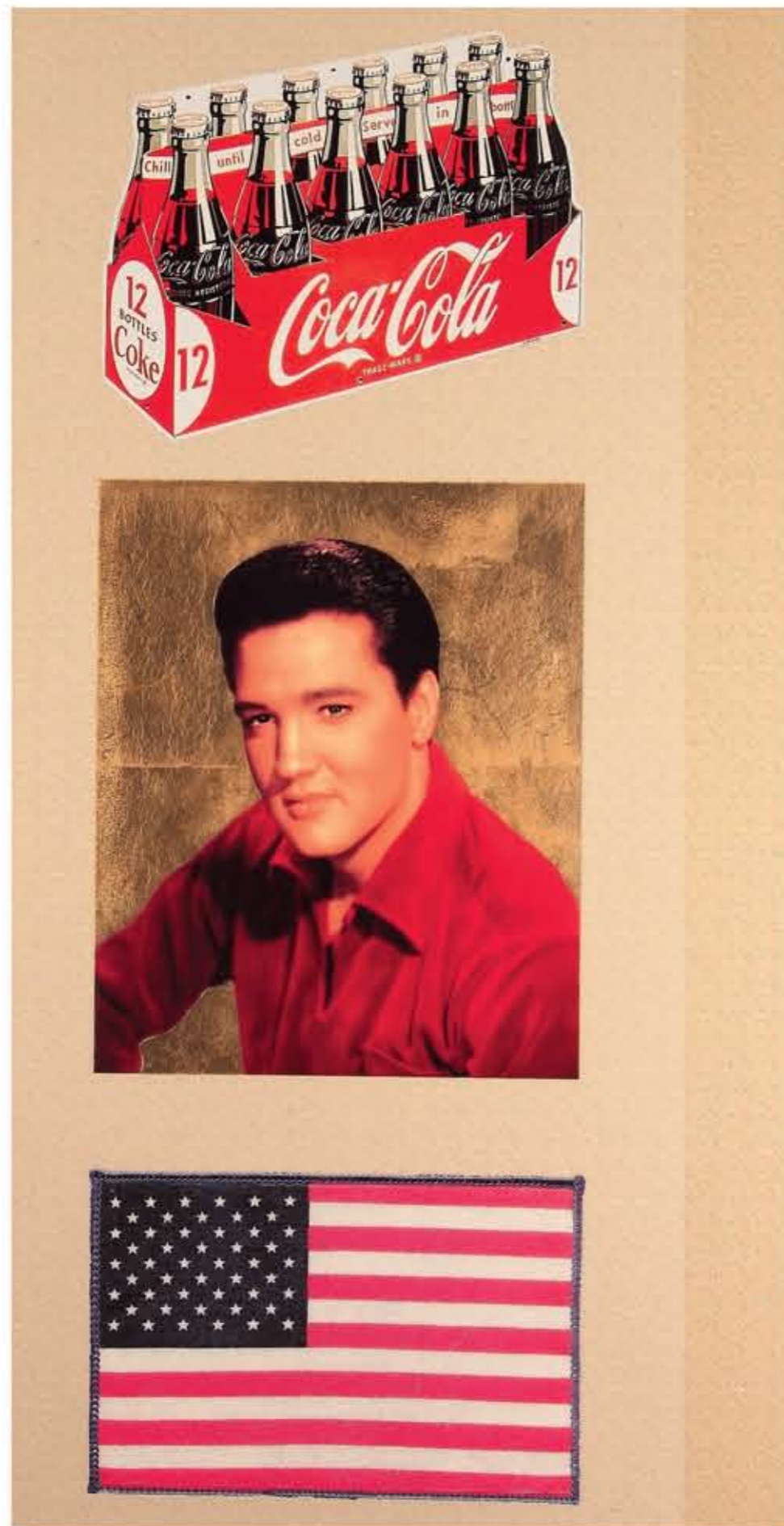


Pop goes the easel

As British pop artist and national treasure Sir Peter Blake turns 80, Foss Fine Art celebrates with an exhibition of his immortal prints. Mary-Jane Wiltsher investigates

