

# CAPITAL LETTER

## Capital Letter #6

A veritable buffet of tips



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## The School of Kiff

You might not have heard the late painter Ken Kiff's memorably alliterative name to be confused with the **Eminem alter-ego**), but you will have seen art that emerge from his orbit. A legendary tutor, if he didn't teach your favourite British painter, then he probably taught whoever taught them. **He is the reason** why Tracey Emin studied the Royal College. Indeed, if his loose figurative style seems hackneyed today, it's because of the legions of artists now working directly or indirectly within the School of Kiff.

Hales Gallery in Shoreditch is currently hung with his paintings and prints from the early 90s, depicting sublime landscapes somewhere between dream and nightmare. Many feature the 'Little Man': a perpetually wandering, round-headed and bug-eye figure. Perhaps he's a stand-in for the Kiffster himself, who Emin **lovingly describe** a 'smallish man with huge eyes'.

They were made during an 18-month residency for which Kiff was given a studio inside and 24-hour access to the National Gallery. A confident colourist unafraid to look a gift horse in the mouth, he thought the collection dreary. To his eye the curators had, by way of 700 years of Western European masterpieces, created a museum of beiges and browns.



Today, these paintings might look like cracking examples of what basically every other artist in this city is doing. But it's worth remembering how quietly radical they were set against the London art scene of the early 90s, when a cohort of Young British Upstarts (some of whom Kiff himself had taught) stirred an insatiable appetite for loud-and-proud conceptualism. While Kiff was locked away in the National, Damien Hirst debuted his formaldehyde aquariums. By the time he was released, he had been nominated for The Turner Prize.

The British art market's present return to painting might be a recession indicator, at least it means that our favourite Little Man is finally getting his due.