

February's Feast

2 February – 3 March 2023

Kevin Laycock, Gillian Lever, Simon Lewty, Alex Lowery, Bridget Macdonald, Jack Milroy, Simon Morley, Donald Teskey, Mimei Thompson, Graeme Williams.

February's Feast is an exhibition of engaging work by a group of gallery artists to celebrate the month with a reunion – one that's free from the demands of a solo show, and which spans decades of exhibiting with Art First. Brought together in the new space, a dialogue unfolds.

When you think about it, February is full of distinctions. It is the shortest month in the year, arguably the last month of winter; it is full of birdsong as nesting begins; daffodils, crocuses and snowdrops burst through the frozen earth; it is the month of love with St Valentine's Day at its core. For the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (born 27 February 1807) it is all about purification. In *The Poets Calendar* he wrote of February:-

*I am lustration, and the sea is mine!
I wash the sands and headlands with my tide;
My brow is crowned with branches of the pine;
Before my chariot-wheels the fishes glide.*

*By me all things unclean are purified,
By me the souls of men washed white again;
E'en the unlovely tombs of those who died
Without a dirge, I cleanse from every stain.*



Kevin Laycock, *Invention 2* (after Gee's Bend quiltmakers) 2018, oil on paper, 55 x 71cm



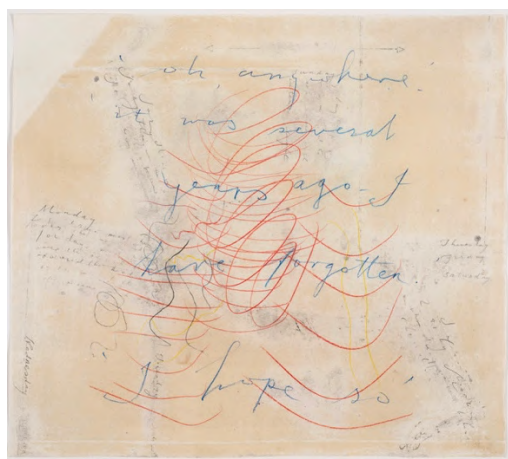
Right: Gillian Lever *Healing Welcome*, 2022 oil on canvas, 30 x 40cm

Poetry, literature, art history, history and music infuse the consciousness and inform the practice of these ten artists in varying ways. **Kevin Laycock** and **Simon Lewty** are musically inclined, with **Laycock** still actively playing as a classical musician. In a previous exhibition with Art First, 'Collision', he collaborated on a contemporary composition with the composer Michael Berkeley and the cross-disciplinary results reveal the harmonic refinements which underpin his abstractions. (https://www.artfirst.co.uk/kevin_laycock/pe-11.html). **Laycock** and **Gillian Lever** have long interacted with musicians, in **Lever's** case, with members of the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra.

Lever's love of Jazz informs her abstract chromatic compositions, and appropriately in 2001, UB40 commissioned her to create paintings as the covers for their album *Cover Up*.

Bridget Macdonald, Simon Lewty and **Simon Morley** are great readers. Poetry has inspired Macdonald's breath-taking charcoal drawings and subtle paintings for decades. The recently published book of poems, 'Soil', by Catherine Swire has triggered a new collaboration. The result is an exhibition, *Rain, Wind and Change* in the South Cloister of Worcester Cathedral for May this year. As well as the landscape drawings of the Herefordshire/Worcestershire borders, with their layers of history and trauma, Macdonald has completed contemporary figure drawings focusing on an interest in Prince Arthur (son of Henry VII) whose exquisite tomb is in the cathedral. Due to his early death, Henry VIII took the throne as the 'spare'. And the rest, as they say, is history. That the exhibition coincides with the coronation of Charles III, and the refusal of Prince Harry to accept the burden of being born into the Royal Family, underlines the fact that generations come and go, but as Macdonald points out, Worcester Cathedral still stands. Her featured painting, *Crows in a September Orchard*, is linked to this re-imagined history through the black pear trees which grow here; three black pears appear on the Worcester coat of arms thanks to Elizabeth I's admiration of such a tree on her visit to the city in 1575.

Simon Lewty died in 2021 shortly after his 80th Birthday, but he is very much a part of this friendly gathering of fellow artists. His life-long practice has focused on drawing, and the written word as a visual language, a thing of beauty in its own right. Speaking to him over the decades, it felt as though he had read everything; 'I am not sure whether I am pre-archaic or post-modern' he would say, and through his engagement with dreams, his mysterious work is an escape from history, while capturing its intimate moments in poetic, broken narratives without endings. Works from 1978, 1992 and 2020 make an appearance.



