



Coffee & Culture

Adding a splash of colour to the walls (and menus and cups) of Kofi&Co, co-owner George Pinder tells Living North how he juggles coffee and creativity

Kofi&Co is an independent restaurant (with outposts in Wetherby and Roundhay) serving speciality York Coffee Emporium coffee alongside brunch, burgers and plenty of sweet treats – but the team here love art as much as they love coffee. George Pinder owns the business with his brother Harrison, and creates the artwork displayed across both sites.

With his artist dad working from a home studio when George was growing up, it's no surprise George found a passion for art at a young age. 'It's been something I've always followed since I was very young,' he says. 'I went to Leeds College of Art and did a fine art extended diploma, then went on to Loughborough University and studied a fine art degree. During that time I spent a year in London working with an artist called Lauren Baker and was able to do some work with bigger galleries (Saatchi Gallery and projects for the Tate). That was a great experience.'

When lockdown hit George moved back to Leeds and focused on private commissions, which was when he started displaying his work in Kofi&Co's Wetherby branch which his brother Harrison had opened. 'There was a really good response from the customers,' says George. 'My brother and I decided it might be quite a cool idea to collaborate and we put our brains together to try to expand what he'd already created, bringing my art to the table to be able to push the brand down

a different avenue. I had an art studio in the top floor of the building but did a lot of training in the hospitality industry to be able to help manage Kofi alongside my own work. It was a case of having to balance quite a lot of stuff.'

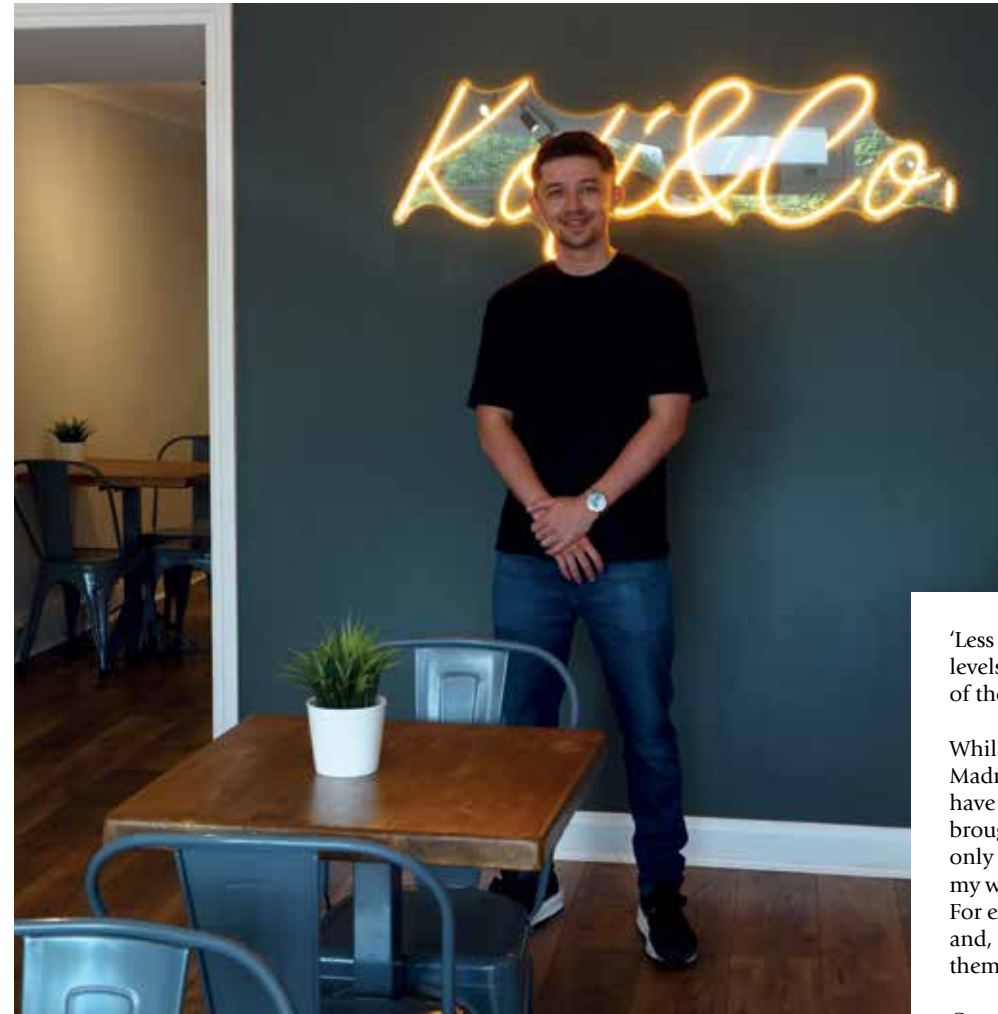
George and Harrison are originally from Roundhay and when the opportunity arose to launch a Kofi&Co branch there, George moved his studio to Roundhay. 'Now I'm working at that site producing work alongside my dad,' he says. 'Eventually we'd like to turn our space into an open studio – the real aim for us is to try and open an art gallery above Kofi to be able to give other people the chance to display their work there. We've also started to acquire artwork from some bigger names. We've got some Damien Hirst, David Hockney and David Shrigley prints and we'd love the gallery to sell work like that as well. We're trying to drive more of a creative community into Kofi because creativity is at the core of what we want to do – food, coffee, the artwork and the way the buildings look.'

