





WHERE THE HEART IS

Graham Fagen

*For St Agnes*

St Agnes Park, Bristol, 2010

Foreground

[www.foregroundprojects.org.uk](http://www.foregroundprojects.org.uk)

Commissioned By Foreground  
For Bristol City Council

Published by Foreground  
The Old Church School  
Butts Hill  
Frome  
Somerset  
BA11 1HR

[www.foregroundprojects.org.uk](http://www.foregroundprojects.org.uk)

ISBN: 978-0-9567002-1-6

Publication edited by Tabitha Clayson & Simon Morrissey

Text © Laura Mansfield

Images of artworks © Jamie Woodley & the artist

Design by Robert Dallas Gray at Pause Button Edit, Glasgow

Printed by 21 Colour, Glasgow

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# Roses and Palm Trees

BY LAURA MANSFIELD

Situated in the heart of St Pauls in Bristol, St Agnes Park is a lively playground, a short cut to the city centre and a place of rest and greenery amongst the terraced houses of the surrounding streets. Originally a site of common land owned by the nearby church, the park housed a series of allotments. As the city of Bristol developed in the nineteenth century, St Agnes was transformed into a suburb of middle class housing and the allotments became a communal park. With an avenue of mature trees, stone paving and traditional iron railings, the landscape of the park recalls the era of its inception, yet its Victorian formality is now juxtaposed by a busy contemporary playground. The recent redevelopment of the park saw the addition of colourful new play equipment – a giant rope swing, an intriguing sunken one-person trampoline and a wooden pirate-boat climbing frame, all of which are irresistible to the local children. The busy area of playground has become the lively centre of the park reflecting the surrounding community – an area characterized by a patchwork of indigenous and immigrant families, combining Caribbean, Somalian and European heritages.

Working across a variety of media, Graham Fagen has developed a practice that explores ideas of identity and belonging. Continually engaging with different communities and subject matter, from Glaswegian housing estates to reggae producers and the literature of Robert Burns, Fagen is adept at reflecting and amalgamating different influences, histories and cultural markers. For St Agnes Park he has created a series of pieces that reflect the history and culture of the area. Fagen developed four bronze plaques painted in bright enamel that present a series of images and text that resonate with both a personal and collective sense of history and identity. Each plaque is embedded in the park's paving, marking the four entrance points into the space and serving as frames or signs towards a journey through the communal area. Each plaque further depicts a different image: a red rose accompanied by the text 'Where the Heart Is', a palm tree accompanied by the phrase 'For I And I', and two



text panels reading 'Rest England, Peace Mandela' and 'Mandela's Peace, England's Rest'.

The rose is a reoccurring motif in Fagen's practice – a flower abound with symbolic connotations from an ancient symbol of love and beauty, to the Tudor Rose of England, to the chosen symbol for socialist and social democratic parties across the globe. During the Royston Road Project in 2001, a public art commission for an area on the east of Glasgow, Fagen developed a work centered on the disused spaces between two housing estates, encouraging ownership of the space through the planting of foliage. As part of this work, Fagen held a competition for members of the local community to name a rose that was cultivated by Cockers, a leading Scottish rose nursery. He chose 'Where the Heart Is' as the winning entry. The image of the rose fused with its chosen title compounds associations of home and homeliness, recalling the traditional embroideries of 'home sweet home' and 'home is where the heart is'. The 'heart' of the community, the shared cohesion of Royston residents, was then reflected in their



planting of the flower in front gardens throughout the area, visibly transforming the landscape in sways of vibrant colour.

Following the Royston Road Project Fagen has continued to use the image of the rose throughout his practice. Cast in bronze, patinated, and exhibited at the Fruitmarket Gallery, 2002, Fagen memorialised the rose with the use of a traditional sculptural technique. Presently creating a life size version of the flower, Fagen continues to toy with its embedded associations, from memorial to personal emblem to signifier of community and ideas of home. Removed from its Glasgow origins and re-presented on a plaque in St Agnes Park, the dusky red rose becomes a signifier of another heritage – the traditional symbol of England. Coupled with the text 'Where the Heart Is' the specifics of the rose's inception expand out to become symbolic of national identity and the sentiment of not just home but of a homeland.

In his use of the rose Fagen explores the different associations we have with the natural world, the ability for plants and landscapes to hold



different associations that are appropriated as markers of identity and belonging. When considering Fagen's use of the rose I am prompted to think about my father's passion for dahlias that only began after the death of his mother. Every year my parents' garden is filled with a selection of the flowers, a somewhat kitsch bouquet of colours reminiscent of my father's 1950s childhood yet hidden under his pretence of the dedicated grower – experimenting with the colour and formation of the plants. Without ever being voiced, his continued nurturing and cultivation of the flowers seems obviously linked to the memory of his mother and the specific timeframe of his childhood garden. Nostalgic and sentimental, the dahlia is a strong signifier of a sense of home for my father. Every year's re-growth marks a ritual of remembering and a reconnection to his childhood.

