



**Left and below:** Church interior which will be the home to Ilkeston Contemporary Arts

competition out of over 300 entries to design the New England Biolabs HQ in 2001 and the owner Don Combs was an avid art collector. He was another inspirational character and at that time the Pound/ Dollar currency exchange was nearly 2:1. Also there were quite a few affordable Warhols available. My first purchase was a Moonwalk, because the 1969 moon landing was such an inspirational event for any young boy. It cost £15,000 and was the most I'd spent, but I never regretted it. Sadly I sold it in a panic at the start of the Covid pandemic when I wasn't taking a salary as a Partner. That's the only (well probably not the only) problem of collecting art - if you aren't disciplined in retaining cash in the bank. I guess I'd rather have something nice to look at. At least I'm not into fancy cars or clothes and watches.

**SP Is it deeper than having something to look at?**

**CW** It is for me. Yes. I think when people visit the gallery for example, they will understand. There will be a permanent exhibition which explores our relationship with religion, with celebrity and with each other. It will invite the visitor to think and examine how we treat each other and why. There will be temporary exhibitions by local and international artists, but fitting the same theme. I have been planting trees outside the Church and I have met several neighbours stopping to chat and they have been both curious and supportive. Some of them paint and I'd like to offer them space and encouragement.

**SP So is it important that it is housed in a former Church?**

**CW** Not particularly but I'm thrilled that it has worked out that way. As I said I started looking for an industrial unit but nothing was quite right and I stopped looking during Covid as it seemed irrelevant. I did some volunteering at the vaccination centres and for a while what we were all going through seemed pretty grim. The pandemic convinced me that Ilkeston was the right place to achieve my objectives. On Christmas Day last year I started looking again, opened up my laptop, and the first property I saw was this amazing redundant Church.

**SP Are you religious?**

**CW** Great question! The short answer is no. But the longer answer is complicated. I don't want this to be a therapy session but...my parents were. My Dad died when I was three and my mum wanted my brother and I to sing with her in the church choir as my Dad had done. So from the age of six to sixteen I went to church three times every Sunday. My Uncle Cedric was a lay preacher and I loved the emotion he evoked - he used to use his hands and arms expressively - he was an incredibly passionate orator. I still love the stories from the Bible. I love hymns and choral music and have a great admiration for anyone who does have that faith. I heard the Bishop of London say, "The opposite of faith isn't doubt. The opposite of faith is certainty". I believe with certainty in the teachings of Jesus as I do those of Mohammed and Buddah. The world's great religions share many similar teachings.

# THE ART OF RELIGION

## Architect Chris Williamson is converting a disused church in his hometown to house his contemporary art collection.

**SP So tell me about this new venture. It sounds amazing.**

**CW** Thank you. For about five years I have been looking for an industrial unit in my hometown of Ilkeston to house the Contemporary Art collection I have built over the last 40 years. And over lockdown I found a disused church and I'm converting it into a gallery.

**SP Have you always collected art?**

**CW** Whenever I had any spare money (which isn't that often) I must admit I spend it on art. It goes back to my very first monthly pay cheque in 1980 at Michael Hopkins Architects where I earned £6,000 pa and spent £50 on an Andrew Holmes screen print. I still have it. I still love it.

**SP Where did this love of art come from?**

**CW** It is really all down to one man. Dr Richard (Dick) Venning, my Art teacher at Ilkeston Grammar School. He was passionate about

all eras of Art but had a special affection for Andy Warhol. He was a wonderful character and made art come to life, placing it in a historic and social context.

**SP So does Pop Art form all your collection?**

**CW** It is a common thread. I've tried to take on new influences through people like Susie Allen of Artwise Curators and Isabel de Vasconcellos who introduced me to Saad Quereshi, Alys Williams of VITRINE, who introduced me to Emii Alrai, and George Mingozi-Marsh of Contemporary Sculpture Fulmer who introduced me to Leo Fitzmaurice. But I must admit most of the elements of their work that I like are the ones that relate more to the iconography side of pop art. Though I'm trying to be more open minded.

**SP And the Warhols...?**

**CW** I never dreamed as a 16 year old I would actually own one but we (WestonWilliamson+Partners) won an International





**This page top L-R:** Jamie Fitzpatrick "Prince St. Charming Jjorge" 2021, Svay Sareth "Head and Power" 2018, Ahmed Abdel Fattah "Sufi" 2016, Russell Young Marilyn Monroe Pink and Black 2016.

