

# BOOKS & ARTS

R. B. KITAJ ESTATE, COURTESY OF FRANK NOBLE, LONDON



*'Synchrony with F.B. – General of Hot Desire', 1968-69, by R.B. Kitaj, Laura Gascoigne, p46*

**Michael Ledger-Lomas** marvels at the feats of flying saints through the ages  
**Rose Prince** discovers just how much we owe to the invention of the refrigerator  
**Philip Hensher** wonders

how the existence of Nadine Dorries's sinister 'Dr No' can have escaped everyone else's notice for so long  
**Deborah Ross** is not surprised the audience were gasping watching Saltburn

**Rosie Millard** discovers the Arts Council uses AI to assess arts organisations  
**Michael Hann** witnesses the gig of the year  
**Zoe Strimpel** says it's end times for TV

## Television

### Rabbit holes

James Walton

**The Playboy Bunny Murder**  
ITV1

**The Remarkable Journey of Bernard Levin**  
BBC4

Perhaps unfairly, Marcel Theroux does rather bring to mind Dannii Minogue. Not only does he look very similar to his more famous sibling, but when not writing (pretty good) novels, he's in the same line of work: like Louis, he makes TV documentaries that feature much brow-furrowing.

His latest was a neat fit for ITV1's continuing obsession with true crime. As it transpired, *The Playboy Bunny Murder* was an over-simple title for an extremely tangled tale. Nonetheless, the programme did start with the killing of bunny girl Eve Stratford who, in March 1975, had her throat cut at her Leyton home. In those pre-DNA testing days, the police did what they could – which is to say they arrested and soon released Eve's musician boyfriend, and then hoped for something to turn up.

For the next four years, not much did. But in 1979, Lynda Farrow – a croupier at another West End club – was murdered in

*'I've never been able to regard paperbacks as real books'*

her home in the same way. So, wondered Theroux, were the Met detectives right to believe these crimes were committed by the same man? As he would for much of both episodes, he investigated his own question with possibly excessive thoroughness before coming up with a firm 'no'. And with that, he moved on to the testimony of Lynda's mother: that her daughter had learned who Eve's killer was and been silenced by an accomplice. Much assiduous sleuthing later, Theroux duly decided that she hadn't.

But then came an especially baffling twist. Once DNA profiling entered the scene, a match was established between Eve's murderer and that of 16-year-old Lynne Weedon in Hounslow in September 1975. This came even though the crimes were very different: Lynne was hit with a blunt instrument, raped and left for dead as she walked home from a night out – quite different to Eve's murder in her home.

Theroux has apparently been examining these cases for years – and has the theatrical wall of press cuttings linked by red string to prove it. Nor could you fault his commitment as he tracked down crime-scene pho-

tos, coroner's reports, Eve's old boyfriend and what seemed to be every living detective involved in the investigations. Yet, perhaps for this reason, he appeared like a man who'd disappeared down a rabbit-hole with no obvious way out.

Instead, the theories continued to pile up – and then to be painstakingly discredited. The bottom of the barrel was reached with a careful consideration of the idea proposed by a former police intelligence officer: that Lynne had been killed by the Yorkshire Ripper on a trip to London.

*The Playboy Bunny Murder* did a fine – if somewhat alarming – job of conjuring up 1970s London. Theroux's sorrow for the victims was obviously sincere. Even so, his regularly expressed wish that this documentary might help the truth to emerge one day began to sound increasingly desperate, as we were reminded all over again that messy old real life rarely offers the consoling satisfactions of fictional whodunits.

*The Remarkable Journey of Bernard Levin* took us back to the far-off days when influencers were clever men in specs who revered Shakespeare and said things like: 'I strolled down to the water's edge and thought about Wagner.'

The programme opened – as it more or less had to – with that trusty clip of Levin being punched on live television by the world's poshest assailant. From there, it jumped about through the highlights of his career, reminding us that he wrote three *Times* columns a week for more than 30 years (an estimated total of 22 million words), and was also a TV star of some magnitude.

In his interview shows, he spoke to the likes of Robert Kennedy, Henry Kissinger and Stephen Sondheim. In his travel documentaries he showed there's nothing new about middle-aged blokes in Panama hats joining in with such local activities as milking goats.

Along the way, we got a basic biography, which began surprisingly (to me at least) in the back streets of Camden, where Levin grew up as the child of a single mother whose own parents had fled the pogroms in Tsarist Russia. After scholarships to Christ's Hospital and the London School of Economics, he cut his journalistic teeth by revolutionising the art of parliamentary sketch-writing in *The Spectator*. ('As a schoolboy, I was astonished by how rude his column was,' said Michael Billington, one of the many genial old hacks on display.)

But while the programme was touchingly celebratory in tone, it did acknowledge – I think deliberately – the edge of faint absurdity that came with Levin at his most lordly. In one travel scene he was reading *Anna Karenina*, ripping out each page after he'd read it and throwing it in the bin. This was partly, he explained, so that he'd have less to carry – but also because 'I've never been able to regard paperbacks as real books'.

