

## DELINEATIONS

### Drawings at Art First

4 February – 6 March 2015

**Wilhelmina Barns-Graham / Eileen Cooper / Margaret Hunter / Simon Lewty / Helen MacAlister  
Bridget Macdonald / Will Maclean / Kate McCrickard / Karel Nel / Richard Penn / Partou Zia.**

A notable feature of artists represented by Art First is their fluency in drawing, which is a central part of their overall practice. Lewty and Nel's principal output can be classified as drawing (for which they use a wide range of materials) whereas other participants are painters, printmakers or sculptors. Yet they are all led by their habit of drawing, both in notebooks or journals, and also as finished works on full sheets of paper.

The aim of this exhibition is to reveal the freshness, the variety, and the sheer beauty of the selected drawings, as well as the powerful, impulsive link between observation and feeling that direct mark-making on a blank surface inspires.

Inevitably, surprising dialogues emerge. **Karel Nel's** majestic *The End of the Line, Centre for Astrophysics, Paris* measures 175 x 175 cm of pastel and sprayed pigment, applied on bonded fibre fabric. It depicts a section of the stone floor showing the bronze inlay of the French Meridian line, one subsequently trumped by placing the Prime Meridian at Greenwich, England, in 1884 (GMT). Its main purpose is to evoke the power of thinking generated by this Centre in Paris, where things that are difficult to think about have been thought and where the ineffable is wrestled with until it yields some of its secrets. The drawing floats, with no horizon line and without gravity yet it lures us in to orientate slowly within its complexity.

Cosmic energy and the mystery and science within this field are also of central interest to fellow South African artist **Richard Penn**, whose small impeccable ink drawings are shaped as a 'stealth-bomber', borrowed from the Hubble Space Telescope as a far seeing frame within which his marks make reference to microscopic organisms as well as the unseen quantum fields and fabrics that hold it all together.

Penn's two drawings titled *Manifold* are paired with the breathtaking small line drawings by **Wilhelmina Barns-Graham**, created as part of her private investigative practice reflecting on wind energies and their impact on water or land, and the rhythms of wave formation. There are two aspects to her line drawings: one takes inspiration from D'Arcy Thompson, whose influential book *On Growth and Form*, which investigates morphologies in nature as form or matter and attributes all change or growth to the action of force, continues to influence artists and architects today.

The second aspect is more philosophical, and as Mel Gooding put it, *"These extraordinary descriptions of sea forms might better be described as meditative abstractions and reflective imaginings. They derive from deeply sensed knowledge of the ways in which energy finds its forms: in the curve, swell, surge, arabesque and linear parallels seen in rings of tree grain, in geological strata, in ploughed fields, in lava flow, in river currents and land forms."*

The sea forms are those observed from the Fife or Cornish shores, in particular those close to her studio of sixty years, in St Ives. The concentrated element of repetition induces a meditative state and acts as a release, akin to something musical. These responses are shared amongst all the artists in this exhibition, for drawing is an intense, all absorbing form of visual thinking which commands total concentration and seldom tolerates errors.

Figure drawing presents all sorts of challenges, whether drawn from life or the imagination, and whether or not the figures are situated in a landscape space, an empty space or an interior. **Margaret Hunter** and **Eileen Cooper** draw largely from memory and imagination, regularly exploring non-European cultural models. Hunter draws largely on 'ideas' inspired by traditional African sculpture and its expressive formal arrangement, focussing on gesture and a selection of symbolic forms. Cooper's figurative work is complex, at first based resolutely on her imagination, creating an autobiographical but universal woman at the centre of her work, sometimes accompanied by a male figure (husband, lover, voyeur) and later, by two children, both boys. Recently the group has expanded to include dancers, acrobats, animals, but the graphic style remains uniquely Cooper's own, and although she is a brilliant colourist, her powerful charcoal drawings convey all the energy and emotional clarity of her signature paintings.

