ART FIRST

SIMON LEWTY

Lewty's mastery of the calligraphic, the palimpsest, graffiti and scripts of many kinds is inevitably matched by his own poetic content. He is a writer, and his art, his chosen 'mark' is writing. The 2010 monograph covering five decades of his life and work - *The Self as a Stranger* (Black Dog Publishing) - inscribes his unusual place in art history. Key regional museums in England (including Birmingham, Leamington Spa, Wolverhampton, Worcester, Stoke-on-Trent, Leeds, Preston) hold his work and in London his drawings are in the collections of the British Museum, the Victoria & Albert Museum and the Arts Council of Great Britain. In the USA he has strong representation in the remarkable Sackner Archive of Visual and Concrete Poetry.

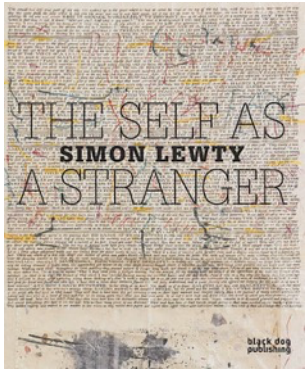
Lewty's recent 21st Century discovery of Thomas Shelton's 17thC system of shorthand – Tachygraphy - provided a written surface after his own heart, beautiful, but opaque as to its meaning. In fact it had been used by Samuel Pepys in his famous diary covering life in London during the Plague of 1665, followed by the great Fire in 1666. Lewty taught himself this now obscure system and began a series of drawings which reflect its mysterious beauty, seen here in *Notations of a Script from a Phoenetic Play*, 2012.

"The word 'tachygraphy' muses Lewty, *'seemed in a crazy way to invite a link with the tachisme of our own time: the two words share a root. Shelton and Pepys meet Hartung and Michaux! Art and Literature....."*

Badly Frightened, 1988, is presented here for the first time by Art First because it seems to have a particular resonance with the strangeness of COVID-19. It hales from his pre-2000 period, after which he abandoned all figurative imagery, choosing to continue with text only. "*How strange that he has fallen in those city streets!"* exclaims the top right creature with five blue claws while others remain silent and the black and white ink narrative text below leads you on, then leaves you in the lurch, mystified.

You may like to acquire a copy of *THE SELF AS A STRANGER* published in 2010 by Black Dog Publishing, London.

This is the first extensive monograph on the life and work of Simon Lewty. The detailed overview is brought together by a distinguished group of writers including Dame Antonia Byatt, Jessica Dubow, Paul Hills, Peter Larkin and the artist himself.