Simon Lewty, *I Have Forgotten*, 2005, ink and coloured crayon on paper, 56 x 62cm

Bridget Macdonald, *Crows in the September Orchard*, 2019, oil on linen, 76.2 x 101.6cm

In 2010 **Simon Morley** left England to teach and live in Seoul, South Korea. Well known for his landmark publication, *Writing on the Wall: Word and Image in Modern Art*, 2001, Thames & Hudson, his recent fascinating book, *The Simple Truth: the Monochrome in Modern Art* published by Reaktion Books in 2020 further places his own practice, which he describes as an 'improbable marriage between words and the monochrome' neatly into context. Thames & Hudson has commissioned a new book from him for their 'World of Art' series entitled '*Modern Painting: A Concise Introduction*' to be published in March. We are showing three of his *Crushed Books*, 2017 works, one of which has crumpled pages squashed into a small box construction, ironically from the T&H *British Art Since 1900* book – from their 'World of Art' series. Other works on view are from Morley's monochromatic Book-Painting series.



Simon Morley, *British Art Since 1900* (published 1986), *Crushed Book*, *World of Art Series*, 2017, 15 x 15cm
 Right: Alex Lowery, *Orkney 5*, 2023, oil on canvas, 40 x 100cm

Graeme William's early passion was for geology and painting, but his main practice has been photography. In the years leading to the end of apartheid in South Africa, he recorded the extraordinary events for Reuters and it is often his images of Mandela's release from prison and numerous others that are familiar to us as award-winners and through global publications. Since 1994 Williams has been working on a series of powerful photographic essays recording a changing democratic South Africa. The country's most famous photographer, David Goldblatt, appointed Williams as custodian of his Estate shortly before he died. The honour was well bestowed for Williams carries Goldblatt's legacy within his own surveys, embracing a more vivid use of colour, especially in the works shown here from the series *Painting Over the Present*. Before Lockdown, we exhibited Williams's photographs of dwellings in South African Townships alongside **Alex Lowery's** distilled modernist paintings of Portland and West Bay (his leitmotifs) in Dorset, where he lives. (<https://www.artfirst.co.uk/art-fairs-and-exhibitions.html>). No figures appear in either of their selected works, yet human presence is everywhere within these man-made environments where the fall of light holds the forms as if they were architectural still lives.

The marine light of **Lowery's** Dorset coastlines and his reductive formal stillness evident in the new painting of Orkney, is at the opposite point to the pounding Atlantic Ocean crashing onto the rocks of County Mayo's coastline, where **Donald Teskey** works much of the time. We are featuring Teskey's Irish seas alongside his majestic painting of Cape Agulhas, at the southern-most tip of Africa. This he painted after a two-week residency in South Africa in 2019 where he cast his gaze on a different Atlantic crashing into similar rocks in radiant southern hemisphere light.



Graeme Williams, *Ermelo*, 2012, from the *Painting Over the Present* series, archival digital prints, Image size 41 x 55cm, paper size 47 x 61cm, Edition of 3

Right; Donald Teskey *Cape Agulhas 2*, (South Africa) 2019, acrylic on paper, 76 x 105cm

Jack Milroy joins the bookish tastes of his fellow artists in this exhibition, but in his own subversive manner. In *Tweet Tweet*, a new cut book construction from his *Librarian's Aviary* series, he re-paginates a French book on birds, to rearrange the order of its pages, allowing his deft work with a scalpel to release the birds from the flat pages in order to relish the space within the Perspex box and to show themselves off to great advantage. This piece is a perfect metaphor for the intense bird song characteristic of this cold month, verging towards Spring.



Jack Milroy, *Tweet Tweet*, 2022, cut French book pages, 86 x 98 x 14cm

Right: Mimei Thompson *Metamorphosis (Opium Poppy)* 2020, oil on canvas 70 x 50cm

Mimei Thompson shares Milroy's fascination with the natural world and her book of choice in this exhibition is *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium*, published by the remarkable Maria Sibylla Merian, with sixty plates based on drawings she made during two years spent in Dutch Suriname around 1699. A naturalist and influential entomologist, Merian set out to study tropical creatures and their host plants, cohabiting in a mutually beneficial ecosystem. Thompson's initial photographic studies, before turning to painting, retains the darkroom alchemy and the luminous high-octane colour evident in her *Metamorphosis* series of paintings, which drew inspiration from Merian's oeuvre. Thompson's undulating brushwork transports her subjects into hyperreal bug parties, suggesting mediations on a fascination with nature but also a modern disconnect from it.

The above comprises ten 'short stories' about the artists participating in the exhibition and as you will gather, the notes are merely the tip of an iceberg. What lies beneath is a longer story of dedicated practice and achievement, as their work has entered museum and other public collections, with accompanying catalogues written by distinguished art critics and art historians. The work is sustaining. It is different, independent, free of fashion, and significant. It is also wonderful to live with.

For further information please visit the gallery website which has extensive information in the Artists' section, and feel free to contact Clare Cooper for price lists and PDFs: clare@artfirst.co.uk

ART FIRST, The Forge, 15 St Mary's Walk, London, SE 11 4UA. T: +44 (0) 7711 945098

E: info@artfirst.co.uk Instagram: @artfirstlondon www.artfirst.co.uk