Few octogenarians can stake claim to the creative diversity of mixed-media maverick Sir Peter Blake. That's right, the 'Godfather of British Pop Art' is turning 80, and his iconic prints and album covers, blending concentrated colours and snatches of consumer culture with a soft undertow of nostalgia, are as popular as ever. This month, 27 limited edition Blake prints will pattern the walls of Foss Fine Art gallery in Battersea, a vivid microcosm of his career. I sampled the art world heavyweight's canon of work and asked gallery owner Caro Foss why he's sustained such currency.

"We started planning this about a year ago," she says. It's a sunny afternoon and Foss Fine Art's intimate interior is bathed in light. Specialising in Contemporary British Fine Art, the gallery frequently exhibits Modern Master prints, and Foss' excitement for the Blake collection is contagious: "The selection process was managed by ourselves and Coriander Press, Blake's print publishers. They've gone through their archives and pulled out some rare pieces. The joy of these prints is that they make a great name in the British art market accessible."



How to summarise this industry grandee? Fascinated by icons, folk art and memorabilia, Blake and his work are somewhat of an anomaly, utilising everyday objects, geometric patterns, comic cuttings and fonts. "He tore up the rule book," enthuses Foss. "He totally embraced a culture of mass media and departed from the traditional. It was very radical, and he's influenced so many younger generations: Tracey Emin and Damien Hirst. His legacy continues. To still be working so hard and creating new ideas at 80 is fantastic."

Blake's persona, too, is hard to pigeon-hole. Part rebel, part royalist, his work is rooted in ideas of consumerism and fame, yet he makes no claim to be a social commentator.

Graduating from the Royal College of Art on the cusp of the swinging 60s, his career spans some of the most turbulent years of the 20th century. He may, in fact, be the first true pop artist; despite common citations of Andy Warhol as original founder, Blake's Captain Webb Matchbox creation predates Warhol's Campbell's Soup Cans. But Blake is more about creative innovation than political anarchy.

There's none of the darkness of Dadaism here – the collages are arresting, sometimes humorous, but not unsettling. "It's cheerful imagery," agrees Foss. "I think that in a financial climate of doom and gloom, people want bright colours and optimistic images."

Is this concoction of artistic revolutionism and accessible aesthetics the crux of Blake's cross-generational appeal? It's a duality that has worked both for and against him. Blake's lack of agenda makes him difficult to categorise, his eclecticism sometimes rendering him a problematic artist to exhibit. This year, Tate Modern is showcasing a major retrospective of Damien Hirst's work, but not of Blake's, despite his position as Hirst's predecessor and fundamental influence – a decision Foss finds "astonishing".

Plucking selective images from Blake's trajectory is a no easy feat, but Caro Foss is herself a collector and owns several Blake prints. "I love Matchboxes; making one big impact out of such small things. Then you have the American Trilogy embracing all-Americana with Coca-Cola culture, Elvis, and the American flag. Idols is a rare print; we're very lucky >>>

From top-left: American Trilogy (Cream & Gold), Britannia (Found Art), Lowering Elephants, Legends Set – Marilyn Monroe



to have that. And people are fascinated by Marilyn, of course. I expect I'll put Britannia in the window, for obvious reasons!"

In a world of snowballing consumerism and celebrity obsession, Blake's work, and much of pop art on a wider plain, still fascinates with its depictions of famous faces and household brands. Where other artists have fluctuated, Blake, like the musicians he worked with – Paul Weller, The Who, The Beatles – has transcended time, remaining a constant. Head to Foss Fine Art for a sense of his technicolour continuum.]

Sir Peter Blake; An Exhibition to Celebrate Sir Peter Blake's Birthday runs 23 June-21 July

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Above: Matchboxes II, Left: Winston (Found Art)