

Time Out London

Art

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Peter's friends

Pop art legend Peter Blake tells **Martin Coomer** about painting famous pals and why he doesn't draw with his knees

'My place in pure painting will never be where Frank Auerbach is,' says Sir Peter Blake over a cuppa in his Chiswick home. Can this be false modesty from one of our most famous and respected artists? With a voice better suited to bedtime stories than provocative pronouncements, Blake, who turned 83 this year, can be a little hard to read. I reply with a meek 'I don't think that's true.' But the godfather of British pop art is adamant. 'Frank has been incredibly consistent: it's either portraits or it's Camden Town. And some great work has come out of it. Whereas I've darted around like a little butterfly. But that's good. It's a path I chose and I don't regret it.'

Blake's darting path – beginning in Dartford, as it happens, in 1932 – has been distinguished by its embrace of both 'pure' painting and commercial design. You'll see his work at both Tate Britain and Tate Modern, but he'll always be associated with the most famous album cover of all time. Does he tire of talking about 'Sgt Pepper's...' almost 50 years after he designed it with his then-wife Jann Haworth? 'I do a bit,' he says, graciously. 'All I would add is that it's not a problem any more. It was [at the time] because everyone else was making so much money.'

Oddly enough, though, as with Auerbach, one thing that's been consistent throughout Blake's seven-decade career is portraiture. Opening this week, his new show breaks down into 'Portraits' and 'People'. 'Portraits' includes paintings of friends and acquaintances from the past 30 years, sometimes commissions, sometimes done for fun. Described by Blake as 'anyone with a head', 'People', meanwhile, is full of invented characters – including tattoo-covered folk inspired by his childhood love of the fairground. He discusses key works in the show.

1 'TATTOOED WOMAN 4', 2015

'I've always been interested in tattooing. The main source for these was a book of mugshots of French prisoners. What I've done is change them around a bit. They do actually exist as tattooed people but I've changed the tattoos. I love doing them. I've got lousy knees but good eyes and steady hands, so I'm lucky.'

2 IAN DURY, 2001

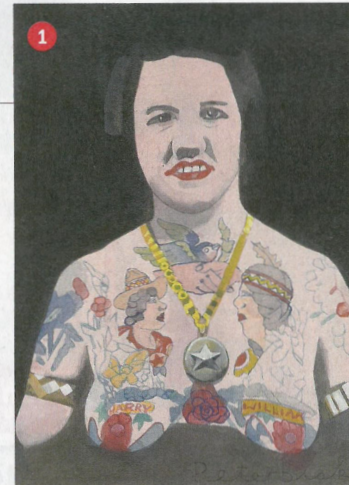
I taught Ian at Walthamstow [College of Art]. There was this amazing year when ten students from Walthamstow applied to the Royal College of Art and nine of the ten got in – and they only took something like 25 students to the painting school. Ian was good, he was always interesting. But they were all great students. And they were all ruffians.'

3 Helen Mirren scared the life out of me

4 HELEN MIRREN, 1983

'Helen Mirren was so exuberant and gorgeous and full of life that it scared the life out of me. I think she wanted to take her clothes off, which would have been fine but I was doing a portrait. The plan was, because she hadn't commissioned me and I wasn't paying her as a model, I would do two pictures. She could have chosen one of them, but it only went to two sittings of an hour-and-a-half each, meaning there's only an hour-and-a-half done on each painting. I rejected them then, and put them to one side, but they came back in at this point, with that story, which is interesting. Without that story they're very slight and not particularly good paintings. She's never seen them. I hope maybe she'll come by the show. I'll still give her one.'

'Peter Blake: Portraits and People' is at Waddington Custot, W1S 3LT. Tue Nov 24 ▶ Jan 30 2016.



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For more of Peter Blake's selections from the show, see timeout.com/PeterBlake

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