

To Rudolf Frieling

8 November 2014



Granby TriangleImage courtesy Charlotte Horn

Rudolf Frieling
San Francisco, USA

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Thanks for your invitation to write something short about Candice Breitz's Working Class Hero (A Portrait of John Lennon), the piece we have at SFMOMA.

You know, my first art-related job was in Liverpool. I once taught a course in Minimalism and Pop Art in the art department of Liverpool John Moores University (Liverpool College of Art, it used to be called), the school where, decades earlier, John Lennon studied. Lennon, aged seventeen, enrolled in September 1957, a month before he and Paul McCartney shared a stage for the first time. Paul was fifteen; his high school adjoined the college.

I was back in Liverpool recently and took a different kind of tour – one led by artists and activists who are engaged with the housing crisis in the city. They're fighting the alliance between government and business that's dismantling the remaining working-class neighbourhoods. It's said that the old terraces are worth more as bricks in London than they are as houses in Liverpool – one city is consuming the other. The tour began at the former Park Palace theatre, where John Lennon's mother, Julia, often saw movies. She was killed in a car accident in 1958. The Park Palace closed in 1959, became a pharmacy, then a vehicle repair shop, then it fell into disuse. Our tour later stopped at the Empress pub, where John and Ringo used to drink. Mural portraits of the two of them are in alcoves high up on the facade. A Beatles heritage tour group was there too, visiting from Germany.

The Empress features on the cover of Ringo's first solo album, Sentimental Journey, released in 1970, as the Beatles were breaking up. John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band, John's own first solo album, with Ringo on drums, came out later that year. This is the music – so elegiac and severe – that's performed in Breitz's piece by devoted Lennon fans, whom the artist selected through interviews. Julia Lennon's

presence pervades the album, from the first track, 'Mother', to the last, a lullaby titled 'My Mummy's Dead'. In the second-to-last track, 'God', John sings a litany of things in which he doesn't believe, including the Bible, Kennedy, Jesus and the Beatles. As much as anything, 'God' is what deranged Mark David Chapman, the Beatles fan who shot John dead outside the Dakota in New York in December 1980.

Thanks again. Let me see what I can do.

Best

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