A life in colour

Jeremy Miles reflects on the vibrant life and work of Neo Romantic painter Katharine Church and her passion for the Dorset landscape

NEO Romantic painter Katharine Church was friends with many of the towering figures of the 20th century art world. John Piper and Ivon Hitchens helped her develop her style as a painter. She was close to Julian Trevelyan and Mary Fedden, and one of her dearest friends was the Bloomsbury writer and diarist Frances Partridge. Yet mention her name and the chances are that you’ll draw blank looks.

Katharine - Kitty to her friends - was one of the great, if largely unsung, painters of the post-war British era. She was supremely well connected. Her mother was the socialite Elsie Neilson Lyle born into the sugar dynasty that would become Tate and Lyle. Kitty would go on to become HG Wells’ daughter-in-law and a longtime friend of her childhood neighbour John Betjeman. She was prodigiously talented as an artist and for decades worked quietly right here in Dorset regularly playing host to a circle of witty and talented friends.

Kitty originally moved to the county in the 1930s and for many years ran the prestigious Hambledon Gallery at Blandford. The great and the good would beat a path to her door, first at Tarrant Hinton, and then for the last 35 years of her life, at her idyllic home and studio, Sutton House at Woodlands near Wimborne, where for many years she held a monthly open-house for artists and collectors.
Although extremely well-known within the art world, Kitty, who trained at the Royal Academy and Slade, enjoyed great success but little fame. Despite an unquestionable talent that displayed itself in her unique and vibrant paintings full of colour, character and life, she was destined to sell her work well but never perhaps reach the dizzying heights she truly deserved.

Piper called her “a real painter” whose emotional reactions to life were primarily visual. Her work was highly respected and she was rarely short of enthusiastic buyers but she never quite became a household name. As one of her fans, the notoriously hard-to-please art critic and historian Brian Sewell once pointed out: “Perhaps one painter in a thousand might make it onto the international scene.”

Kitty died in 1999 just weeks after her 89th birthday following a fall in the garden at Sutton House. Now her friend, the retired artist-manager and gallery owner John Duncalfe has produced an impressive new book celebrating her work, life and career - Katharine Church (1910-1999): A Life in Colour. The Later Years - it charts a unique artist whose immense talent and intuitive skills with paint allowed her to work equally effectively in oils, watercolours and a variety of other media. She could switch from landscapes and portraits to still-life, flower paintings and interiors with ease. All were powerful and unique in their style.

John Duncalfe’s 288 page book is lavishly illustrated with 200 illustrations mostly of her work but also including previously unpublished photographs of Kitty and her circle. There are striking paintings of the Dorset landmarks that she knew and loved including Tarrant Hinton Rectory (where she lived in the late 1940s and early 50s), Cranborne Chase, Kingston Lacy, Chettle House and Knowlton Church.

There are stunning portraits, including paintings of Caroline and Edmund, the children from her 14 year marriage to the writer Anthony West, son of HG Wells and Rebecca West, and there are many studies painted in and around her beloved Sutton House.

Though he first met her by chance on a business trip to Spain, John Duncalfe says he will forever associate Kitty with her “very special home” in Dorset. Visiting Sutton House - an old farmhouse that Frances Partridge believed had magical properties - was he insists like travelling back in time. “You’d turn into the drive which took you to this little bit of heaven with old fruit trees and a windy path going to the studio. It was like driving from the 1980s into the 1950s.”

He admits that Kitty was a strong personality and could be alarmingly forthright in her views. “I found her quite formidable the first time we met in Spain. She was one of the last grande dame painters and certainly didn’t suffer fools gladly but happily we got on very well indeed.”

After their initial meeting an invitation to Sutton House was swiftly forthcoming and led to the first of many visits for John and his partner Tony Campbell. It was also the start of both a friendship and an enjoyable business relationship which lasted until Kitty’s death more than a decade later. This included a wonderfully successful retrospective of her work at Duncalfe’s galleries in Harrogate in 1988.
“She could be tricky,” he recalls. “We had tremendous battles over prices after her first successful exhibition. I’m afraid I used to send Tony to do the dirty work and then I’d turn up all smiles with some champagne and smoked salmon sandwiches that I’d got made up. It worked very well. Tony said she’d told him: ‘It’s such a pity dear. He’s far nicer than you.’”

Among John’s favourite memories are the times that he caught a glimpse of a long past world as Kitty and her friend Frances Partridge delighted in one of their favourite pursuits, a little verbal sparring. The repartee and barbed put-downs flew thick and fast. “They used to banter tremendously. They could be incredibly spiteful and yet they adored each other.”

Despite a sometimes prickly exterior Kitty was fiercely loyal to her friends. “She could be very generous,” says John. “I had a quite serious illness in the 1990s and she sent a painting to help pay for my hospital fees. Of course I didn’t sell it, it’s in the book.”

Kitty’s death was unexpected and imbued with the kind of irony that she would probably have found oddly entertaining. She tripped over her pet cat, one of a string of devoted mogs named after artists. This one was called Kitaj (after the American-born artist R B Kitaj). So we have it. Kitty’s demise was caused by a kitty called Kitaj.

John Duncaife says he wrote the Katharine Church book because he couldn’t bear to see her disappear into oblivion. “Kitty is far too important to let go,” he adds.

Penning this substantial tribute - which carries a forward by Dorset art historian and writer Vivienne Light - was clearly a labour of love and has already met with the approval of Kitty’s family and friends including her son Edmund West - now an eminent doctor in the USA.

John has further plans to secure Kitty’s memory and reputation including collating the many letters she wrote him and adding them to her archive at the Tate.

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Katherine with John Duncaife

“Chapman’s Poole, Isle of Purbeck” watercolour and gouache (1970)

GET THE BOOK

Katharine Church 1910-1999: A Life in Colour
is published by Tillington Press at £35.00. It’s available from Amazon, is currently on sale at the Salisbury City Art Gallery or can be ordered direct from Tillington Press email: tillingtonpress@hotmail.co.uk
KATHARINE CHURCH
1910-1999

A Life In Colour
The Later Years

Katharine Church, the Dorset & Bloomsbury connected painter. This 288 page book with over 200 colour illustrations of oils & works on paper, Chronology, and photographs, which gives an insight into this powerful painter with major artistic connections.

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