Although the dahlia is not a national symbol, the aesthetic of the flower is associated with the English cottage garden of the post-war era. In 2002 Help the Aged exhibited a garden design at Chelsea Flower Show that was full of 'retro' flowers from dahlias to carnations and marigolds. Here then, a flower can be a maker of personal identity and a shared cultural image of a specific time period and way of life. By extension the images, objects, colours and textures we choose to surround ourselves with stand as markers of our identity and history. In the juxtaposition of cultures that contribute to contemporary British society we are often presented with an array of visual symbols – diverse threads that signify a plethora of heritages and cultural traditions.

Fagen's installed works seem to fuse a number of different aesthetics and cultural metaphors. The choice of bronze plaques echoes the civic tradition of English statues creating a historical thread to the inception of the park. Bronze's history as a civic material is rooted in the development of western civilization. From Grecian statues to contemporary memorials, the material is favored due to its malleability yet there is something further – the history of its use making it a signifier of pride, civic celebration and power, with a statue often imposed on a particular place by the civic authority whether it reflects the identity of the local community or not.

In contrast, Fagen's commission for St Agnes Park creates a series of works that are carefully woven into the fabric of the local community, drawing upon shared images and symbols to denote ideas of home. Placed within the paving of the park the bronze plaques are literally embedded into the landscape of the area. Subtle and unimposing markers, they



are ridden across, walked over, as often unnoticed as commented on. Marking each point of entry to the park the plaques seem closer to a domestic tradition rather than one of civic display. At each entrance the plaques recall the doormats of households and the decorative floor tiles of traditional entrance halls, creating signs of welcome – encouraging visitors over the threshold.

Fagen's choice of colouring the bronze with vivid enamels of blue, red and green further draws upon a cultural tradition of Jamaican and African signage, where the construction of signs is very much a colourful and handmade practice. The suggestion of homemade signage is most prominent in the plaque depicting a palm tree. Two bright green leaves span out of a sandy coloured trunk creating a graphic image against the bright blue enamel of the background. Echoing the lone palm tree found in St Agnes Park, which is somewhat lack luster in England's colder climate, Fagen's colourful bronze presents an invigorated version of the tree enhancing its symbolic connotations. Read as a sign of peace and fertility since pre-



Christian times the palm is, furthermore, inextricably linked to ideas of tropical climates. Indigenous in countries resting on or near the equator, the placement of the palm tree's image in St Agnes Park represents the homes and heritages of Jamaican and Somalian communities local to the area. And with Fagen's tree, weatherproofed in bronze and bright enamel, the connotations of warmer climates become that little more present.

The symbolism of the palm further alludes to Fagen's own interests and identity. As a teenager growing up in the Scottish new town of Irvine he had a passion for reggae. Listening to the music on late night radio, Fagen was captivated by the lyrics and beat of musicians signed to the now iconic Island Records. With the palm tree as its logo Island Records, now in its 51st year, promoted the reggae music of Toots and the Maytals, Aswad, Steel Pulse and Bob Marley amongst others. Fagen's appropriation of the symbol in St Agnes Park references both his own hybrid cultural references, and the communities local to the area – both equally representative of the juxtaposition of cultures that inform post-colonial Britain.

Here, I am prompted to think about my extended family makeup also, my Brazilian brother-in-law and my two year old nephew and his sister who are rarely out of their yellow football shirts going ‘passeando’ – going for a drive in the car with their dad listening to Brazilian music as my nephew kicks his feet and my niece sings along. Something perhaps more alluring in Rio than the suburbs of Manchester maybe, but with the heating turned up it has become a small ritual within their family that draws upon their father’s own childhood, and his teenage years driving in his hometown, listening to the music that is now part of the nursery rhymes and pop songs his children happily sing along to.

Fagen’s practice continually explores the associative potential of music, language, and images to signify a personal, communal and even national identity. In a previous commission for Tramway, Glasgow, Fagen recorded two Robert Burns poems, *The Slave’s Lament* and *Auld Lang Syne* with singer Ghetto Priest to a dub reggae soundtrack. The resulting exhibition ‘Clean Hands Pure Heart’ fused traditional Scottish poetry with the music of Jamaican heritage in a reconsideration of what contributes to a sense of collective and individual identity. Fagen’s reoccurring references to reggae and its cultural origins surface again in *For St Agnes*. His depiction of the bronze palm tree in St Agnes Park is accompanied by the text ‘FOR I AND I’ – a Rastafarian phrase whose complex meaning encompasses the uniqueness of each individual, the oneness of the individual and of God, and the belief that God is within every human being and we are in fact a single people, one humanity above any cultural or national divisions. The phrase extends out into a universal sense of the collective and often replaces the terms ‘you and I’ or ‘we’ in the rastafari vocabulary, implying that individuals are united under the love of God – a phrase whose humanitarian message creates a welcome of peace and community into the shared land of the park.