Badly Frightened,1988
Ink and pencil crayon on paper, 120 x 115 cm, £20,000

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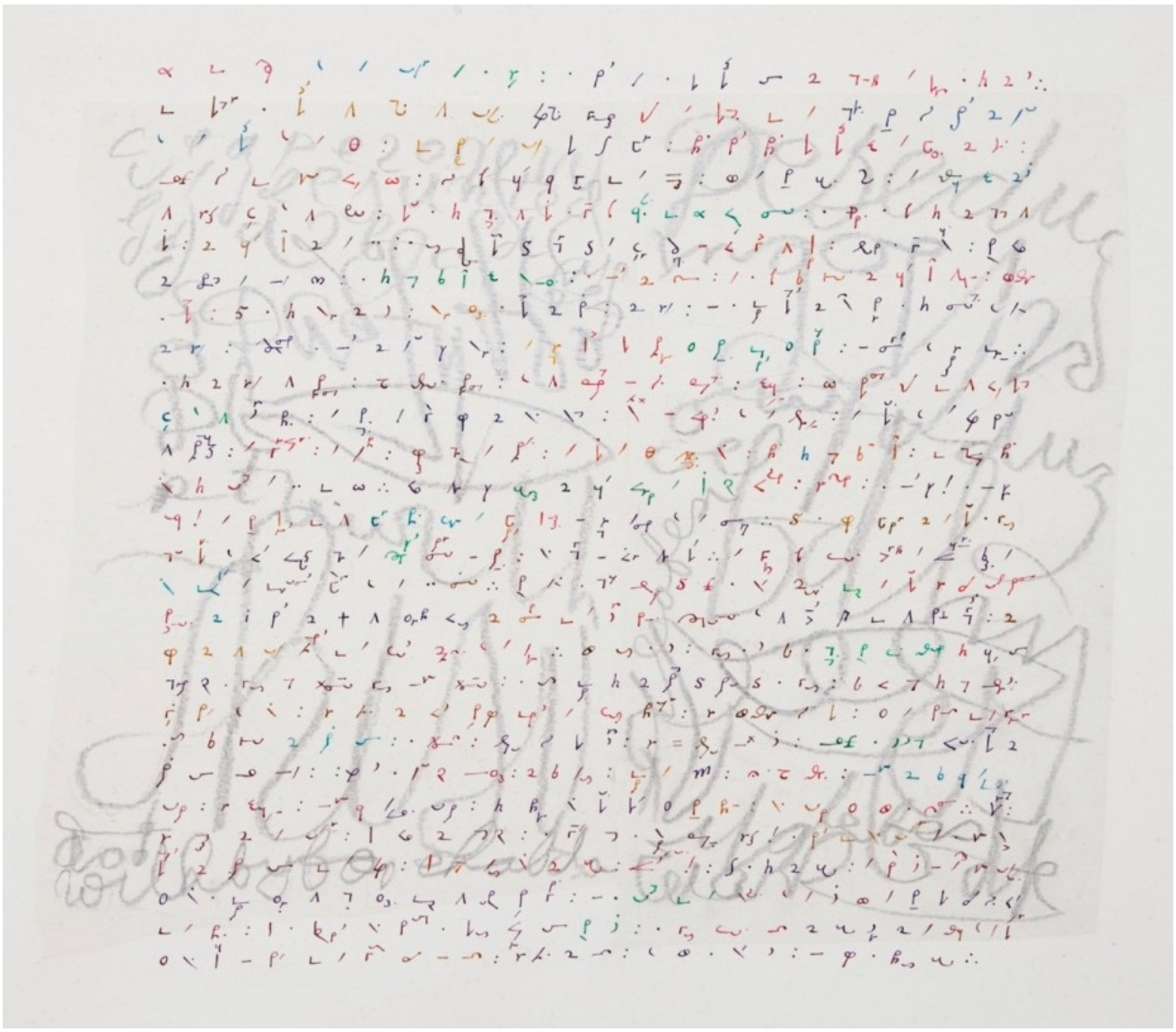

Notations from a Script for a Phonetic Play (1), 2012
Acrylic and graphite, 46.5 x 56.5 cm, £5,000

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Abstract Script (2), 2014
Ink and crayon on paper 43.75 x 48 cm, £3,000

