

SIMON LEWY & THE NEREIDS

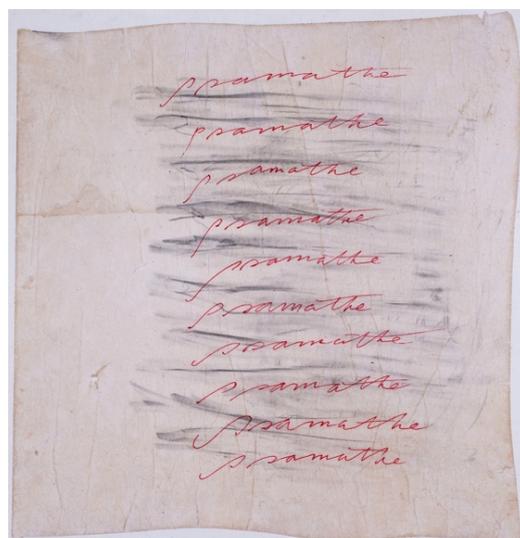
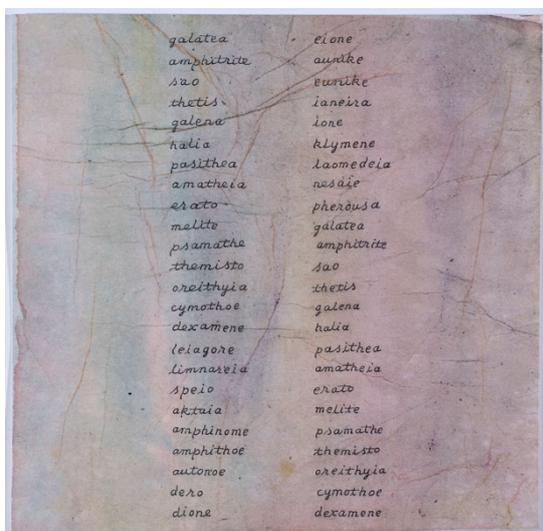
The Lettering Arts Trust Centre, Snape Maltings, Suffolk

18 May – 4 July 2021

Simon Lewy's text-based art has been sustained by a consistent yet radical practice for over five decades. His mastery of the calligraphic, the palimpsest, graffiti and scripts of many kinds, is matched by his generation of poetic content. He is a writer, and his art - his 'mark'- is writing. His earlier hand-written texts combined with figurative imagery to create a mysterious dream like reality, suggestive of medieval maps and manuscripts but with surreal overtones. During the previous two decades he abandoned the figurative, retaining pure, richly evocative text, sourced largely from his private dream journals, as his principal output.

The title of this exhibition is taken from a group of small recent drawings inspired by his love of Greek mythology, which began with a childhood encounter during an illness when reading his way through 'The New Book of Knowledge'. The Nereids in particular captured Lewy's imagination. Known as the fifty benign sea goddesses whose father was Nereus, the 'honest old man of the sea', and whose mother was Doris, the daughter of Oceanus, they symbolise everything that is beautiful and kind about the sea and its related waterways, and their melodious voices could be heard by all those who inhabited their mythological world.

Lewy has drawn up lists of their names – especially those with a pleasing sound to his musical ear – in a seemingly random order, writing them in ink onto delicate tissue paper laid onto other paper surfaces with subtle markings, sometimes resembling marble. Psamathe's name features dramatically, for she is the goddess of beaches, and Lewy repeats her name across the page in bold red ink, or half buried in wild swirls and scribbles, as if windswept and covered by sand.



Sometimes Lewty coats tissue paper in white gesso onto which he applies softly inked lettering. In *Three Transcriptions of the Sea*, 2016, the engaging but illegible lettering he uses is known as tachygraphy, or Shelton's shorthand - used in the 17th Century by civil servants, in particular by Samuel Pepys for his diaries, and mastered by Lewty over a period of years. These elegant mysterious marks serve as a secret language, in this case - 'a kind of wordless sea-language' which he went on to develop in 2019 as an evocation of the voices of the Nereids, 'who may cry in the murmurs of the waves'. This is indeed how Lewty describes the body of coded drawings called *Pencillings*, now published in a small limited-edition book.

Two upright slim works, *Pages From a Beach Diary*, and *A Timeless Litany*, are meditations on the sea, offering repeated phrases as in a chorus. A litany is a list, a repeated supplication or formula used in the church by clergy, and to which people respond. It is heard and known and its visual manifestation is linear. Lewty's love of music with a knowledge of the Psalms and of musical notation enables him to create a confluence of art and poetry with music which characterises many of his drawings.