Fagen’s use of plaques combines different visual symbols – the palm, the rose, the bronze, and the coloured enamel – in a reflection of the differing cultural traditions that make up the demographic of St Agnes. Beyond this specific context the juxtaposition of visual symbols can also be seen to reflect the mass of cultural influences that make up contemporary English identity. Here, again, I think about my family, my other niece who has an incredible array of party dresses and gold jewellery given to her by her Ghanaian grandma. She is often adorned in striking outfits for family occasions where she sits on my sister’s knee, who is never dressed in more





than simple jeans and a cardigan. And I remember the incredible array of food at her first birthday party – a mix of rice and peas, curried chicken, egg sandwiches and Victoria sponge cake, each Grandma proudly helping and my sister just happy to have one less thing to think about. The colours and flavours of an African heritage welcomed side by side with a plainer English tradition.

The remaining two text panels – ‘Rest England, Peace Mandela’ and ‘England’s Rest, Mandela’s Peace’ – place the iconic figure of Nelson Mandela with the word that designates a nation, England, together. St Agnes Park is known by some residents within the local community as Mandela’s Hideway or Mandela’s Rest, signifying a place of peace and quiet away from the raucous celebrations of the annual St Pauls Carnival. Nelson Mandela constitutes an important symbolic figure-head for many diasporic communities of African decent, representing the history, present and future of struggles against oppression in the transition from a colonial to a post-colonial world. Mandela comes to



constitute an open-ended symbol of pride, strength, peace, hope and dignity for those afflicted by this history. Here, juxtaposed with the text England, the two words bring together two different cultural heritages into an associative relationship with manifold resonances for the local communities of the area.

Alongside its universal message the word ‘peace’ holds further resonance for the local community, in particular alluding to the story of a well-known local man, Bangy. Tragically killed when intercepting a fight in the area, Bangy’s story has become part of local folklore and was recounted to the artist by St Agnes Park’s park keeper Constantine Blake. Blake told Fagen how, when attempting to reason with a group of young men intimidating a local youth, Bangy stepped between the men and their victim and repeated the phrase ‘peace my brothers’ in an effort to stop potential violence, but was killed for interfering in their quarrel. Through the inclusion of the word ‘peace’ at the thresholds to the park, Fagen literally embeds Bangy’s message of peace and tolerance into the physical

fabric of the community of St Agnes, reinforcing the idea of the park as a site of communal calm and refuge.

Coupled with the word England, Fagen's text expands out from the specifics of the local community, and its recent history, to suggest England's place as a site of refuge. Many residents of St Pauls have made a new home in England in this way over the years, fleeing economic hardship or conflict. Placed at the entrance to the park, the sentence offers entry into a place of respite and quiet, yet at the same time it invites reflection upon the complex, multi-layered constructions of ideas of home and belonging that circulate in the community of St Pauls as well as much of contemporary Britain.

From economic migrants to refugees, the current fabric of English society and the consequent concept of 'Englishness' is informed by a complex and multifaceted heritage. Fagen's commission for St Agnes Park draws upon this often-complex mixture of histories. The work references geographical homelands yet simultaneously expands out of the specificities of place to become metaphors for an ambiguous and complex sense of home and belonging. Communities adopt their own images and symbols, defining mascots for a specific history or story that tells of the formation and development of their heritage. Here, I am prompted to think again about my father and his adoption of the dahlia as a marker of childhood and home, or my niece and nephew dressed in their Brazil football shirts. Throughout his work Fagen explores the appropriation of text and image for individuals, groups and nations. Once his bronze plaques were installed in St Agnes Park, Fagen's works became open themselves to appropriation and revision. The community will bring their own associations and understandings to each visual symbol so that, eventually, the meanings of the signs will be owned as much by the community as the artist, playing their part in signifying both the history and future of the area.



## PROJECT CREDITS

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Curated and produced by Tabitha Clayson and Simon Morrissey

Funded by Bristol City Council, The Big Lottery Fund and Places for People

Print edition released to accompany the permanent works supported by Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art & Design, University of Dundee



## THANKS

The curators would like to thank Aldo Rinaldi, Senior Public Art Officer, and Oliver Roberts, Parks Improvement Project Officer, Bristol City Council, for their support and vision; Powderhall Bronze Foundry for their expertise in the production of the artist's bronzes; Robert Dallas Gray at Pause Button Edit for the digital rendering of Graham Fagen's drawings for the bronzes and his sensitive design of this publication; Laura Mansfield for her insightful text; Paul Harrison at the Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art & Design Visual Research Centre, University of Dundee, for his skill and expertise in producing the silk screen prints of the bronze art works.

Thanks is also due to Pete Bullard, St Pauls Unlimited; Constantine Blake, park keeper, St Agnes Park, Bristol City Council parks department; and June Burrough, The Pierian Centre, St Pauls, for their particular support and involvement during the artist's research period and the many members of the local community who shared their ideas with the artist and curators at the talks and presentations during this period.

Finally, thanks to the artist for his sensitivity and dedication shown throughout the process of creating and producing the artworks.



*For St Agnes* is a new permanent work by Graham Fagen for the park of the same name in St Pauls, Bristol. Consisting of four bronze plaques set into the paving at the thresholds of the four entrances to the park, the work explores the appropriation of text and image by individuals, groups and nations, and how such symbols can transcend cultural boundaries to become new signifiers for both the history and future of communities.

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