

DEAR CHRISTINE interview with myself and journalist Marilia Papathanasiou in TO VIMA (09-02-2020)

How and why did you come up with an idea about an exhibition dedicated to Christine Keeler?

I've been fascinated by Christine Keeler ever since seeing the film *Scandal* (1989) in the late Eighties when I was a teenager. There was something about the whole story—the injustice and the vulnerability of Christine, that stayed with me. It's a narrative that's intriguing on so many levels historically, politically and culturally, but it's Christine's experience that I'm interested in—how the scandal affected her, how she was treated and how it impacted upon the rest of her life. I started painting a series of portraits of Christine in 2014 and decided that myself painting her may not be all that exciting, but a whole load of other artists, all looking at her life story through their own prism of interests, was something that could be very powerful. I asked female artists to participate as I felt they would have more to say about her story — they would understand and relate as women. The project began in 2016 and has widened from painting to include sculpture, film, photography, music and poetry. The exhibition is an attempt to rehumanise and reclaim and reframe Christine and rescue her from the media image. I also wanted to add to her legacy in a cultural sense—to organise new secondary source material around her. My hope is that now, through this body of work, when people look for 'Christine Keeler' they will find more than black and white photos of her, seemingly frozen in time. That they will now also meet with artworks, poetry and music which have been created within a contemporary context and with sympathy and understanding.

Why is Christine Keeler an important figure in British history?

The Profumo Affair of 1963 was an explosive mix of sex, politics, class and espionage and can be seen as a watershed in British social and cultural history. The scandal not only helped to bring down the government of the time, but, in pre-sexual revolution Britain, it let the genie of sex out of the bottle. It also dealt a blow to deferential attitudes around tightly cast class divisions. There had been a settled feeling of what Britain was—the rich man and his castle, the poor man at his gate. The fallout of the events revealed the sleaze and hypocrisy at the heart of the Establishment. Reporting the scandal the tabloids went where they had previously feared to go—never had the press been so bold and it has never looked back. Christine Keeler is inextricably tied up with this moment in history in the British subconscious. The iconic Lewis Morley image of Christine sitting on a chair, seemingly naked (but covered) is one of the most famous images in recent British history.

After the Profumo Affair ended, why has it been impossible for Keeler to live a normal life? I mean, the Swinging Sixties had started, British society was changing, arts and music were exploding, but it seems that there was no frame for a girl like her, to fit in. Why is that?

Christine was hounded by the press all her life and I think the media have had a big part to play in the fact that she could never escape her notoriety. She had to change her name and she lost jobs when employers found out who she was, even decades after the scandal. As

she herself said: "Even a criminal has the right to a new life, but they made sure I did not have that. They just didn't stop calling me a prostitute forever and ever and ever and ever". Twenty years after the Profumo Affair, captions of photos of Christine from the early Eighties still refer to her as 'Mistress of John Profumo'—as if that's all she was. As Christine aged, the tabloids still chased her—taking photos as she did her shopping, cruelly comparing her as a 70-year old woman to images of herself as a young woman in the Sixties. I think another reason Christine could not escape her place in history is to do with the perpetual elephant in the room—class. She came from a deprived background, she grew up in poverty and never managed to break free from this. If she had been of a different social class she would have been shielded and protected in some way. I also think that despite the so-called sexual revolution, attitudes to women being sexually active really haven't changed much. A woman who is seen as sexually confident and sexually free is still dangerous. Society still likes to define women in terms of virgin, mother and whore. Christine was the whore and society remains fascinated by women who somehow refuse to compromise sexually.

Have you ever met Keeler and if yes what was her impression on you?

I contacted Christine via a friend of hers when I started painting her portrait from photos in 2014. I had hoped to meet Christine and to paint her from life but she was reclusive and (understandably) suspicious of any interest. It is a huge regret of mine that I didn't get the chance to meet her. When Christine sadly passed away in 2017, I contacted her family about the exhibition, as I felt I needed their blessing. Christine's son, Seymour Platt, has been very supportive of the project and has written a foreword for the exhibition catalogue.

Do you think that today, in a world run by social media, an Affair like the Profumo Affair could have the same consequences on a young girl who happened to be involved?

I think that, sadly, today social media would only hasten the shaming and judgment of a young girl who may find herself in a similar situation to Christine. I may be being cynical, but I'm not convinced we've learnt anything from the treatment of Christine Keeler (and other women, for example, Monica Lewinsky) and social media would probably only fan the flames of judgment and shaming.

What do you think about the #MeToo movement and the whole new generation of feminists and activists?

There is an increased awareness of how women have been treated historically and this can only be a good thing as we look to the future. Christine Keeler was publicly shamed and she never escaped that—once she was labelled it stuck for the rest of her life. In the age of the internet, where a person's name can be tarnished so easily and so potently, I think it also pays to be very conscious of this. I can see the temptation to draw parallels with Christine's story and #MeToo, but for me it's much more about class. The abuse that she had to face, being called a slapper or a tart, is the exact same abuse that is levelled at working class women today. I find that a far more compelling focus.