



Only Connect

ANNABEL HARRISON meets Kate Gordon, founder of the popular London Art Studies lecture series, to find out why we could all benefit from opening our minds to cultural delights this autumn



Photography: Polly Hamm-French

“LEARNING KEEPS YOU young, passionate and engaged. Why wouldn't you want to be those three things?” I can't disagree with Kate Gordon's words here; my active grandmother, who is firing on all cylinders, is a constant source of inspiration to me on this front, engaging weekly in competitive bouts of bridge and golf, and reading voraciously about all manner of topics. Just because you're older certainly does not mean you have to slow down or allow your brain to switch off. Spending time in the company of Kate provides a similar level of inspiration; the founder of London Art Studies is very enthusiastic about the merits of lifelong learning. “One of the great joys in life is to be able to continue to learn. The brain needs to be stimulated and you need to be passionate about something. The most attractive people, and those who are most fun to be with, are engaged, and learning and doing and seeing.”

Kate practises what she preaches; London Art Studies (LAS) is her first business venture and with this comes an onslaught of learning, and not just about art. “I was saying recently that I didn't realise quite how relevant my college degree was until I set up my own business. I read Russian and English at university and yet I'm staggered, today, by how much I learned about running a business there without even realising it. You have to make the decisions to drive the business forward, decide on appropriate collaborations, choose who to hire – and fire – as well as deciding between the urgent and the important.” This business, LAS, is an interesting concept, and one that has been welcomed with open arms by Londoners in the two and a half years since its launch.

The motto is ‘connecting through culture’ and Kate aims to provide short, fun, informative courses about art – “usually accompanied by great food and wine”. Classes are limited to 16 students and the social element is almost as important as the education itself, Kate explains (which should appeal to those who are envisaging a silent room, a strict teacher and overly-keen pupils). However, thanks to the calibre of lecturers and high academic standards, it becomes “the kind of learning you wish you'd done in school. If you have the smallest amount of interest in art, you will learn. If you have a great deal of knowledge, you will learn. Our lecturers pitch it at both levels and it does work.” Kate adds that one student described LAS as ‘a spa for the mind’ because “she'd rather be in class for a day learning things and meeting people than lying on a massage table. For her life it suits her better to get an energy boost from learning”.

This sounds like something Kate herself would agree with. Before setting up LAS, she worked at Sotheby's and as a television arts producer for CNN on *The Art Club*. “The time at CNN taught me the most about loving the work you do. I couldn't wait to get to the office some mornings, and loved discovering both new artists and some very bizarre ideas. We did a piece on a man whose wife painted one of the world's great paintings on his chest every morning; it was the only time I'd ever seen this seasoned cameraman's footage shake, as he was laughing so hard! As a TV producer, it's important to be organised and curious. I'd say both of these were key factors in setting up London Art Studies.”

I thoroughly enjoy speaking to Kate. We digress repeatedly from my interview questions and art-related topics, happily losing ourselves in discussions about the perils of being an adolescent, our favourite teen movies, Greek sarcophagi, the Scottish referendum, orators (notably, Obama, Hitler and Cicero), *Homeland*

At London Art Studies, whether “you have the smallest amount of interest in art or a great deal of knowledge, you will learn”

and *The Great British Bake Off*. This increases my conviction that an LAS course would definitely not be a staid, dry experience, especially when one considers the term schedule and the wide range of topics covered. “I'm particularly looking forward to *Best of British: From Bloomsbury to Bacon*,” says Kate, “and we round off the season with *Great Tarts in Art: High Culture and the World's Oldest Profession* which always sells out as soon as the schedule appears. I wasn't expecting it to be quite so salacious!”