## Exhibitions

### Comic and cocksure

Laura Gascoigne

**Nicole Eisenman: What Happened**  
Whitechapel Gallery, until 14 January 2024

**R.B. Kitaj: London to Los Angeles**  
Piano Nobile, until 26 January 2024

There's a photograph in Nicole Eisenman's Whitechapel exhibition of the 28-year-old artist, in 1993, sitting at her easel with a big bow in her hair and a bevy of studio assistants – a feminist piss-take of the trope of the heroic male artist surrounded by adoring acolytes. Her resemblance in the photo to stand-up comic Sarah Silverman is not entirely coincidental; Eisenman is Jewish-American and funny. At the time she was producing the bawdy satires on downtown New York lesbian life – battles of the sexes redrawing Michelangelo's 'Battle of Cascina' in the style of *Where's Wally?* – which plaster the wall facing the exhibition entrance. She could have been a cartoonist, but she chose art.

Her raucous lesbianism put her on the map, but by the Noughties she wanted a bigger canvas and moved on from sexual politics to broader issues. 'The Triumph of Poverty' (2009) addresses the sub-prime meltdown in a composition quoting from

*Eisenman could have been a cartoonist, but she chose art*

Holbein and Bruegel in the carnivalesque language of James Ensor; later allegories are directed at the Tea Party and the MAGA disciples of Donald Trump.

Like the great cartoonists, Eisenman is an art-historical magpie, as happy filching from Ingres's 'Angelica Saved by Ruggiero' as from Renoir's 'Bal du moulin de la Galette'. She owes the pop-eyed cyclops in her series on contemporary culture's screen addiction to Philip Guston, but has not inherited his feeling for juicy oil paint. Her paint surfaces are strangely impersonal, as if eschewing the machismo of the gestural. Give her ink on paper, though, and she's a different artist: her monoprints of heads from 2011-12 are wonderfully witty and expressive. Her sculptures can be laugh-out-loud funny, too. Her saving grace is her humour, which she looks in danger of losing in her recent monumental painting acquired by New York's Met, shown in the final room in reproduction. 'The Abolitionists in the Park' (2020-21) includes portraits of Eisenman and friends at an 'Occupy City Hall' protest after the murder of George Floyd. Hailed as a 'history painting', it's actually a portrait of the artist painting her-



*'Fishing', 2000, by Nicole Eisenman*

self into the right side of history. It's as if Picasso had recorded himself demonstrating against the bombing of Guernica.

Let's hope she's not beginning to take herself seriously; that would be R.B. Kitaj's undoing. When the 27-year-old American artist arrived at London's Royal College of Art in 1959, his friend David Hockney logged him as 'a much more serious student than anyone else'. A bibliomaniac, he was also the most art-educated. Like Eisenman's, the paintings in his exhibition at Piano Nobile are packed with art-historical references, from the Giotto monk cast as 'Marrano (The Secret Jew)' (1976) to the sciapod in 'Welcome Every Dread Delight' (1962) copied from a medieval relief in Sens Cathedral. His literary allusions are equally eclectic: 'Welcome Every Dread Delight' comes from a poem by the 18th century poet Edward Young, 'General of Hot Desire' from one of Shakespeare's sonnets.

'What Happened' would make a good subtitle for this show too. Who knows what's going on in the pop arty diptych 'Synchro-

my with F.B. – General of Hot Desire' (1968-69) featuring Francis Bacon turned out like a dandified mafia don (see p31). Is that Christine Keeler being throttled on the chair beside him? The meanings of what Kitaj called his 'surreal-dada-symbolist strain' of paintings are harder to unpack than their references, yet an image like 'Junta' (1962) has

*When Kitaj's wife died, he blamed her death on the savagery of the critics' attacks*

a clear political context. 'I watch political events like I watch baseball and boxing,' he said. 'Very closely.'

Kitaj is a 'polemical' artist, noted John Russell in a review of his first exhibition with the Marlborough in 1963. 'He has brought the subject back into painting and, what is more, he has brought history-painting back to life.' Unlike Eisenman, he did it without obvious messaging and it worked fine until he infuriated critics at his 1994

Tate retrospective by providing explanatory captions to his paintings. When his beloved wife Sandra Fisher died of a brain haemorrhage months later, he blamed her death on the savagery of the critics' attacks and abandoned his adoptive city for Los Angeles, where he poured out his grief in a series of mystical paintings of himself and Sandra as angels, pun intended.

'I don't fit in here,' he later said of London. 'Maybe it's the Jewishness.' More likely it was the intellectualism and the un-English tendency to show it off. Thirty years on, this mini-retrospective is a reminder of how exceptional an artist he was. Robert Hughes's observation in 1980 that 'Kitaj draws better than almost anyone else alive' is even truer now than it was then. No contemporary artist can breathe life into charcoal like Kitaj does in the portraits of his adolescent daughter Dominic in this show.

'When you get it right,' he once said about drawing, 'you get the whole world in, like Degas, Dürer and Hokusai did. Then you can do anything.'