



QUINTESSENTIALLY ICONIC

HER IMAGE HAS LONG BEEN SPLASHED ACROSS THE TABLOIDS. NOW AMY WINEHOUSE'S UNMISTAKABLE BEEHIVED AND BALLET-SHOED FORM IS TAKING TO THE GALLERY WALLS, FINDS SOPHIE WALKER

You may not have heard of Gerald Laing but it's very likely that you are familiar with one of his pictures. The arresting image of Brigitte Bardot's fiercely feline face, captured in enlarged pointillist style and enclosed by a thick black circle that emphasises her seductive symmetry, has been reproduced ad infinitum as poster art since Laing painted it in the 1960s. The image has become one of the most recognisable in British Pop Art, yet its creator, unlike many others of that movement, has purposefully stepped away from the limelight.

'I am not a branded artist,' Laing demurs. 'I have never been interested in becoming famous myself, and my work is very varied. I tend to fall for imagery that resonates with me, and I transform my style to best reflect my feelings about it.'

So it's quite hard to recognise 'me' in my work and the images take centre stage.'

He may not be interested in becoming a celebrity but the cult of celebrity has long been the subject of his fascination. He has stuck with starlets and sirens as a subject matter, moving on from Bardot to Kate Moss to the colourful singer-songwriter Amy Winehouse, who died suddenly this summer. It's his bold, symbol-laden images of Winehouse, who he had been painting for seven years before her death, that are the focus of a new exhibition of his work at the Thomas Gibson Gallery in London's Bruton Street. 'When I came across images of Amy I instantly felt that she was a gift to someone like me. She was fascinating, someone who lived life at full throttle in the public eye and had an immense talent. Visually she was unmistakable,

wholly individual; the hair, the clothes. So for my purposes, she was a perfect subject.'

The exhibition has been staged as a homage to Winehouse, whose album *Back to Black* has climbed to the top of the charts again since her death. Laing hopes that the images of her locked in an eternal embrace with her lover Blake Fielder-Civil, or grasping a bottle of champagne at a decadent MTV party, will commemorate her in a positive way. 'The media were obsessed with her tragedy, but I was interested in only her talent. I hope the work reflects that.'

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