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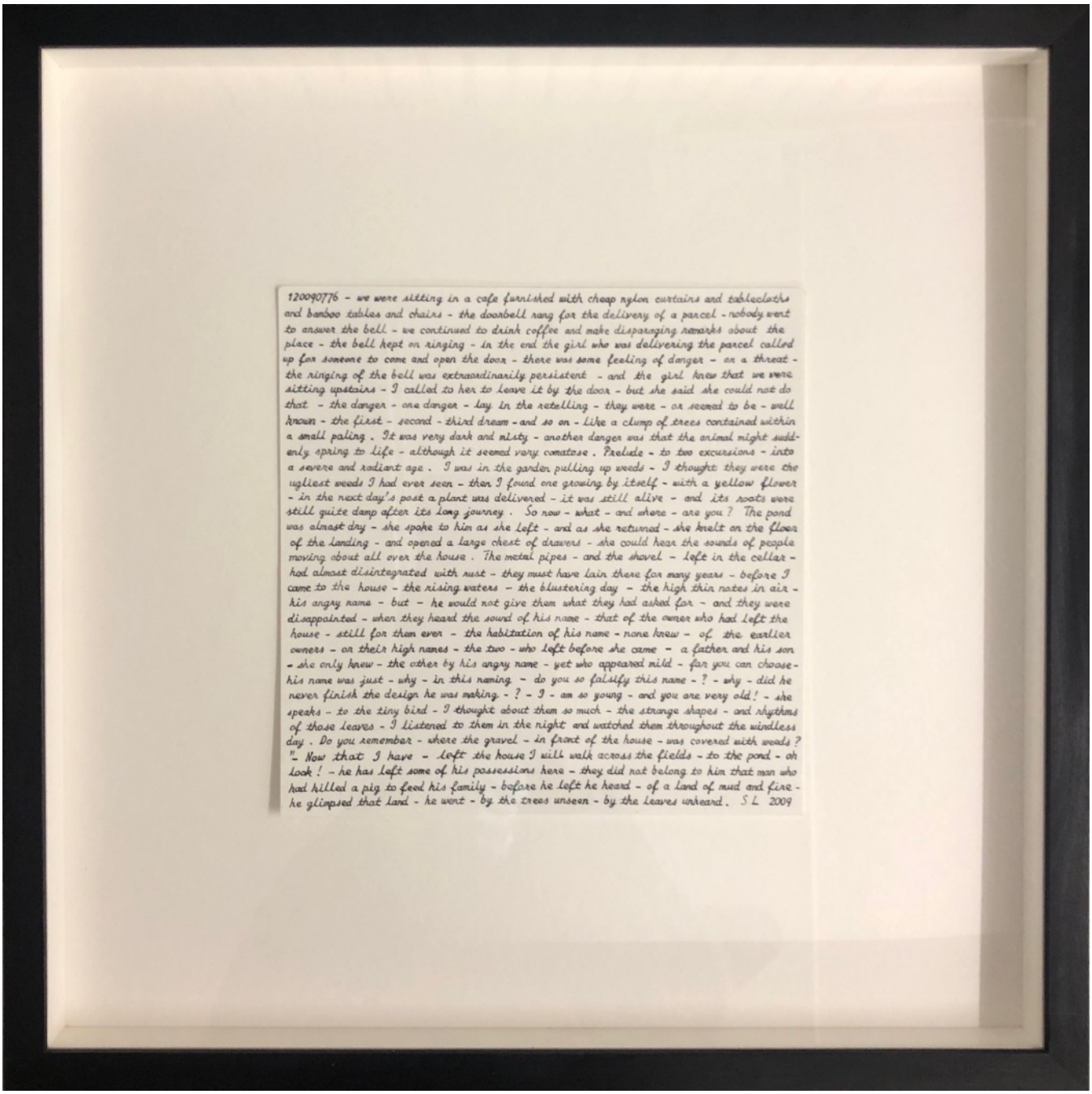

Proximity of Dream 3, 2009
Ink on paper 21.5 x 21.5 cm, £2,800

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"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…… 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."

Ian Hunt shares these insights in his essay for Lewty's 2016 exhibition, *The SIGNificance of Writing* at the Leamington Spa Art Gallery and Museum.

The works illustrated range from 1988, shortly after the major exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery, which launched Lewty's career, to 2014 and they offer an insight into his practice within the chosen medium of pencil, ink and pencil crayon on paper that is layered, and treated in different ways. There is also extensive information available, including videos showing him at work on www.artfirst.co.uk.

