

<p><b>Ken Kiff,</b> <b><i>The Sequence No.113:</i></b> <b><i>Talking with a</i></b> <b><i>psychoanalyst: night sky,</i></b> 1975-80, acrylic on paper, 78 x 135 cm (31 x 55")</p>	<p>Initial analysis</p> <p><i>The Sequence</i> consists of 195 paintings (note 1). Each painting was numbered at its commencement, some paintings were completed in the year they started, many were not and a number remain unfinished at Kiff's death.</p>	<p>All of the paintings in <i>The Sequence</i> are acrylic on paper, usually prepared with a white acrylic ground. <i>The Sequence</i> commenced in 1971 and continued over 30 years until Kiff's death in 2001.</p>
<p>On the left a man sits cross-legged in a grey arm chair. His head is large and out of proportion to his body. Behind him are a group of perhaps five characters, they are, from the left, a short undefined figure with a peaked cap in an open doorway. In the foreground a figure with an animal head or mask out of proportion with a naked male body displaying his genitals. Behind him what appears to a camel, or at least a camel's head and neck. Behind that a pink large head with a large open eye and pink feet. The fifth character appears as a lighter pink smiling head on a long thin neck. These 'characters' appear to be metonymic for different aspects the man's condition: vulnerable, gazing, troubled, amused.</p> <p>On the floor in front of these characters, a garden fork, indicative of attending to the land. All of these characters appear to be part of the sitting man's psyche or his thoughts. The man, as the title indicates, is talking to a psychoanalyst. The gesture of the man's left hand might suggest conversational attention.</p> <p>The discrepant figuration is a feature of all the paintings in <i>The Sequence</i>. It immediately encourages a sense of human frailty, improvised decision and uncertainty all of which contribute towards the success and vulnerability of the achievement.</p>	 <p>There are likely to be many interpretations of Kiff's painted work. For the paintings to be understood the viewer would need to recognise the work as part of a large number of paintings all contributing to an unspecified narrative or journey. <i>The Sequence</i> makes use of recurrence as a pattern of connectedness made consistent by the use of intrusions by friendly or menacing faces and use of colour as an index of mood or circumstance, such as the glowing yellow sun and hill forms as indexes of warm and a bright future. Naming a psychoanalyst as part of <i>The Sequence</i> (on three occasions) Kiff is immediately referring to aspects of the work of psychiatry and, in view of the continual use of gazing faces, allusions to patriarchic ideas of the super-ego and in more recent psychiatry to ideas of the libido, the efficacy of images and situational apperception (note 2). The blank featureless appearance of the figure in the chair on the right turns the figure into an apparition as if the sitter on the left were imagining its presence. Another recurrence in <i>The Sequence</i> is the character of the carpenter, alluded to in this painting by the tools on the floor. The tools also recall the tools on the foreground floor in Albrecht Dürer's etching <i>Melancholia I</i>, the subjects of which include beauty and the difficulty of achieving it. Another recurrence is the gardener, alluded to in this painting by the garden fork. Throughout <i>The Sequence</i> there is an overlap of the everyday with daydream and stories which recalls Kiff's illustrations for the volume <i>Folk Tales of the British Isles</i> (1977). There is a consistent association with narratives of lone figures in a wilderness or desert with figures in the town observing or meeting others.</p> <p>Note 1: There are 195 listed in Iain Biggs (ed.). <i>Ken Kiff's Sequence</i>, Bristol: MakingSpace Publishers, 1998.</p> <p>Note 2: I am referring here to the work of Jacques Lacan partly made evident in <i>Écrits</i> (derived from his work of the 1930s and after, collected into French book form in 1966, much discussed in Britain in the 1970s). A new edition of <i>Écrits</i>, translated by Bruce Fink into English was published by Norton in 2006.</p>	<p>On the right a psychoanalyst sits in a pink upholstered chair. He has been painted brown and is almost featureless. He appears to have his right arm raised to his chin or mouth and his legs are crossed, but the features of his face are not distinguished. Behind him are two yellow mounds on a brown platform or they are two hills in the landscape through a window. The green curtain with a yellow design may have been pulled to reveal the scene through the window. The pattern on the curtain partly includes four small heads and a number of serpentine curves. On the floor in front of the psychoanalyst a carpenter's hand saw and beside the chair, also on the floor, a wood chisel and a claw hammer. The black sky seen through the window, according to the title, signifies a night sky, even so the yellow hills are visible and bright.</p> <p>Comprehending and understanding the paintings in <i>The Sequence</i> confronts two significant features. The first is that the deliberately free and partly discrepant figuration lends itself to ambiguity and reduction of assured recognition, leaving the viewer in a state of occasional incomprehension but as often surprise and revelation. The second feature will take more diligence to overcome, that is the availability of the paintings in <i>The Sequence</i>. Most of the paintings are in private collections and even when shown, as many were at the Sainsbury Centre in Norwich recently, only partly on display, which leads to a considerable reliance on curatorial decisions and reproductions in books.</p>