Keith Cunningham

The Cloud of Witness

PRESS RELEASE

Keith Cunningham *The Cloud of Witness*
16th February – 10th July 2022

Newport Street Gallery
Newport Street
London SE11 6AJ

Opening times
Wednesday – Sunday 10am – 5pm
Closed Mondays and Tuesdays
Admission is free
Please visit the website for further details:
www.newportstreetgallery.com

NEWPORT
STREET
GALLERY

An elusive member of the School of London is rediscovered in a new exhibition at Damien Hirst's Newport Street Gallery

Newport Street Gallery is proud to present *The Cloud of Witness*, an exhibition of over 70 works by little-known Australian artist Keith Cunningham, which runs from 16th February to 10th July 2022.

Cunningham's paintings were produced in London during the post-war period, an artistic environment dominated by the likes of Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud. A student at the Royal College of Art in the mid-1950s, Cunningham worked alongside major artists such as Frank Auerbach, Leon Kossoff and Jo Tilson.

Cunningham's sombre paintings, coated in layers of dense, sculptural brushstrokes, are populated by skulls, fighting dogs and darkly altered human figures. Like his schoolmates and teachers at the Royal College, Cunningham was interested in figurative painting, transforming the reality of everyday life into loose, slowly disintegrating forms.

His canvases, like those of Bacon, Kossoff and Auerbach, are covered in powerful strokes of dark pigments conveying strikingly expressive forms. *The Cloud of Witness* seeks to redefine Cunningham's role in the London art scene of the 1950s, highlighting not only his ability but also the variety of his inspirations. To this effect, it coincides with the major show at the Royal Academy of Arts, *Francis Bacon: Man and Beast*, encouraging visitors to compare and contrast the works of these two artists.

Keith Cunningham, *Dogs*, 1956

Upon graduating the Royal College, Cunningham was invited to submit his paintings to the prestigious London Group, with whom he displayed his paintings for two consecutive years. His canvases were singled out by high-profile art writers for their rough materiality and suggestive presence. Auerbach admired his 'outstanding talent,' and his tutor John Minton described him as 'one of the most gifted painters to have worked at the Royal College.'

Praised by critics, admired by peers and increasingly sought after by collectors, in the 1960s Cunningham was on the brink of reaching international fame. However, in 1967 he suddenly withdrew completely from the art world, refusing to submit his paintings to public exhibitions and hardly ever allowing outsiders to see his works.

Upon his death in 2014 at the age of 85, Cunningham had left behind a large collection of unseen works spanning over five decades. His paintings from the 1950s and 1960s, neatly stacked in his house facing the wall, had been kept hidden, amassed in his flat's spare room. In 2016, thanks to the efforts of his wife and friends, a small selection of his paintings was exhibited at Hoxton Gallery in London. Six years later, *The Cloud of Witness* discloses Cunningham's canvases to the public, offering a rare chance to rediscover his powerful, expressive forms.

Keith Cunningham, *Blue Study of Squid*, 1960-1966

Keith Cunningham, *Dark Sheep Skull*, 1957

About Keith Cunningham

Born in Sydney in 1929, Keith Cunningham moved to London in 1949 to study graphic design at the Central School of Art, where he graduated with a dissertation on architecture. Animated by a consuming passion for painting, he later applied to the Royal College of Art, where his talent was quickly recognised.

A driven and resolute individual, his years at the Royal College were spent working tirelessly and exploring every artistic medium available. In 1955 he was granted a travelling and continuation scholarship and arranged a trip to Spain which greatly influenced his painting style.

On graduating from the College in 1956, he exhibited at the Royal Academy and the Beaux Arts Gallery – then one of the most influential galleries in London – at the invitation of its director, Helen Lessore. In the same year he applied for a part-time position as lecturer of Drawing and Printing at the London College of Printing, which he held for around 40 years.

His works were shown twice with the prestigious London Group, attracting high praise from an art critic from The Times. The art collector and celebrated photographer Elsbeth Juda was one of Cunningham's most vocal admirers and circulated his paintings worldwide.

