

PRESS RELEASE

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Art First is delighted to present four artists working in different mediums with a singular approach to their subject matter. What connects them is a fascination with the natural world and our own relationship with it. **Simon Lewty, Kate McCrickard, Jack Milroy and Mimei Thompson** are all artists whose work is held in museum and public collections. Their exhibition and publication history can be explored on their mini-sites on the gallery website: www.artfirst.co.uk.

Simon Lewty (1941-2021) passed away last year, leaving a rare legacy. We miss his gentle, brilliant presence and Art First is proud to celebrate aspects of his unique work with a memorial selection for the 2022 edition of LAF.

As an artist-writer, Lewty's chosen 'mark' is largely the written word in all sorts of different manifestations. In the earlier work such as *Badly Frightened* (1988), presented for the first time, human figures appear too, floating randomly in an open field where invented words and strange lettering emerge, and a narrative text that has no direct relationship with them proclaims 'THE BRAGGART WILL CEASE!'. Mysterious and moving, the drawing resonates somehow with the strangeness of Covid-19. It was completed shortly after his major exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery in 1985, which launched his career.

Accompanying drawings are more recent. All of his work comprises drawing on paper surfaces and his mastery of the calligraphic, the palimpsest, with graffiti and scripts in many hands is matched by his own poetic content. In 2012, he mastered 'tachygraphy' a now obsolete system of 17th Century shorthand, used by Samuel Pepys in his famous Diary. Its beautiful markings are used in Lewty's 2015 *Fragment from a Shorthand Diary* and evolved in his final years into magical small drawings called 'pencilings' in which the illegible script becomes a form of music, evoking a wordless sound of the sea or of the sweet murmurings of the Nereids, those mythological goddesses of the sea who captured his interest in myth.



Simon Lewty, *Badly Frightened*



Kate McCrickard, *Table Ghosts*

Kate McCrickard's *Table Ghosts* (2021) is a tall 1.3m painting, full of new departures. McCrickard knows her subject well, she has observed closely, pencil and pad always to hand, capturing gestures, moments, interactions. The daily rituals of family meals have fused over the years, especially those languid holiday gatherings of blended age groups including cousins, aunts, and family friends. The young are presided over by grown-ups, conversations unfold, everyone becomes a little older. It is a resonant work, cleverly composed for its universal narrative while retaining a special intimacy.

In recent works, ghosts and phantoms creep in to replace or surround observed figures, as the artist takes the real into the imaginary. Unintentionally, the theme of memento-mori has crept in – perhaps fitting for our times, or all times – but approached with a sense of humour. The medieval *Danse Macabre*, an artistic motif from the

late Middle Ages popular in times of plague and pandemic, discreetly informs works built around the domestic sphere and McCrickard's quartier of Belleville, Paris that has long provided an arena for image-making.

Mimei Thompson's *Metamorphosis* series of paintings is inspired by the findings of Maria Sibylla Merian, a famous 17th C naturalist and an influential entomologist and botanical artist. In particular Thompson is drawn to Merian's series from two years spent in Dutch Suriname around 1699, studying tropical creatures and their host plants. Merian self-published her important observations on returning to Europe – *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium* - with 60 plates based on her own exceptional drawings.

Thompson's interest lies as much in the botanical elements as in the insects that cohabit with them in a mutually beneficial ecosystem. Her luminous high-octane colour, brushed in continuous undulating strokes transport the botanical subjects into hyperreal 'bug parties' as notions of botanical and still life painting are fused, becoming something else that is contemporary, and which the artists suggests are mediations on a fascination with nature but also a modern disconnect from it.

Also intrigued by things botanical is **Jack Milroy**, who brings a scalpel to books about cottage flowers, and another book on regimental uniforms from around the world, with their colourful regalia of stripes and medals. The unlikely combination results in *Dressed to Kill*, a 150 x 120cm cut paper construction housed in a Perspex box, with the cottage blooms in a blast of colour, surrounded by black silhouettes of themselves and framed by the printed pages of the military regalia book. Edited and re paginated by Milroy, they tell a wry story of people dressed in military uniforms to kill other people in wars that devastate the natural environment. Ukraine, Afghanistan, Syria - war zones currently flashing across our screens raise many questions about existence.

However, in an unleashed abundance of joy, Milroy has also created *Fish and Flowers*, (2021) harmonising the botanical and the zoological within his vivid cut paper construction. Fish and flowers float weightlessly together, freed from their watery and earthly elements to showcase their gorgeous colours, generously bestowed by mother nature and Milroy's Epsom printer.



Jack Milroy, *Dressed to Kill*



Mimei Thompson, *Metamorphosis Series (Cardinal's Guard)*

Illustrated PDF's of the artists' works are available.

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