

LONDON ART FAIR, BOOTH 11

Islington Design Centre, London N1 0QH

16-20 January (Preview, Tuesday 15 January)

ART FIRST is delighted to present five artists at this year's edition of LAF:

SIMON LEWTY, WILL MACLEAN, KATE McCRICKARD, JACK MILROY and MIMIEI THOMPSON.

McCrickard and Thompson have emerged over the past decade with work entering important museum and public collections. Their practice is essentially urban, being based in Paris and London respectively, great evolving cities from which they draw their subject matter. While **McCrickard** is principally a figurative artist, focusing on the drinkers and smokers of Paris's centuries old cafés and bars, she also has an extended family of young children to observe. Sketchbook drawings are made quickly – the art of fugitive drawing is essential for capturing the young and the transient – but in the studio images are developed over time. Paintings emerge alongside smaller monotype offset drawings on Japanese paper. This method is riddled with chance and unexpected resolutions and its tonal atmosphere around lines is rich and beguiling, as you can see in the *'Drinkers'* series. A group of offset drawings and monotypes recently entered the collections of the New York City Library, and the Los Angeles Contemporary Art Museum.

Thompson's background studying photography inflects the way her subject matter materialises during the creative process. There is an alchemy in the morphing and shape-shifting of her forms, connecting them to myths and magical thinking. Her focus is on 'nature' which in her work represents a site of authenticity, a place of origin longed for but knowingly unattainable while it is part of a man-made urban culture. She synthesises the every day with the sublime in beautifully brushed paintings: bonsai trees, weeds popping up from paving stones or uprooted, a mysterious hanging basket, city flies on their backs, their legs an ideogram in the air, or a silvery moth, silent on its surface, drawn to a streetlight.

Milroy has exhibited alongside Thompson on several occasions at Art First, for the alchemy of nature and the art of transformation is core to their different but complementary practices. Milroy's irrepressible sense of humour and surrealist interest in chance is also marked by a serious formal investigation of monumental events and big themes. He works with diverse materials and here we present pieces with illustrated books and with sardine tins. He manipulates his imagery, transforming his collages and constructions through virtuosic interventions with the use of a scalpel, placing them in the enclosed world of a Perspex box. His work in the Victoria & Albert Museum's collection was recently shown in a 'Subversive Art' display, which pleased him, and the Financial Times chief critic, Jackie Wullschlager, who has followed his work consistently, noticed how he blends fairy tale and conceptual art with references to Darwin. She relishes the offbeat and unexpected elements in his work:

"He has the gentle wit of a late surrealist, yet the sense of infinite possibilities of mutation... his rearrangements of species is fraught with 21st Century tension about science and nature: a pertinent contemporary vision."

Milroy's monograph *Cut Out* (Black Dog Publishing 2016) covers five decades of his work and offers a template for his forthcoming survey exhibition in April 2019. (see www.artfirst.co.uk for details)

Will Maclean's box constructions are acclaimed world wide. Like Milroy, he deploys surreal combinations with wit and transformative ingenuity, finding in the ready made, the flotsam and jetsam of objects washed up by the sea, a rich source of form and metaphor for his art, which is based on histories and mythologies of those who live and work by the sea. Though rooted in Highlands culture, he deals with universal themes of

navigation, emigration, whaling, fishing and global exploration; - as relevant now as they were four decades ago when he defined his subject.

Symbols of Survival: the art of Will Maclean is the title of his monograph by Duncan Macmillan and it describes the main thrust of his art in those very words. Maclean's reductive, poetic vision has led to collaborations with poets – most recently John Burnside, who produced twelve resounding poems in response to paired composite collages by Maclean based on 19th Century news sheets covering life in coastal communities. Those narratives remain central to Maclean's practice. *Ebb Tide* for example, a deep box construction presented here, refers directly to a devastating tragedy in British maritime history, when on 1 January 1919 the yacht *lolaire* was wrecked within sight of Stornoway, Isle of Lewis, as it carried back over 200 servicemen from WWI. Only 79 survived, while 205 lives were lost and the psychic shock to the islanders remains to this day.

On 1 January 2019 Prince Charles and Nicola Sturgeon unveiled the resonant open air memorial sculpture to mark the centenary of the *lolaire*. A collaboration between Will Maclean, Marian Leven and the bronze sculptor Arthur Watson, this land art work follows four other stone monuments which Maclean has overseen on Lewis over the previous two decades. Unique tributes to the history of the island people, these handsome, compelling structures feature in a new publication coming out later this year.

During the 25 years in which ART FIRST has been privileged to exhibit the work of **Will Maclean** and **Simon Lewty**, two special two-person shows took place. *Charting a Decade I* (2006) and *Charting a Decade II* (2016) examined the dialogue between them as exact contemporaries, celebrating their poetic sensibilities, the mutual respect and tacit agreements, their private practice, unswayed by fashion or the market place; also their shared interest in metaphysics, in reading, in narratives and the passing of time.

Whereas Maclean's work is largely sculptural, Lewty's is entirely drawings based. Yet Maclean draws extensively and incorporates his drawing into his constructions as in the *lolaire*, while on occasion Lewty virtually constructs his paper, layering it densely like a palimpsest, as in *The Smiling Fair*, 1994, which we are presenting here for the first time since its appearance in the gallery exhibition *Voices from Lost Fields* 1995. Its wealth of imagery and coded writing is typical of Lewty's work pre 2000, after which all images vanished, with only the text remaining - 'The SIGNificance of Writing' he likes to call it, in which his mastery of the calligraphic, graffiti and script of many types is always matched by his generation of poetic content. For he is a writer, and his art is writing. The 2010 monograph covering five decades of his work, *The Self as a Stranger* Inscribes his place in British art history. More recently, the poet and writer Ian Hunt wrote a brilliant new essay for the Leamington Spa Art Gallery & Museum survey exhibition:

"This is work that makes demands on us, and at the same time opens up an intimate inter-subjective space of encounter. It may resemble a notary's agreement, summons, legal title or claim, written in a language we do not speak or read. It can be bluff and forbidding in its block-like arrangements of script, which our mind, seeking for points of contact, has to break into. It may be coded into historic forms of shorthand or handwriting styles that only paleographers can read. But look again: Lewty's words can equally open out with almost complete limpidity...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."

For further information and exhibition archives, please visit our website: www.artfirst.co.uk