

Shortlisted for the Nero Book Awards 2024

All That Glitters

*A Story of Friendship,
Fraud and Fine Art*

*'Liar's Poker for
the art world'*
Economist

*'Compulsively
readable'*
Guardian

'Tremendous'
William Boyd

'Jaw-dropping'
i Paper

*'A blazing
exposé'*
Spectator

*'An art world
Great Gatsby'*
Patrick Radden Keefe



**Orlando
Whitfield**

Each day in the late morning, his back as straight and strong as the pencil he keeps tucked behind his ear, Piers Townshend rides one of his three over-sized cargo bicycles from his home in Stockwell, south London, to his studio in Vanguard Court, in the nearby neighbourhood Camberwell. Piers pedals with the contented rhythm of a man happy in his work, sometimes stopping to buy a loaf of bread or a tin of sardines or a block of cheese for his lunch. He is a man whose deep appreciation of the quotidian – of the gentle cadence and infrequent disturbances of his day-to-day existence – he has heightened to something approaching a philosophy. Once, he spotted me walking along this same stretch of road in the same direction as he was cycling and dismounted to walk me back a few hundred yards just to show me a small patch of violets that he had spotted growing at the base of an elephantine plane tree. He has never, to my knowledge, used an emoji.

The entrance to Vanguard Court is sandwiched between a former piano factory now converted into apartments and Southwark Register Office. As you make your way over uneven cobblestones, the modern world seems to drop away and a London of the 1950s unfurls before you like a film set. The noise from the busy main road behind you softens and then vanishes, the quiet only broken by the shrill dive-bombing of

ring-necked parakeets as they criss-cross the sky above with their ai-kai-kai-kai call and their feathers the bright green of new leaves.

Originally the site of a manufacturer of omnibus chassis, Vanguard Court was, from the 1930s until the 1980s, the factory of a prominent manufacturer of lightweight suitcases. Today it is privately owned by a family, and the mews is now home to an array of artists, artisans and craftspeople. It is a sliver of yesteryear that I loved from the moment I first visited it.

Piers's studio is a room packed full like a midden. The painted wooden floor is pebbly with the rivets that once held machines. In a space in which you could just about fit a decent-sized car, there are countless tools, many esoteric and specific, some home-made or refashioned, others merely broken and redundant; three plan chests; a cast-iron nipping press; a plastic sink so large you could sleep in it with your legs outstretched; a suction table; and innumerable rolls and reams of different papers from the thickest felty blotters to the wispiest cigarette papers. Plant life forms a garland around the whole room, succulents and ferns and nasturtiums and geraniums clambering over each other wildly.

The walls, where there is space not taken up by tools and things-leaned, are adorned with a variety of artworks. There is a black and white photograph of the German artist Joseph Beuys and a coyote; a childhood drawing by Piers's son, now in his thirties; a small painting of an old woman by his late mother; and a small ironwood nineteenth-century Benin sculpture of a lioness with a cub in its jaw that sits atop a light box and seems to be protecting everything in the room – not only the precious things that take up temporary residence there but also Piers himself and the occasional acts of brinkmanship he must perform in order to save them.

All That Glitters

Piers is tall – six foot one, at least – and has the strong, broad shoulders and wide, open chest of a man who has done manual labour and who, despite his years, is still very active. He has a full head of grey-white hair, which covers his ears. When you tell him something that pleases him – as I did when I told him that among the conservators at the National Archives he is known as the Indiana Jones of paper conservation – his head emerges from his neck like a giant tortoise waking up from a nap. His smile, when it really comes on, is better and brighter than any other I know.

How I first met Piers and how I came to work for him are two separate but linked events and he and I have different memories of them both. In 2017, we were preparing to move the gallery from the space in Clerkenwell to the new one in St James's. Even in the relatively short time we had been in business, we had amassed a great many artworks – some unsold by artists we represented or had shown and others I'd bought in order to sell on. The gallery's storage space at the back was small and chaotic and this was one of the many reasons for the move – and in the process of excavating it we opened a box of unframed drawings given to us by an artist we were representing. This man was by far the most difficult of the artists the gallery worked with over the years, as well as one of the most talented. I wore gloves to unwrap each one in turn. When I reached the bottom of the box and began to unwrap the last drawing, I saw something horribly wrong: the square of masking tape that was meant to hold the tissue paper enclosure together had instead become adhered to the artwork.

Carefully but stupidly, I tried to remove the tab of tape myself. Although the tape mercifully was stuck to the rear of the sheet, it came away with a thin layer of the paper beneath