**Kate McCrickard**, much as Cooper did early on, incorporates her young children as single figures or within family scenes as her prime subject matter, directly observed and spontaneously captured in rapid pencil or mixed media drawings. The close domestic arena, in Paris or the French countryside, evokes aspects of Parisian artistic legacy from the fin de siècle (Cassatt, Vuillard, Degas), but McCrickard brings a wit and a modern sensibility to her work that is anything but historical.

The richly atmospheric drawings of **Bridget Macdonald** are beautifully worked using charcoal to 'breathe' across the surface, at one moment capturing weightless blossom, at the next presenting the rippling muscles of a young bull, snorting, glaring and whisking his tail. *The Midsummer Mare* is an arresting new drawing; a perfect profile of this noble creature set in Malvern's rolling hills. Macdonald is steeped in a knowledge of art history but also incorporates an acuteness of live observation and a sense of how contemporary matters to do with the English countryside take up their position alongside Arcadian tradition and memory.

The writing of Sorley Maclean and John Burnside in particular affect the work of **Will Maclean**. His delicate pencil drawing, *First Contact – Offering* is a profoundly poetic, magical scene, set remotely on Scotland's West Coast at the shore's edge. A mysterious ceremony takes place where human figures merge with bird and fish beings in tacit understanding. Not far from here, a different landscape with expansive valleys and braes is intensely worked in small dense pencil markings by **Helen MacAlister**, to convey places of historic significance and identity within Gaelic culture. *Glen Urquhart + Glen Moriston* for example, were alone in their innocence of the Clearances.

Like William Blake, **Simon Lewty's** written words are poetic narratives of his own invention. From early in his career, Lewty's drawn 'mark' has been writing, in many different scripts and hands, from the personal notebook to the elegance of chancery script, at first accompanied by drawings of figures and landscapes, but after 2000, relegated to the written word alone. His masterful piece *A Flourish is as to Transparency as the Ceaseless Wind is to Stone*, (96 x 123.5 cm) is what one critic called 'a performative act of writing', such is the replete, edge to edge occupation of space by an endless flow of words. In scale it is larger than the Magna Carta, but smaller than the Mappa Mundi. Within the flow of language Lewty has inserted a symbolic system of 17<sup>th</sup> Century shorthand, or *Tachygraphy*, used by Pepys for his diaries. Lewty mastered Shelton's book about Tachygraphy, and put it to use. For the catalogue of the exhibition, *Absorption*, in which Lewty introduces this new 'script', Paul Hills made some apt observations:

*'We may guess that these dashes and ligatures stand for words but can only look at them not read them; ..... Scanning these recent works one becomes aware of the beauty of the varying tempi or majuscules and cursive script, and of the quicker tempo of the succession of Shelton's symbols. They bear some resemblance to musical notation.'*

He also comments on Lewty's use of coloured inks - red, orange, azure, green – sometimes for individual letters, sometimes for a word. *'This decorative deployment of colour'*, he points out, *'fits the strategy of creating a gap between word, letter or symbol as mark, and language as bearer of meaning.'*

The directness of drawing brings us close to the artist as an individual, with an expressive example of the self-portrait. **Partou Zia** ( Persian born but educated in England), a writer and innate storyteller, evolved a personal mythology of symbols and visionary scenarios, bringing to her paintings and drawings an increasingly spiritual quality. The pair of vivid self-portrait drawings selected here relate to a group chosen by the British Museum for their collection. Art First presented Partou's drawings initially, alongside an astonishing series of luminous landscape paintings where a predominant presence, in the many guises in which she depicts herself, were described as *Portraits Beyond Self*. Her work deals with the great questions of life and death. That she maintained her exuberance, channelling it to survive a life-threatening illness before she was forced to lay down her tools just before her fiftieth Birthday in 2008, brings a sense of truth and urgency to the features of this young, fascinating woman who looks out at us, looking at her. Perhaps this dialogue illustrates best what good, truthful drawing across time, is able to offer its audience.

Clare Cooper  
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Further information on participating artists is available on our website: [www.artfirst.co.uk](http://www.artfirst.co.uk)