Festive Script, 2014
Acrylic on tissue, 23 x 46 cm, £2,400

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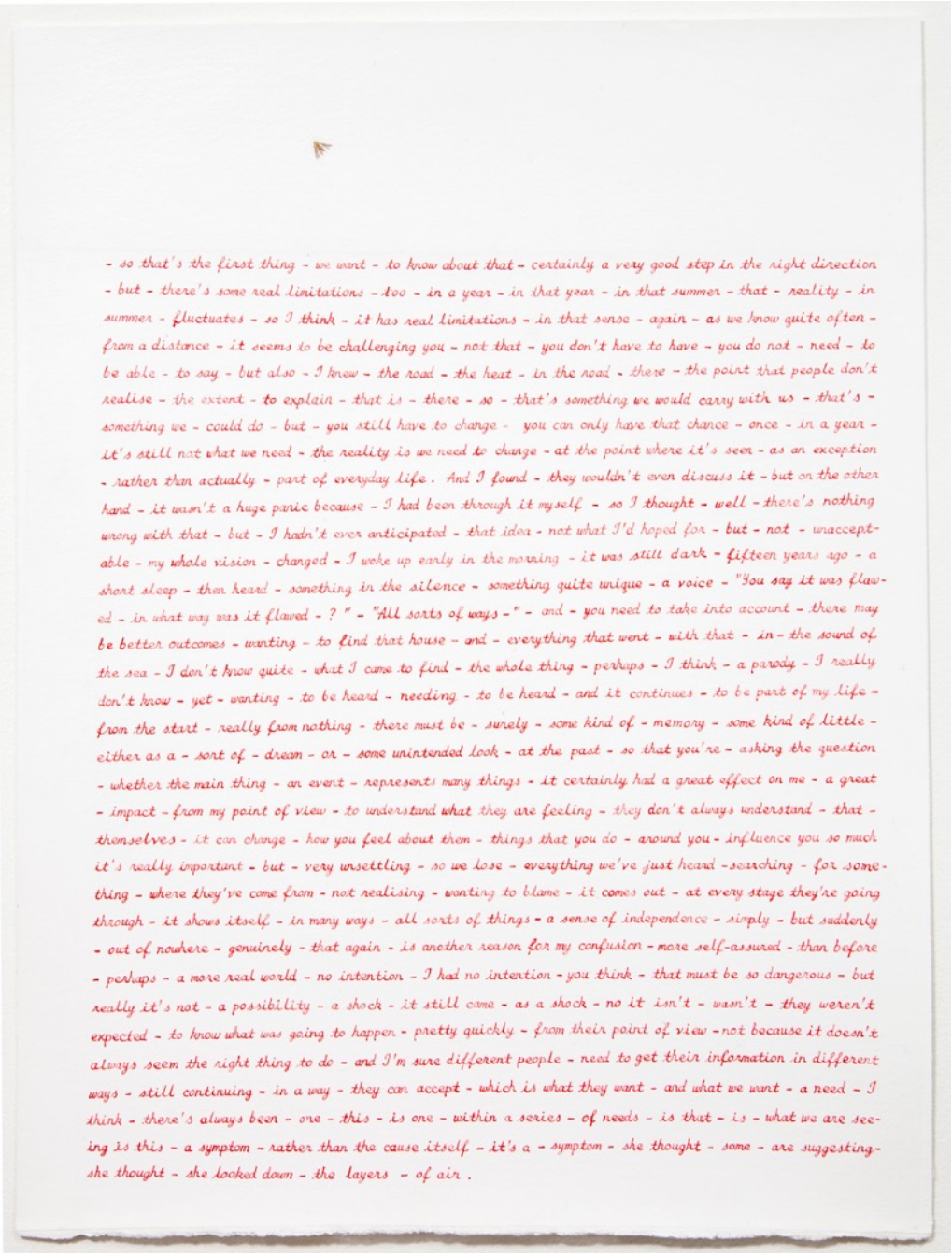

