (2018)

28. Wickham, Annette (2018)





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THE SECRET TO  
A GOOD LIFE?  
GET A GOOD PENCIL!  
A 2B OR A 3B NOT AN HB  
THEY ARE FOR ARCHITECTS  
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