From the late 1960s, however, he refused to exhibit his work and started to focus instead on graphic design, watercolours and small-size drawings. Between the 1970s and 1980s, Cunningham worked as a graphic designer for the publisher Peter Owen, producing impressive hardback book covers. A number of these were shown at the 2004 Barbican exhibition *Communicate: British Independent Graphic Design Since the Sixties* and were acquired posthumously by the University of Brighton Design Archives.

The majority of his works, including thousands of drawings and watercolours, however, never left Cunningham's studio. His vast estate, like many details of his personal life, remained undisclosed until his passing in 2014, at the age of 85.

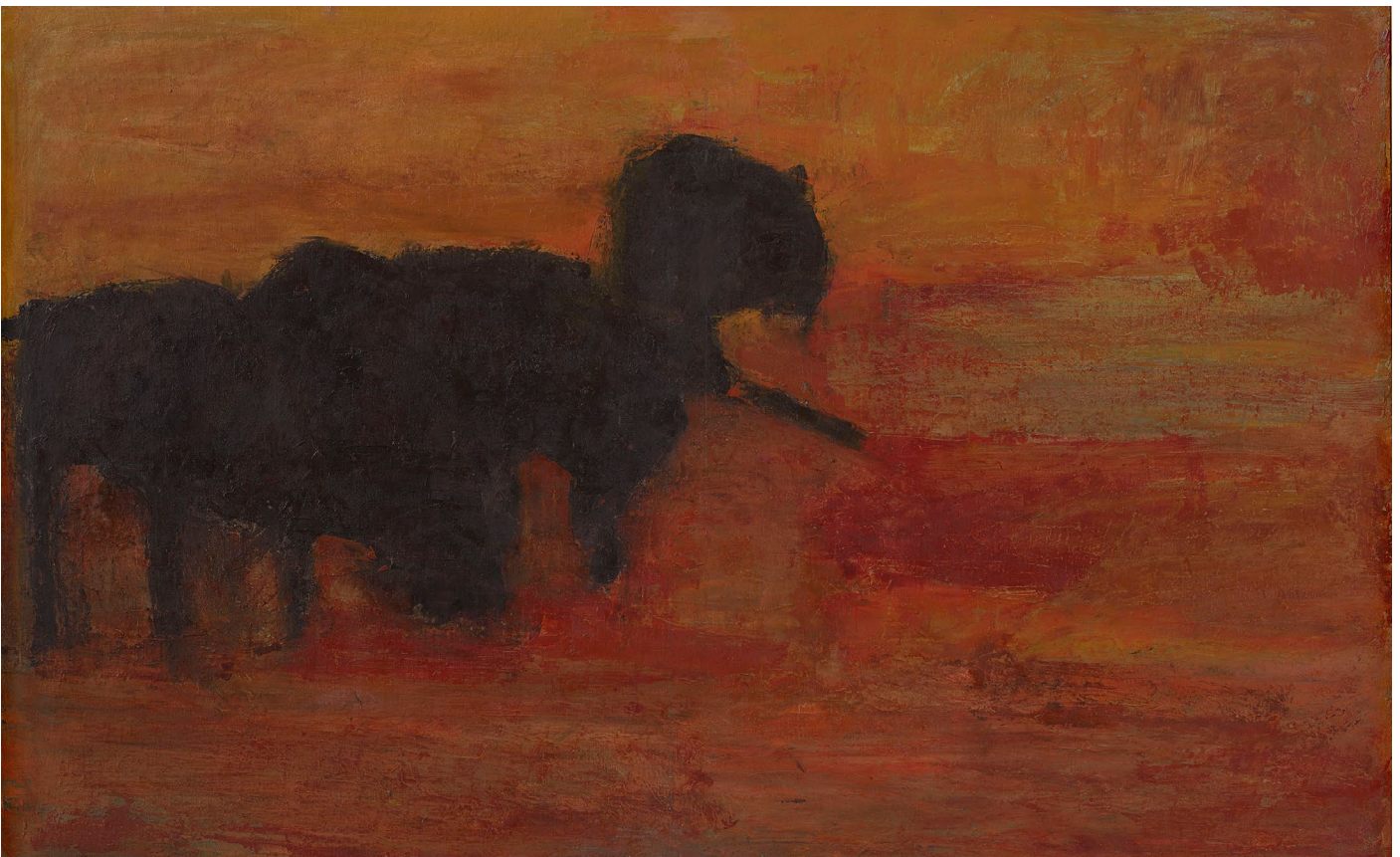Keith Cunningham, *Two Fowl on Table*, 1956

