

**SIMON LEWTY / WILL MACLEAN**

**Charting a Decade II, 2006 – 2016**

**12 April – 21 May 2016**

Art First has great pleasure in presenting this exhibition of a dialogue between Simon Lewty and Will Maclean, charting the second decade of an arrangement in which tacit agreements and mutual respect have co-existed harmoniously, creatively, privately. It is time to celebrate.

“There are many points of contact between Maclean and Lewty. The beginnings of a list might include that both have engaged deeply with the coast and the sea (in Lewty’s case in the parts of his life spent in Swanage, Dorset), both have an interest in metaphysics, both are serious readers, both have remained true to their sensibilities over decades, sustaining an intense focus on their subject matter in whatever varied scales and mediums they have worked, neither has been swayed by fashion or the marketplace, each maintains a consistent inner voice... and the list could go on for some while, yet their characters and their art, and the texture of their lives embody great contrasts. They do not often meet but they have exchanged works and they regard one another highly. The nexus for them is Art First.”

The extract above is from Cathy Courtney’s essay in a brochure accompanying *Charting a Decade II*. She was invited to write on this occasion, in her capacity as Project Director of the British Library’s National Life Stories, an oral history project’ of which the *Artists’ Lives* section is run in association with Tate. She is the only person who has listened to both artists’ recordings in their entirety and as they are sealed during the artists’ lifetimes, the content she releases is highly valuable, and with consent. She continues:

“Much, though not all, of the work of Lewty and Maclean *implies* a narrative whilst at the same time not making full disclosure. Whilst the art is autonomous the *Artists’ Lives* interviews uncover the context in which the work was made and trace something of the thoughts and feelings that contributed to it.”



As it happens, Lewty and Maclean both have Museum exhibitions taking place simultaneously with their more intimate show at Art First. There are new publications for each of those – Lewty’s *The SIGNificance of Writing*, a survey in his home town of five decades of his art at Leamington Spa Gallery and Museum, for which Ian Hunt has written a riveting essay, placing Lewty in the centre of current innovation, and Maclean’s *Veering Westerly*, a touring show with a west coast focus, beginning in Stornoway, continuing to his place of birth, Inverness, on to Mull and finally to Fort William, for which three new essays have been published. Lindsay Blair’s covers aspects relevant in *Charting a Decade II*, so we include extracts from her and Ian Hunt’s writing to share their fresh thinking with our audience.

“In his ‘Cabinets of Curiosities’, writes Blair, “Maclean alludes to the Surrealist orthodoxies of readymades and installations, the display boxes of Joseph Cornell, the glass cases of Joseph Beuys and the more contemporary re-envisionings within the drug cabinets of Damien Hirst and the archaeological ‘wunderkammers’ of Mark Dion. As with the above artists, Maclean deftly bypasses the infantilist audience responses elicited from exploitative contemporary spectacles and re-engages the viewer with the spirit of enquiry. His *Shaman Board/Herring Caller* and *Taxonomy of Tides* for example, renew a dialogue within the original terms of the debate by addressing the boundary lines of science and art ....

The terminology which dominates critical conversations about Maclean's art typically ranges from the anthropological to the archeological; the art historical to the literary. The discourse which proceeds from such well established semiotic foundations has enabled a dialogue with the past, and especially a Scottish Highland past, to move beyond well-worn binaries and stereotypes but the central principle of his art – the act of transmission - can remain obfuscated by the plurality of its manifestations.”

You may be forgiven for thinking Blair was also referring to Lewty's work just then (with the exception of a Scottish Highland focus), but this only serves to underline the point of the Lewty/Maclean dialogue.

During the decade covered by this exhibition, the role of depictions and images as such has diminished in Lewty's work. Ian Hunt describes Lewty's strategies of telling, of “overlying and disrupting, and of the peculiar optic on the modern and the new provided by his various ruses of antiquity – from italic typewriter fonts to 16th-century ‘secretary hand’.... In some recent works, Shelton's 17th-century shorthand (or tachygraphy as it was first known) is used to record the sound of waves. Can the sound of the sea be magically coded into script?”



Lewty has attempted exactly that in his newest work, *Three Transcriptions of the Sea*, a tall 1.5 metre drawing, barely 24 cm wide, marked with flourishes of tachygraphy and letters of sound from our own alphabet. Lewty's writing is on occasion coded into a variety of historic forms of shorthand or handwriting styles that only paleographers can read. “But look again” implores Hunt. “Lewty's words can equally open out with almost complete limpidity, and the effect is like looking into a pool. The words frequently tell of everyday experiences, that are being related to us in as straightforward a way as possible. It is precisely in the shifts between obscurity and directness in his work that such unexpected power can be found.”

“Crucially, Lewty is not motivated by a simple literary ambition. He has remained a visual artist while having a deep interest in, and understanding of, the modes and complexities of writing, script and inscription. He has developed a highly consistent approach to making works on paper, which he has always treated as a pre-existing surface rather than a simple carrier for his ideas.”

The element of surface is crucial in the work of both artists. In recent years Lewty has made use of white gesso on tissue paper and other paper surfaces, using its dry, bony texture to write on, as we see in *List: Rhyme-Rivulet*. Maclean uses marble dust, mixed with wax, often partly burying the markings or articulations he has completed to obscure them a little, as in *Lapland Rose*, *Sildar Man*, and *De Bestiis Marinis*, to keep us guessing, or merely to impart a sense of weathering, the wear and tear of the sea or the beach. “Not making full disclosure”, as Courtney says.

This knowing sense of restraint, where less can be more, stems from the poetic sensibilities of these two narrative artists and indeed, as an additional pleasure for this exhibition, each has collaborated with a poet, resulting in two assured, innovative publications: Simon Lewty and Peter Larkin: *Versions of One Another*, and John Burnside and Will Maclean's *A Catechism of the Laws of Storms*.

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