**Opposite from top:** St John at Hampstead, Fifteenth-century St Nicholas Icon, Andy Warhol Santa Claus screen print 1981.

**Below:** Chris Williamson portrait by Dan Fontanelli



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[www.ilkestoncontemporaryarts.com](http://www.ilkestoncontemporaryarts.com)

**SP Do you have any religious art?**

**CW** I do. I am fascinated by religion and have a collection of about 50 icons mainly of St Nicholas dating from the fifteenth-century onwards. They were often painted by unknown artists as acts of religious devotion throughout Eastern Europe and cost me a few hundred pounds each. In the gallery they will be displayed at Christmas alongside Andy Warhol's Santa Claus. Warhol photographed Macy's Santa on his Polaroid camera, projected the image on the wall, traced the image onto cartridge paper to generate the silkscreen. He produced 250 prints, each one now worth tens of thousands more than any of the handpainted icons. To me that says a lot about what we value and I know it will make a great exhibition. Even I haven't seen them all together before. The Polaroids, the sketch, the prints and the 50 icons. It will make people think. It does me anyway.

**SP Is that important that visitors understand?**

**CW** It is to me. I think they will. If not there will be someone on hand to explain if they ask. The education room is named after Dick Venning - it can take a lifetime to work out how to thank someone. It is a space to welcome schools and other groups and if just one 16 year old is inspired that will be enough. The Church was designed by local Architect John Higginbottom and completed in 1938. It now has the opportunity to inspire a new generation in its new use. The building itself will be an amazing canvas for artists to express ideas. I just hope people will visit. It's free, has great coffee, so why not?

**SP Are you still collecting?**

**CW** Whenever I can yes but it has to sit alongside other commitments, charitable obligations and the ups and downs of running a business. I try to limit my spending on art to the same as I give to charity but obviously many people would think it should be less. Recently I'm more interested in young and emerging artists like Jamie Fitzpatrick who challenges the pretention of monumental figures in public sculpture, and Ben Turnbull who uses satire to create politically charged comment,

and Svay Sareth who turns real anger at his treatment in Cambodia into beautifully crafted work with humour and humility. Also, established artists are expensive and it's more interesting to spot new talent and see how the artists develop over time.

**SP Are you as fond of the new artists as the more established ones? Is the love affair with Warhol over?**

**CW** Definitely not. But I think the younger artists are constantly challenging and questioning - as Warhol was - as artists always are. We (WestonWilliamson+Partners) have been fortunate to work with some amazing artists on our projects and they are a constant revelation. Rodin said that before you become an artist you need to become a craftsman. I'm not sure that it's true any more for the current generation of artists (or architects). I guess it depends how you define craft. I love the fact that everyone likes different things. It would be a boring world if we were all the same.

**SP When is it all due to open?**

**CW** It will open in the summer. At the moment the decorating is being completed. The church, as you can imagine was quite austere, so it's being painted in a palette of muted heritage shades similar to St John at Hampstead, which looks stunning. The AV and lighting takes time but will be state-of-the-art. The lights are from Concord by Sylvania and the AV is by musicgearinstallations.



co.uk. It's a fantastic space to adapt, even down to the wonderful natural ventilation system - through the walls and roof - which still works. There might be certain things like the artist-in-residence to finalise. I'd like to have an artist working there a year at a time - for visitors to meet and engage with to help take away the mystique of art. They would have an exhibition of work at the end of their tenure. There will also be a Sculpture Park, if that's not too grand a term. The grounds are not extensive but there is certainly space to do something interesting.

**SP It sounds wonderful. After the last few years we've had we could all use an uplifting experience. Good luck.**

**CW** Thank you. I hope my home town enjoys it as much as I have. I'll let you know. Perhaps we should do a follow up next year when it has been open for a while. London has so many great galleries but there's nothing like this in Ilkeston.

**Other galleries and curators mentioned**

- [vitrinegallery.com](http://vitrinegallery.com)
- [contemporarysculpturefulmer.com](http://contemporarysculpturefulmer.com)
- [belairfineart.com/en/galleries/venise-san-marco](http://belairfineart.com/en/galleries/venise-san-marco)
- [artwisecurators.com](http://artwisecurators.com)
- [messumswiltshire.com](http://messumswiltshire.com)
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