Text With Moth, 2009
Red ink and moth, 56 x 42 cm, £4,500

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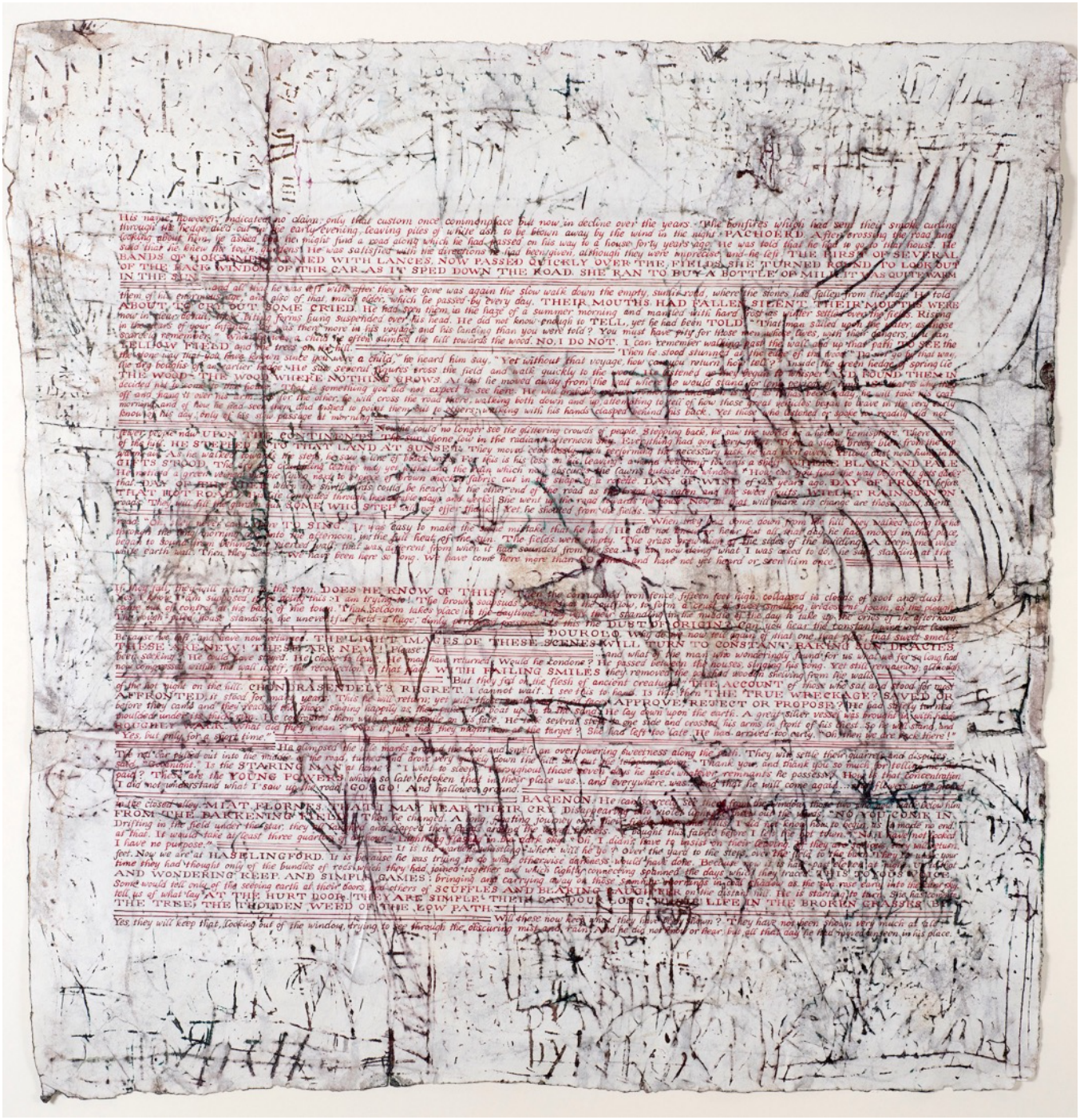

