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LIGHT ART LIGHT

ART AS LIGHT / LIGHTING ART

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SCOTTISH NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY • FESTIVALS OF LIGHT

Photographs: Bill Kingston



design file

FUN BOY BY SEA

In the centenary of the birth of neon we talk to one man whose passion for the medium knows no bounds. In fact he lives with it every day.

Now aged 48, Philip Oakley has worked as an interior designer for the past twenty years, with a spell at Black Illuminations six years ago. Working primarily in fashion retail with numerous small brands such as Richard James, Start, Natural Selection and Tommy Guns, Oakley was known for his quirky style bringing obscure and fun objects into the design process. Then, two years ago he decided on a complete lifestyle change by buying a pub in the quirky seaside town of St Leonards-on-Sea on the south coast of England in East Sussex. But it's not what you think (but perhaps you've guessed looking at the pictures)...

"The pub (Admiral Benbow) had a reputation as the roughest in town and was closed

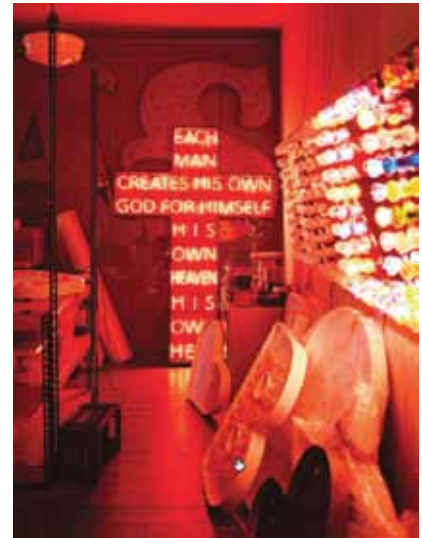
after 176 years of business. It was in need of refurbishment but not suited to developing into flats, but lent itself to a live / work set up. The building is 6,500 square feet and allowed for living accommodation, showroom, workshop, office and storage to be created; every designer's dream surely!" Eventually he sold his flat in London to consolidate accommodation and business in St Leonards on Sea whilst retaining customers in London. This meant a move away from interior design to product design as the commute didn't lend itself to more than one or two trips into London per week. Oakley's products, like his interior design, reflects his unconventional taste in art pieces and his career at Blackpool Illuminations is clearly an influence.

"Over many years I'd amassed a collection of old neon, fairground lights and the illuminations. Anyone visiting my flat in London would be mesmerised by these huge lights with fairly low tech controllers made for two or three thousand watts of light and heat. Everyone wanted a bit of this fairground magic in their home but I was reluctant to sell them my vintage lights, so after moving into the pub I began producing more user friendly versions of the lights using a mixture of neon, tungsten and LED. Has he found it hard to persuade people that these pieces would look good in their homes?"

"As an interior designer I often found people to have very conservative taste, and slightly scared of my nutty ideas and what



Fun by the sea? Philip Oakley has created a business from collecting neon and fairground lights. However, the tide of LED is becoming hard to resist.



effect they might have when it comes to sell their property. So the pub space also acts as a showroom and a lot of what we sell is in fact installed in the flat upstairs where people can see, for instance, that neon can function in a lounge, and not just a kebab shop window."

Apart from overcoming people's initial caution there is also a matter of cost - something that Oakley gets frustrated with, particularly with the state of British industry nowadays.

"Everything we're making at present is made in England, and this is certainly going to be one of the new retail trends in 2012 onwards. Unfortunately foreign imports of manufactured goods mean that people inevitably think that a relatively small piece of neon, for instance, is expensive, because they can buy a massive flat screen TV for the same amount of money. So I often find myself apologising at the cost, but the bottom line is that this is the real cost, and it's the TV that's cheap. Hopefully people want to pay for something special and keep some

unique skills going in this country."

Unfortunately, many of the suppliers Oakley uses have struggled to make ends meet over the last few years, not with just a lack of work, but also with many retail businesses going bust often owing these companies tens of thousands.

"The lighting and signage industry seems to prosper and suffer with the retail industry so it's not surprising to find many disappearing," comments Oakley.

And what of the future for neon signage? Will it last another 100 years?

"LEDs have certainly revolutionised signage and decorative lighting but it's been a disaster for the neon sign maker. The use of neon for halo lighting and making the traditionally bread and butter work of cafe, hotel, kebab signage has been replaced to a large extent with LED. It's left the 100 year old trade in something of a crisis with the art world perhaps filling some of those order books... but for how long?

www.oakleyillumination.co.uk

Some of the piece in Philip Oakley's pub, the Admiral Benbow. "The pub space acts as a showroom and a lot of what we sell is in fact installed in the flat upstairs where people can see, for instance, that neon can function in a lounge, and not just a kebab shop window.