Keith Cunningham, *Dog*, 1953

Keith Cunningham, *Pack of Dogs*, Spain, 1955

Keith Cunningham, *Four Dogs*, Spain, 1955
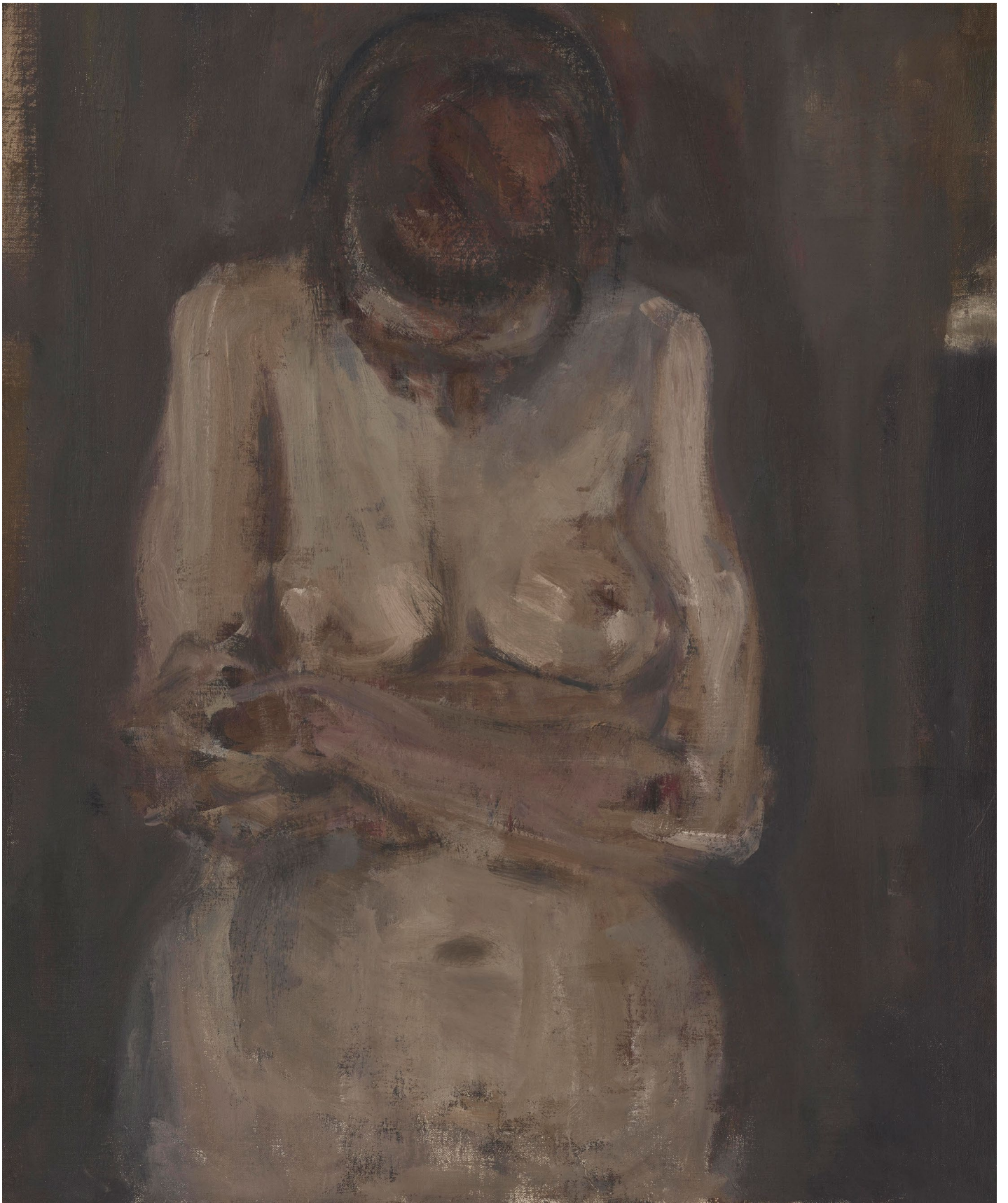
Keith Cunningham, *Woman with Red Hair*, 1952