'My artwork is definitely something I run in tandem with the restaurant. There's a lot going on so sometimes you have to just take a step back and breathe a little bit. With my background being fine art and always working in a studio on my own with my headphones in, to then having to collaborate and working alongside my brother and a team was a bit of a shock to my system. But I'm really enjoying the challenge.'

The influences for George's artwork vary from neo-expressionism to abstract expressionism, impressionism and characteristics inspired by the Romantics. Colour, emotion, music and popular culture all inspire his paintings. 'I've always been interested in rap culture and did a piece on that at university,' he says. 'I've always found the stigma behind cultures like that interesting. You get a lot of people judging that sort of urban look. I always found it really interesting that on my course I'd go to the studio in a tracksuit and I stood out in a way. I was always quite aware of that. I was one of very few men on my course both in college and university and I wasn't quite like the average artist, so [I] wanted to understand why that was. I was working around the symbolism of a hoodie and worked on a few paintings (which are actually on display in Kofi now) of myself wearing a hoodie in an abstract nocturnal setting. I wanted to paint in a way that creates interest. It's the idea of "don't judge a book by its cover" and "there's more than meets the eye". I wanted to put a lot of energy into the work by using vibrant colour and neon paint to be able to create the artwork, which are almost dreamscapes. It was about flipping the narrative.'

Some of George's other works have been a lot more expressionist. 'I was pausing music videos and taking screenshots from them to [be inspired by] motion and movement,' he explains. 'Some of the figures I got out of that were so interesting because of their movement. They're already composed pieces of art in their own right and it was a case of me translating that shape into a composition. I worked with a lot of spray paint for them and a lot of drip markers linking to graffiti culture. It all links back again to the idea of urban culture married up with traditional styles of painting (using oil paint and old glazing methods). I'd build up a lot of colour using that on top of the spray paint. When you put the two together you get these pieces that have a lot of depth and a lot of different layers which work together really nicely. Being able to put something inspired by graffiti on a wall that would traditionally go in a gallery which is quite elitist - I always found that quite cool, bringing street culture into somewhere it might not usually get a look in. That whole culture, especially with my generation, is really expanding. There are some elements where you can take a lot of good from where the culture has come from, and how diverse we are as a country now.'

George also takes a lot of inspiration from David Hockney's techniques. 'He has always been a huge inspiration to me and that's why in a lot of my work you'll see these broken down colours, trying to simplify my work,' he explains. 'You don't have to spend hours trying to make a tree look like a tree, you can just make a mark and imply what that would be. That's how he's always worked. It's that ability to be able to break down an image and to use colour as a language to create an emotion, and how you respond when you look at it as a viewer. Salts Mill is on my doorstep and I've spent a lot of time there looking at his works. He's definitely a really big influence for me.'



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'Less of an influence but more of a drive to know that you can reach higher levels with art, Damien Hirst went to the same college as me and he's one of the biggest living artists in the world. His journey has inspired me.'

Whilst working on these pieces, George continued to exhibit his work in Madrid and London. 'But I haven't done as many exhibitions as I would have liked because they're not as accessible,' he explains. 'That's what brought me onto the idea of being able to try to create a gallery myself. I'm only 25 and I'm lucky enough to have two restaurants where I can display my work, but I want to open that up to the younger art community as well. For example, going to universities and seeing what talent they've got there and, if some of the work suits what I think customers might like, inviting them to display some of their work in Kofi.'

George hopes to tap into Leeds's creative community. 'There is a big creative community in Leeds in general, especially in Roundhay, and I really want to create a place that's a bit of a hub for that creativity,' he says. 'Leeds is a creative city. It has an arts university, an arts college, a lot of open studios, East Street Arts, Sunny Bank Mills, painters, print makers, sculptors but if you actually look at the galleries there's just a very select few. Because we're in this big building in Roundhay, that's where the gallery idea came into play. When people sit down to have food they're looking at the work. I saw a lot more of this when I was in London but it hasn't translated up to the North of England as much as I would like it to. If I can try to do that with our little business then it's a step in the right direction.'

While George says there's certainly potential for further Kofi&Co outposts to launch in future, he and Harrison continue to focus on the experience they're already creating. 'We'll produce great coffee, keep being innovative with our food, I'll keep pushing the boundaries with my artwork and we'll keep this momentum going,' George says. 'Of course the gallery is going to take some working out but I think all of these things are enough for us to get our teeth stuck into, to keep us busy at least for the next two years!'

See more of George's artwork at georgepinderart.com and at kofilandco.co.uk.