The works selected for this exhibition reflect Lewty's life-long dialogue with the sea. Born in Sutton Coldfield, Birmingham, and later moving to Leamington Spa, Lewty is a man of Middle England, as remote from the sea as anywhere on this island. However, the family's holiday home was close to the sea in Swanage, Dorset, to where regular 'pilgrimages' took place throughout his life, and where he was able to continue with his work. For his 2008 Spring exhibition at Art First, *The Self as a Stranger*, he wrote a catalogue essay describing his days in that Swanage studio by the sea:

'Another piece of paper, another wall, another room, another season. This time the window looks out over the sea, an immense, glittering space of light, reflecting into the room and across the surface of the paper. I am working to the sound of the sea through the open window. The waves break upon the shore below, their endless surge and reflux one of the most ancient sound-lines. I am using a kind of translucent tissue, almost weightless, and the writing is in coloured pencil. Its soft, waxy tip marks the surface in quite a different way to a lead pencil, and I'm having to go much more slowly and deliberately, otherwise the thin paper would tear. As I work, I can feel the pencil responding to the slight unevenness of the wall underneath, and passing it on to the micro-structures of the text, as though I were picking up the 'voice' of the wall, like an old-fashioned gramophone needle. The warm sun and the sea and the rhythmic repetition of the lines of writing induce a feeling of calm. The text covers the surface in a violet flush. This work began partly as a 'found' text, with bits of overheard speech from many different sources. And if I look at my notebooks I'm reminded of how some of them came to me.'

It is here that he completed the two-metre *A Voice, A Recognition* 2007, in which he has transcribed fragments of speech, 'ready-mades' if you like, snippets of conversations heard on the train journeys he made between Birmingham and Swanage, which cover the entire surface of the paper. Lewty knew how to grasp the potential of chance encounters such as overheard speech or the possibilities inherent in graffiti and found lists of words. He also drew more formal inspiration from other works of art.

Mythe, 2006, for example, is his first 'picture in French' and it is his translation of Claude Gellée, le Lorrain's landscape: *Cephalus and Procris Reunited by Diana* of 1645:

'I have known this painting, one of the great poetic masterpieces of Western Art, ever since I used to visit the National Gallery, almost every weekend in the early 1960's..... My picture is a response and an 'hommage'. Claude's handling of space and light can induce a state of reverie in which the landscape becomes, almost literally the space of myth, the site of a dream. I had to find out what the myth was (there are several different versions) and try to 'hear' it as Claude (from all accounts the least 'verbal' of artists) might have done.'

Written in blue ink, Lewty emulated the beauty of French hand-writing in his telling of the myth, largely in French, with his own interjections in English. He signed it 'Mis en écriture par S.L. anno MMVI'. Much to his delight he realised last year that Procris was the sister of the Nereid Oreithyia (they were both daughters of Erechtheus, King of Athens) who was carried off by Boreas, the personification of the North Wind, to live as King and Queen of the winds in Thrace. The fortuitous connections between *Mythe* and the recent Nereid drawings are presented here to open a door and invite you, the viewer, to step inside in order to explore on your own the beguiling world of Greek mythology, its literature, its art, its relationship with the sea, and its startling mystery.

If there is any other artist who has explored this territory of myth and the sea with a related poetic sensibility, it is Cy Twombly - a significant inspiration to Lewty - who in 1959 created *Poems to the Sea* in oil, pastel and coloured pencil on 24 paper sheets measuring approximately 33 x 30cm. Twombly's use of a quasi-writing and wave signs tussle with the impulse to 'read' and 'write', suggesting words and thoughts about to emerge from the waters of the Mediterranean, just as Lewty's 'wordless sea language' surfaces in his late Pencillings drawings.

The Lettering Arts Trust Centre, situated close to the sea at Snape Maltings, is hosting the exhibition in collaboration with Art First, London. LAT stone carvers and calligraphers were invited to respond to Lewty's engagement with the Nereids through their own explorations on 30 x 30cm panels, rendered in stone, on paper, glass and other materials. These works form a frieze within the exhibition in a dialogue happily expanding the possibilities and meaning of timeless mythology, highlighting its inspirational power and continuous relevance in contemporary creative life.

The monograph published in 2010 – Simon Lewty, *The Self as a Stranger*, (Black Dog Publishing, with Art First) – inscribes Simon Lewty's place in British art history. Key regional English museums, including Birmingham, Leeds and Wolverhampton, hold his work while in London work may be found 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. Copies of the book as well as other publications will be available in the LAT shop.

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