Kate personally selects all the LAS lecturers and most come recommended by other lecturers, as well as from Kate's time spent heading up the Public Programmes Department at Sotheby's Institute of Art, where she was “fortunate to hear a wide variety of speakers. We currently have lecturers from Sotheby's, Christie's, both Tate Galleries, the ICA, the RCA and the National Gallery on our books. I'm still looking, though, for a great furniture lecturer, and to expand our jewellery team. We were incredibly fortunate that Joanna Hardy [Sotheby's, BBC *Antiques Roadshow*] was, and continues to be, our main jewellery lecturer.”

One comment that Kate makes, after I express a preference for classical art over contemporary, stays with me long after we part ways. “Someone said to me:

Opposite page, clockwise from top left / *How to Blow up Two Heads at Once (Ladies)*, 2006, Shonibare, Yinka (b.1962) / Davis Museum and Cultural Center, Wellesley College, MA, USA / Museum purchase with funds provided by Wellesley College Friends of Art / Bridgeman Images; *The Kiss*, 1907–08, Gustav Klimt (1862–1918) / Osterreichische Galerie Belvedere, Vienna, Austria / Bridgeman Images; *Olympia*, 1865, Edouard Manet (1832–83) / Musee d'Orsay, Paris, France / Giraudon / Bridgeman Images; *Self Portrait with Two Circles*, c. 1665–9, Rembrandt, Kenwood House, The Iveagh Bequest, English Heritage, London © English Heritage

'All art was contemporary once.' Of course this is true but I hadn't kept this at the forefront of my mind and it has already allowed me to consider modern art with fresh eyes. Kate has been surprised to see its connections with the past, again and again: "We have a terrific course with Ben Street who traces the links between the Old Masters and today's Contemporary Art." She references the *Diptych of Federica da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza*, 1474 by Piero della Francesca and Félix González-Torres' *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)* from 1991.

Our capital city is undoubtedly a big source of inspiration for Kate – "there's so much to see and do in London right now, and people are hungry to learn" – and despite a soft, refined American accent, she has lived in London since the age of four. "It feels like home to me. I go to Holland Park Avenue every Friday afternoon to do the weekend shop; I stock up at Lidgate's, at Mechanicou Brothers, Speck Delicatessen and Jeroboam's and then

Lecturers come from Sotheby's, Christie's, both Tates, the ICA, the RCA and National Gallery

finish over at & Clarke's on Campden Street. If there's time, I'll also wander into Daunt's to see what's new. I'm often to be found in Hyde Park on a Saturday morning and may stop at the Serpentine Galleries. There's also Holland Park (where I grew up) and am looking forward enormously to seeing what they're going to do with the new Design Museum there. The V&A is a particular favourite and I think that the Horst exhibition [running until 4 January 2015] is one of the best of the year."

The V&A is also a local favourite of mine and I am looking forward to attending an LAS lecture to confirm what I already suspect; that it would be a most satisfying use of my time and rather more engaging than art classes at school. ■

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Clockwise from top / Photo released by Sotheby's New York of Andy Warhol's *Orange Marilyn*, a silkscreen painting made in 1964 and based on a 1952 publicity still of Marilyn Monroe / AFP/AFP/Getty Images; *Details of Renaissance Paintings: One Plate*, 1984, Andy Warhol (1928–87) / Private Collection / © Christie's Images / Bridgeman Images; Whitney Museum hosts press preview for Jeff Koons retrospective / *Photography*: Andrew Burton/Getty Images

AUTUMN TERM SCHEDULE

11 November:

Rembrandt and the Dutch Golden Age (Richard Stemp)

12 November:

Heavenly Colours: The Symbolism of Blue, Gold & White (Lucrezia Walker)

18 November:

Best of British – from Bloomsbury to Bacon (Elizabeth Perrotte)

20 November:

Great Tarts in Art (Linda Smith)

Day courses (9.45am–2.30pm): £175 per person (fee includes two-course lunch at Koffmann's)

Guided visits: £75 per person

All day courses take place at Koffmann's at The Berkeley, Wilton Place, unless otherwise stated. Places should be booked in advance; call the office on 020 7259 5634 or email office@londonartstudies.com