The Joyous Voice, 1999
Red ink and acrylic on paper, 91 x 87 cm, £15,000

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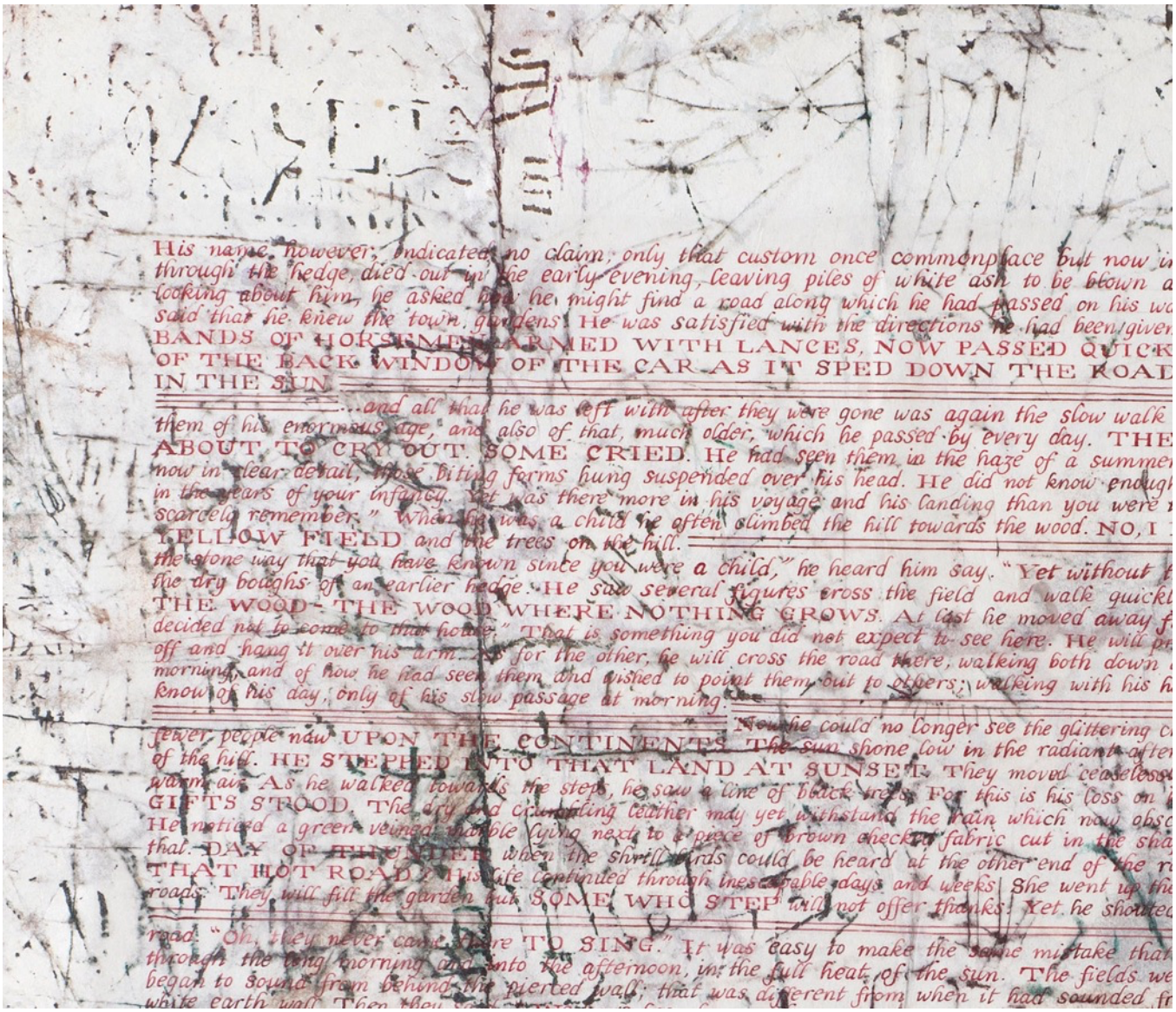

The Joyous Voice (detail), 1999
Red ink and acrylic on paper, 91 x 87 cm, £15,000

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The Fair Evoke, 2019
Ink on paper, 31 x 40 cm £2,500

