



## Vladimír Kokolia: Epiphany/ Francis Alÿs; Knots'n Dust review - a compelling double bill

**Ikon Gallery, Birmingham** Czech renaissance man Vladimír Kokolia's first UK show is a revelation, while Belgian daredevil Francis Alÿs heads to the eye of the storm

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**T**he paintings of the Czech artist **Vladimír Kokolia** are outstandingly beautiful. To stand before them is to be uplifted and revived. Airy fields of colour, not so much brushed as breathed on to large canvases, they shimmer with an internal light that seems both familiar and yet not of this world. With Kokolia, it is a case of love at first sight.

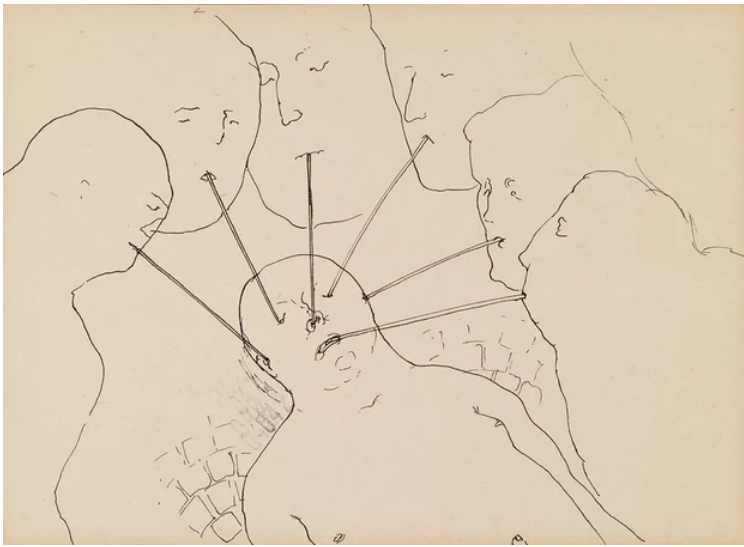
Look deep into a skein of turquoise, lemon and hazy green lines and your eye is seduced by the sense of something shifting among them, like dappled sunshine held in summer branches. The lines stutter ever so slightly as they sway around the pale surface, adding a strange frisson. The painting is called *Looking at Ash Tree*, and while the tree may be present, in the tangle of marks, the emphasis is entirely on the sensation of seeing; specifically, the way that leaves percolate sunshine and breezes shift leaves, so that one seems to be looking at flames of light.

In *Roads and Doors*, something is definitely passing through, and something is definitely opening in and out of the gorgeous opalescent surface. But these paths and entrances are more or less abstract: less depictions than intricate patterns weaving through the paint, adventures for the mind and eye. In *Crown*, with its green facets and fractals, a scattering of blue pinpoints sparkles in one corner while white streaks zigzag across another. If one first thought of jewels, it is no surprise to learn that Kokolia was looking at another kind of natural radiance: the sky seen through the topmost branches (and needles) of a conifer.

He paints these marvels at home in the small Moravian village of Veverské Knínice, which has a population of around 900 but many thousands more trees. Born in the former Czechoslovakia in 1956, Kokolia lived through the Prague Spring and two decades of isolation behind the iron curtain before the Velvet Revolution freed his country from communism. He studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague, where he subsequently became professor himself, but there is nothing formal about his existence.

In the Czech Republic, for instance, he is better known to some followers as a champion of composting, tai chi and Chinese philosophy; to others as a poet and pithy tweeter. Still others remember him as the frontman of the legendary alternative rock group E during the 1980s. Over here he is barely known at all, alas, although the Ikon Gallery's exhibition should change all that. It is a complete revelation.

For in addition to these ravishing paintings, Kokolia turns out to be the Goya of the Czech Republic. The opening gallery is filled with his dense and brilliant drawings in black ink on card, each depicting some queer scenario halfway between aphorism and fable. Here is Sisyphus with his head disappearing right into the rock he rolls up the hill, and a traveller stranded in a sea of suitcases as far as the eye can see, unable to move. A dog is dwarfed by a humiliatingly large rabbit and a tiny woman smothered in the clasp of a gargantuan baby: nature turned upside down.



'Some queer scenario halfway between aphorism and fable': from Big Series1 (1983 by Vladimír Kokolia. Photograph: courtesy of the artist

One man tries to broach a storm at sea on fragile stilts. Another attempts to kill the bolting horse on which he rides. Puppets pull the strings of other puppets and one ravenous figure eats another, which eats another, and so on, in grotesque pastiche of Russian dolls. A tense citizen stabs himself in the back, in true communist fashion.

If the drawings show the political plight in Prague, or the human condition in general, the paintings come as joyful compensation. Kokolia is a euphoric observer. He sees the allure of night, of making darkness visible with thickets of glowing black paint. He looks at crisscrossing avenues of long shadows and translates them into slender vertical strokes in brilliant colours, as if the landscape was composed of the finest silk threads.

And the closer you get to his pictures, the more captivating they become. A big canvas of midnight blue whorls on a deep blue ground looks as if it had been made with the artist's bare hands, running his fingers through the pigment. But in fact, like all the other works here, it is meticulously painted in brushstrokes that seem to render themselves nearly invisible, as if they might get in the way, distracting the viewer from the blue of some nearly real landscape by night. Except that the painting casts its own glow, the radiance of a sudden new vision. No wonder this show is called Epiphany.

Paired with it, aptly, is a small exhibition of work by the Belgian-born, Mexico-based artist **Francis Alÿs** which includes many delicate drawings of a girl making a knot in her long hair, which then unties itself in a charming moment of release (these images are all edited into a single culminating animation). But the high point is his spectacular video *Tornado*.

Alÿs (b1959), camera in hand, rushes headlong towards a gathering dust devil in the Mexican highlands. The sound is cacophonous, the vision overwhelming and then, with great abruptness, it all seems to end. Except that the artist is now inside the eye of the storm. Everything subsides into a mesmerising silence - offering the realisation of what it is to be at peace, in the midst of grave danger - only to start up all over again.

. Vladimir Kokolia: Epiphany and Francis Alÿs: Knots'N Dust are at Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, until 9 September

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