

Gerald Laing, the artist that made a war zone go pop
A retrospective of the former soldier turned passionate antiwar artist will showcase his best paintings and sculptures

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When Gerald Laing wrote to his commanding officer in the Royal Northumberland Fusiliers to resign his commission, he was sternly told: “Laing, if you continue writing letters of this sort, you will have no future in the Army!”

Laing, who was born in 1936, finally did leave the Fusiliers, and in 1960 enrolled as an art student at St Martin’s College, one of a bright new wave of British pop artists. His name is less well known today than those of Peter Blake or Allen Jones, but this month the Fine Art

Society on New Bond Street marks the fifth anniversary of Laing’s death with a retrospective comprising 70 of his best paintings and sculptures.

The early works that made his name — particularly the seductive portraits of the sullen Bridget Bardot and silken Anna Karina — seemed to be about celebrity. But others, his stirring, block-colour images of girls in bikinis, hot rod racers, free-fallers and astronauts, show that the Arthurian quest of Laing’s life wasn’t for fame but perfection. That was what lured him to cross the Atlantic in 1964 and throw himself into the New York scene: the present-tense perfection that seemed implicit in the American dream, the promise of Technicolour prosperity that struck such a contrast with the grey-greasy drabness of the Britain he left behind.

At first glance, there seems a gulf between Laing’s military background and his artistic bent. Then you realise his speed freaks and fall guys, like soldiers, risk their lives for a cause, paradoxically making life more precious by valuing it less. And if that all sounds a bit noble, it must be admitted that Laing succumbed to some of the temptations of the high life. He was good-looking, a foot-down drinker and late-night party-goer; thanks to the patronage of his hip Manhattan gallerist, Richard Feigen, he began to hobnob with the stars.

Yet Laing understood the flip-side of the cool 1960s ideal — the human cost of hedonism — and when he ventured into political works such as “Souvenir” and “Lincoln Convertible”, responses to the Cuban Missile Crisis and the killing of J.F. Kennedy, his gallery didn’t welcome the move away from the beach girls and sportsmen that had become part of the visual vocabulary of the time.

At the end of the decade, he returned to the UK and bought a tumbledown castle in Scotland, which he set about renovating with his second wife Galina. But a new artistic direction eluded him until, one night after a party in London, he found himself beside Charles Sargeant Jagger’s Royal Artillery Memorial at Hyde Park Corner, a butch slab of concrete guarded by trench-caped squaddies. As the black-bronze soldiers glared down at him out of the small-hours gloom, he caught a glimpse of an artistic truth that would dictate the course of his career for the next years.

The former pop-art star became a public sculptor. In the first instance, his work suffered a catastrophic collapse in demand, but he eventually won a new level of recognition for representational sculpture. His towering 1991 statue of Sherlock Holmes stands outside

Arthur Conan Doyle's birthplace in Edinburgh. The 1994 bas-relief "Ten Dragons" at Bank station in London might have crawled from the pages of Mallory.

Some years later, when the world was shocked by images of the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib in Iraq, it chimed with Laing's passionate feelings against the Iraq war, which were fuelled by his experiences serving in Northern Ireland with the Fusiliers. Now he changed course again, reaching back to the pop-art idiom of the 1960s and using it to create his scorching Abu Ghraib series of 2005-6. Unlike his earlier works, these achieve their power from the risky mismatch of form and content: a cheery, magazine-cover take on sickening cruelty. Critics didn't go for the pictures at first and Laing struggled to get them shown, but two were later bought by the National Army Museum.

His return to the pop style showed a new virtuosity. Portraits followed of a new breed of celebrities: a vision of Kate Moss that is part-Picasso, part-Testino, or his Loony Tunes image "The Kiss", a clinch between the doomed singer Amy Winehouse and her black-suited boyfriend Blake Fielder-Civil.

Yet among his varied work it's the antiwar images that retain the most impact. For Laing, art had first represented an escape from war; later he became one of the most powerful antiwar painters of his time.