



Source: Camden New Journal
 Edition:
 Country: UK
 Date: Thursday 29, November 2007
 Page: 5
 Area: 206 sq. cm
 Circulation: VFD 53823 Weekly
 BRAD info: page rate £1,596.00, scc rate £6.00
 Phone: 020 7419 9000
 Keyword: Novas Gallery

> durrants

Robin Hood with a paint brush

ART world pariah, social commentator, occultist and polymath – Robert Oscar Lenkiewicz (1941-2002) was a man of myriad interests and prolific output, never scared to confront life's uglier truths.

By his own judgment "the best bad painter he knew", Lenkiewicz eschewed fashionable painting styles in favour of a more traditional approach, though he courted controversy with contemporary subject matters of vagrancy, suicide, mental health and addiction.

Growing up in a Jewish hotel in West Hampstead, populated by a number of Holocaust survivors, set the tone for the artist's unorthodox working habits.

Annie Hill-Smith, the mother of three of Lenkiewicz's children, is curator of the "at the edge" Lenkiewicz exhibition which begins on Thursday at the Novas Gallery, Parkway. She describes him as "a Robin Hood, robbing the rich to feed the poor".

His studio (whether in London or, later, in Plymouth) was open to anyone in need of shelter; invariably becoming the refuge of down and outs, drug users, criminals and the mentally ill, who formed the subjects of his



Lenkiewicz's 'Les in the bowler'

paintings. Their swelling numbers forced Lenkiewicz to commandeer derelict warehouses to house everybody.

To support his troubled models, he began to systematically steal and sell on rare antiquarian books from Plymouth City Museum.

Ms Hill-Smith tells how a policeman came to the door one day. "Before the officer could speak, Robert said, 'I've been waiting for you. You've come

about the books, haven't you?' The officer, who had come about a completely innocent enquiry and had no idea about the books, arrested him. That was an example of the damn fool Lenkiewicz."

Lenkiewicz emerged from jail with the Vagrancy Project, one of many which shone a light on the lives of ostracised, hidden sections of society, combining thematically linked paintings with research notes and the collected observations of the sitters.

He kindled outrage in 1981 when he faked his own death in preparation for another project on the theme of death. "I could not know what it was like to be dead," he said, "but I could discover what it was like to be thought dead."

His subjects might often have seemed dead to the public too, but Lenkiewicz's work serves as a reminder that they are human, and very much alive.

SIMON WROE

■ *at the edge, the works of RO Lenkiewicz is at the Novas Gallery, 68 Parkway, NW1 from November 29-January 25. Admission is free. Tel: 0870 906 3200*