Keith Cunningham, *Red Portrait of Frank Bowling*, 1956-1957

Keith Cunningham, *Red Sheep Head*, 1957

Keith Cunningham, *Woman Looking Down*, 1956

Keith Cunningham, *Old Man Smiling*, 1953

PRESS IMAGES

High Resolution Download: https://we.tl/t-B80NWOySZ3

Keith Cunningham
Dogs, 1956
Oil on canvas
1100 x 1860 x 35 mm / 3.3 x 73.2 x 1.4 inch 1100 x 1860 x 35 mm

Keith Cunningham
Red Landscape, 1955
Oil on canvas
920 x 2120 x 25 mm / 36.2 x 83.5 x 1 in
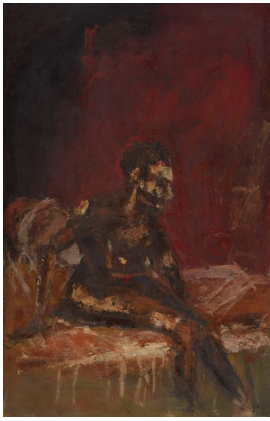Credit: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd

Keith Cunningham
Pack of Dogs, Spain, 1955
Oil on canvas
1060 x 1728 x 27 mm / 41.7 x 68 x 1.1 inch
Credit: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd
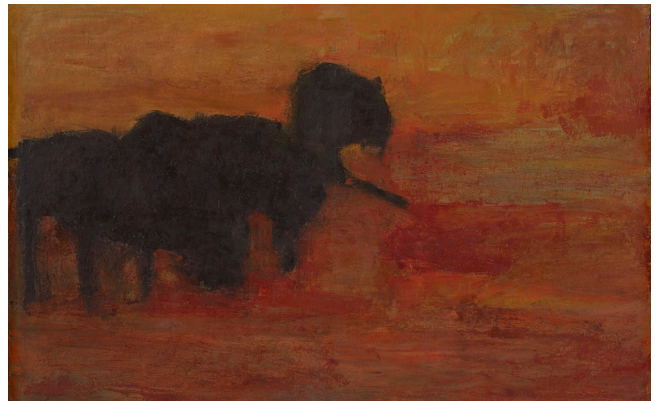
Keith Cunningham
Four Dogs, Spain, 1955
Oil on canvas
1090 x 1710 x 27 mm / 42.9 x 67.3 x 1.1 inch
Credit: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd

Keith Cunningham
Woman on a Sofa (Beryl), 1955
Oil on canvas
1680 x 1060 x 27 mm / 66.1 x 41.7 x 1.1 inch
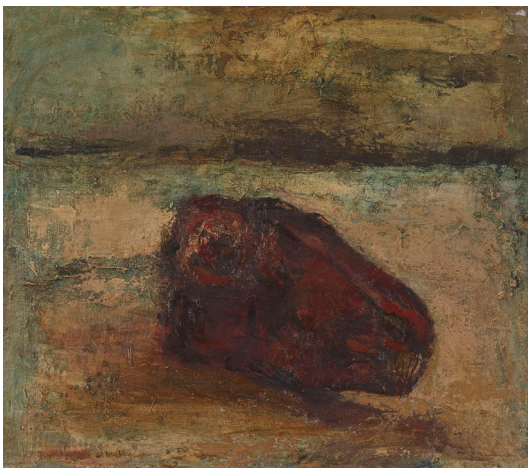Credit: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd

