

John Piper was an artistic polymath, able to shift, seemingly effortlessly, from style to style, genre to genre, medium to medium.

He is perhaps most famous today for his delicate, elegant, rather brooding landscapes, particularly those depicting the ruins of churches in the English countryside. But he also worked in the fields of abstract art, collage, book illustration, theatre set design, tapestry, stained-glass, photography, ceramics, fireworks(!)... and, arguably, pop art.



Working collage for *Eye and Camera*. Copyright the John Piper estate, courtesy of Portland Gallery

John Piper the pop artist was first revealed to the public at an exhibition at the Marlborough Fine Art Gallery in April 1966, at the exhibition *Nolan, Piper, Richards*, alongside Sydney Nolan and Ceri Richards. The 62-year-old artist, according to the *Birmingham Post* critic Richard Seddon's review, exhibited 'a few new abstracts, by the same old hand, some new studies of Gothic churches in watercolour... and a new departure, the pen, paper and wash figure studies, which are collages with photographs'.

Piper had been experimenting with collage since the 30s – influenced by Braque and Tzara – but the incorporation of photography was a new departure. The 'figure studies' were of his wife Myfanwy, who Piper had photographed, semi-naked, at their Fawnley Bottom home, developing the prints himself in his studio. He repeated the image several times, on layered over, drawn, or painted backgrounds, playing with the concepts of fragmentation and repetition, exploring the multiple, and making a statement about the status in the fine-art world of photography (then seen as a lower-grade medium). The collage series was entitled *Eye and Camera*.

It raises several interesting questions. Was he dipping a toe into the burgeoning British pop art scene, placing himself alongside the likes of Richard Hamilton and Peter Blake? Had he been influenced by Andy Warhol's duplicated photo silk screen prints, such as *Marilyn*

continuing to investigate the nature of multiplicity (and increasing the payload for each work) by making silk-screen prints of his collages. To make the prints, he employed the Kelpra Studio, set up in London in 1957, and favoured by the many artists (most significantly younger than Piper) who were, in those heady experimental years, exploring that medium.

You can see an example of one of his original *Eye and Camera* collages, made c1973, at the Portland Gallery's new exhibition of Piper's work. The original (touched up) photograph of Myfanwy, on the left, is repeated in three different forms across a variegated background, simultaneously bringing to mind (or my mind, at least) influences as diverse as Warhol, Man Ray, Picasso, Goya and Matisse. The piece is on sale at £18,000.

The Portland show is a major retrospective of Piper's work between the 40s and the 80s, amply displaying how comfortable he was working across different genres and media. Other highlights include *In Highclare Park* (1943), *Cerne Abbas* (c1958) and *Bullslaughter I* (1962). As a counterpoint to Piper's delicately styled church-scapes, a selection of rougher-hewn cathedral works by Dennis Creffield will simultaneously hang on the lower ground floor of the St James' gallery.



PARTNERS