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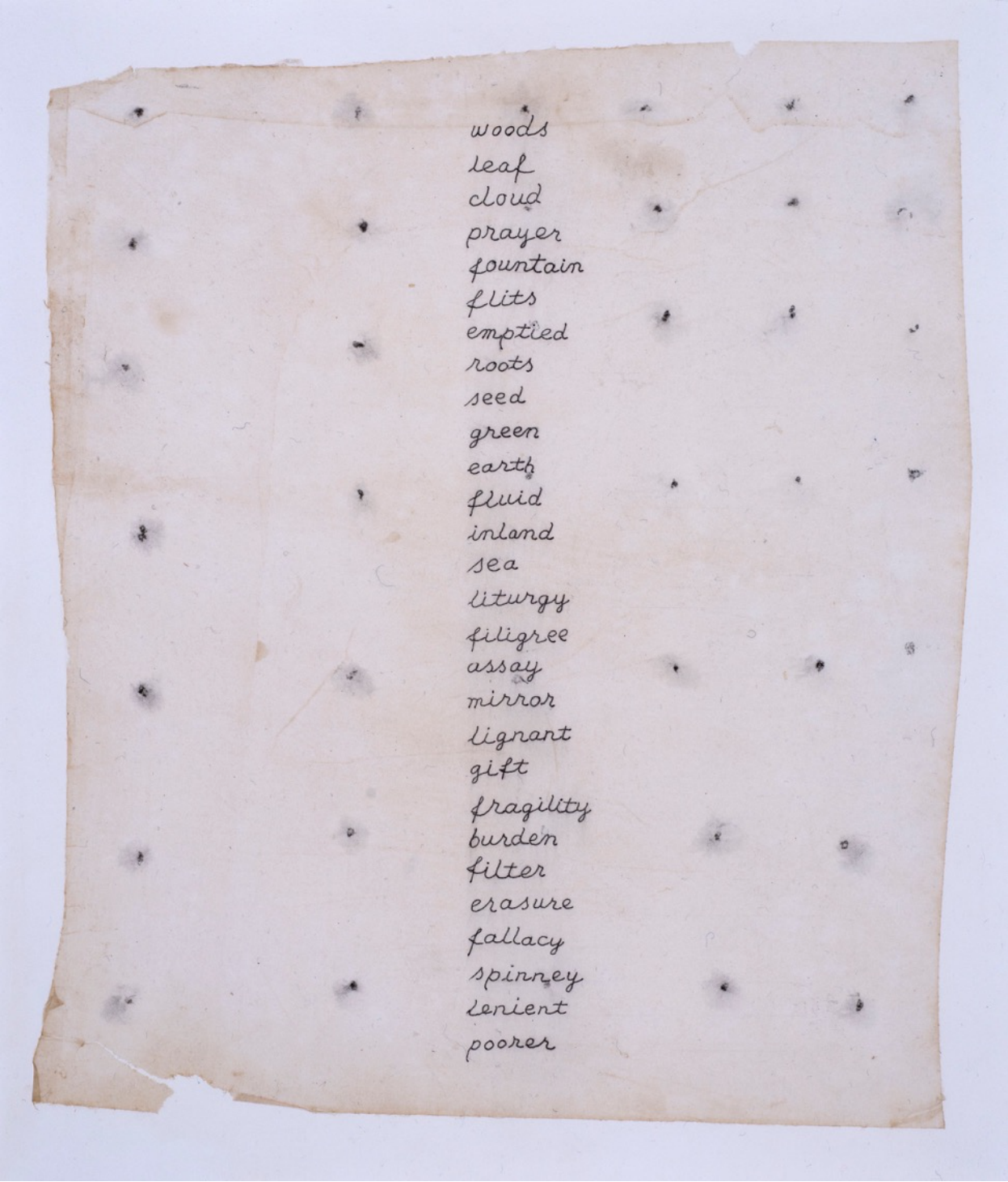

List : woods – poorer, 2019
Acrylic and ink on tissue paper, 35.5 x 30.6 cm, £2,200

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