Keith Cunningham
Blue Study of Squid, 1960-1966
Oil on canvas
300 x 500 x 15 mm / 11.8 x 19.7 x 0.6 inch
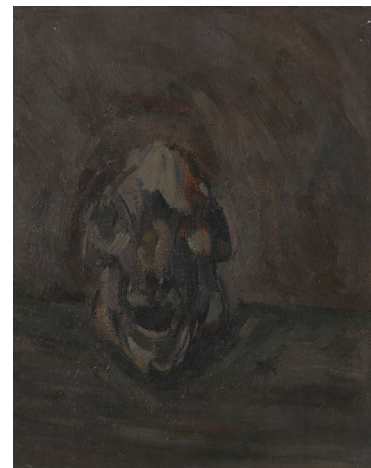Credit: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd

Keith Cunningham
Fish on Board, 1957
Oil on canvas
305 x 607 x 15 mm / 12 x 23.9 x 0.6 inch
Credit: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd

Keith Cunningham
Two Squid, 1960-1966
Oil on canvas
405 x 540 x 15 mm / 15.9 x 21.3 x 0.6 inch
Credit: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd

Keith Cunningham
Red Sheep Head, 1957
Oil on canvas
465 x 510 x 15 mm / 18.3 x 20.1 x 0.6 inch
Credit: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd

Keith Cunningham
Dark Sheep Skull, 1957
Oil on canvas
510 x 405 x 20 mm / 20.1 x 15.9 x 0.8 inch
Credit: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd

Keith Cunningham
Dog, 1953
Oil on canvas
620 x 510 x 15 mm / 24.4 x 20.1 x 0.6 inch
Credit: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd

Keith Cunningham
Two Fowl on Table, 1956
Oil on canvas
830 x 553 x 3 mm / 32.7 x 21.8 x 0.1 inch
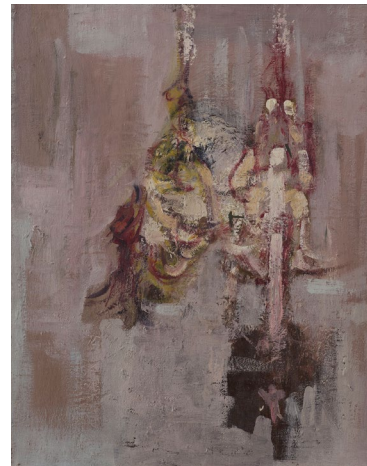Credit: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd

Keith Cunningham
Pink Rabbit Study, 1960
Oil on canvas
560 x 545 x 15 mm / 22 x 21.5 x 0.6 inch
Credit: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd

Keith Cunningham
Woman Looking Down, 1956
Oil on canvas
782 x 655 x 25 mm / 30.8 x 25.8 x 1 inch
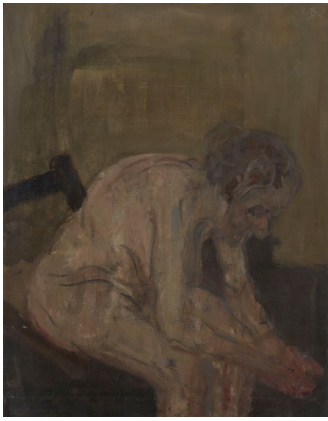Credit: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd

Keith Cunningham
Woman with Red Hair, 1952
Oil on canvas
760 x 640 x 20 mm / 29.9 x 25.2 x 0.8 inch
Credit: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd

Keith Cunningham
Two Hanging Chickens, 1956
Oil on canvas
910 x 695 x 20 mm / 35.8 x 27.4 x 0.8 inch
Credit: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd

Keith Cunningham
Despair, 1956
Oil on canvas
925 x 725 x 20 mm / 36.4 x 28.5 x 0.8 inch
Credit: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd

Keith Cunningham
Old Man Smiling, 1953
Oil on canvas
1070 x 605 x 20 mm / 42.1 x 23.8 x 0.8 inch
Credit: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd

Keith Cunningham
Dogs in Sunlight, Spain, 1955
Oil on canvas
790 x 1250 x 25 mm / 31.1 x 49.2 x 1 inch
Credit: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd

Keith Cunningham
Red Portrait of Frank Bowling, 1956-1957
Oil on canvas
985 x 770 x 20 mm / 38.8 x 30.3 x 0.8 inch
Credit: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd