

## Moody & Muted

3 – 25 August 2023

Art First celebrates its first year in Lambeth since opening the new St Mary's Walk gallery space in September 2022. The late summer exhibition includes work by fourteen gallery artists:

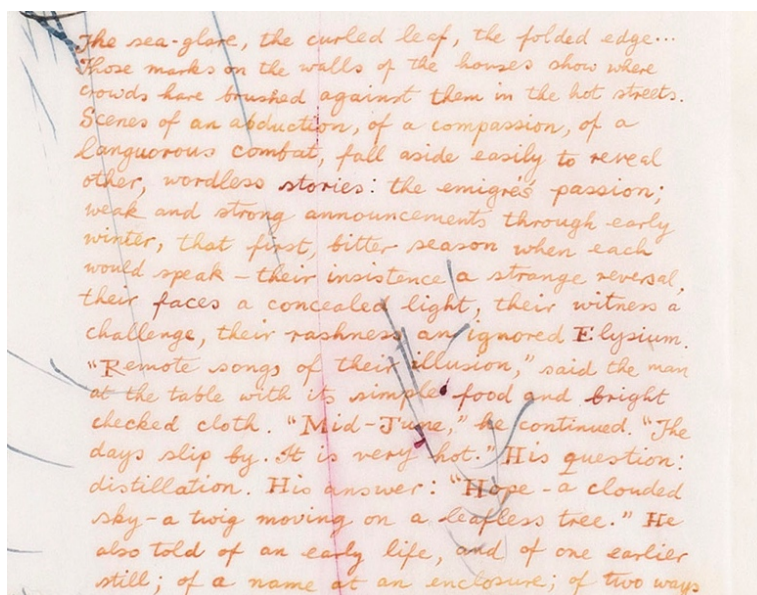
**Joni Brenner, Teniqua Crawford, Marisol Jacquemot Derode, Jake Harvey, Gillian Lever, Simon Lewty, Alex Lowery, Helen MacAlister, Will Maclean, Bridget Macdonald, Kate McCrickard, Simon Morley, Donald Teskey, Partou Zia.**

Presented is a group of distinguished artists whose work lends itself to the pensive, the poetic and at times the conceptual. Independent, challenging, and fascinating, many of them have work held in museum and other key public collections. Good publications are available from Art First, documenting their careers and their practices, with illuminating accompanying essays.

We are delighted to introduce two guest artists: **Teniqua Crawford** and the ceramicist **Marisol Jacquemot Derode**. Also included are **Simon Lewty** and **Partou Zia**, both no longer alive, but who exhibited with Art First and alongside their fellow artists in this exhibition for a substantial period. We are working with both of their Estates.

Affinities between the works emerge readily, for some of the dialogues are long established. There is an overriding shared interest in poetry and in the primacy of drawing; in the written word as 'mark'; in a fugitive treatment of subject where allusions prevail and evocations assert themselves with slow looking. **Simon Lewty's** *'Mid June'* of 2004 is a vertical work, its upper half a blush of terracotta pigment, the lower part a written text which in some ways defines the mood of this show. Here is a transcription of the opening section:

*"The sea-glare, the curled leaf, the folded edge... Those marks on the walls of the houses show where crowds have brushed against them in the hot streets. Scenes of an abduction, of a compassion, of a languorous combat, fall aside easily to reveal other, wordless stories: the émigré's passion; weak and strong announcements through early winter, that first, bitter season when each would speak – their insistence a strange reversal, their faces a concealed light, their witness a challenge, their rashness an ignored Elysium. "Remote songs of their illusion," said the man at the table with its simple food and bright checked cloth. "Mid-June," he continued. "The days slip by. It is very hot." His question: distillation. His answer: "Hope - a clouded sky - a twig moving on a leafless tree." He also told of an early life, and of one earlier still; of a name at an enclosure; of two ways*



**Bridget Macdonald's** majestic charcoal drawing, *Emblems for a Lost Prince* (over a metre wide) could be subtitled with a line from Catherine Swire's book of poems, 'SOIL':

*'We cannot be sure what counts most in our own history... the king drops away like a spider on an invisible skein'.*

In her catalogue essay for her May exhibition in the South Cloister of Worcester Cathedral, *Rain, Wind and Change*, Bridget writes about her connection with the poems:

*"These drawings have their roots in SOIL, a book of eight poems by Catherine Swire which was published in October 2021. The poems, with associated maps and essays, consider the layers of history and trauma in the landscape of the Herefordshire/Worcestershire borders.*

*Catherine's poems sparked my interest in Prince Arthur, whose exquisite tomb is in Worcester Cathedral. The poignant story of the life and early death of Prince Arthur, groomed by his father Henry VII to be the embodiment of the Tudor dynasty, is less well known than the lurid reign of Henry VIII who took the throne as the 'spare' after Arthur died at the age of 15 in 1502. Arthur and Catherine of Aragon had been betrothed since childhood but were only married for a few months.*

*I decided to use contemporary models and set them in interiors which give an idea of a place and time but are not specific. It helped that Catherine's teenage son bears an uncanny resemblance to contemporary descriptions of Prince Arthur, and her daughter makes a convincing Spanish princess.*

*It happened by chance that the exhibition at Worcester Cathedral coincided with the Coronation of Charles III, and the refusal of Prince Harry to accept the burden of being born into the Royal Family. Issues of how individuals come to terms or otherwise with the demands of the monarchy have come into focus once again.*

*Generations come and go, the rain floods the rivers and filters through the ancient rocks. Worcester Cathedral, Great Malvern Priory, Little Malvern Priory still stand"*

(The exhibition moves to Little Malvern Priory in June 2024)

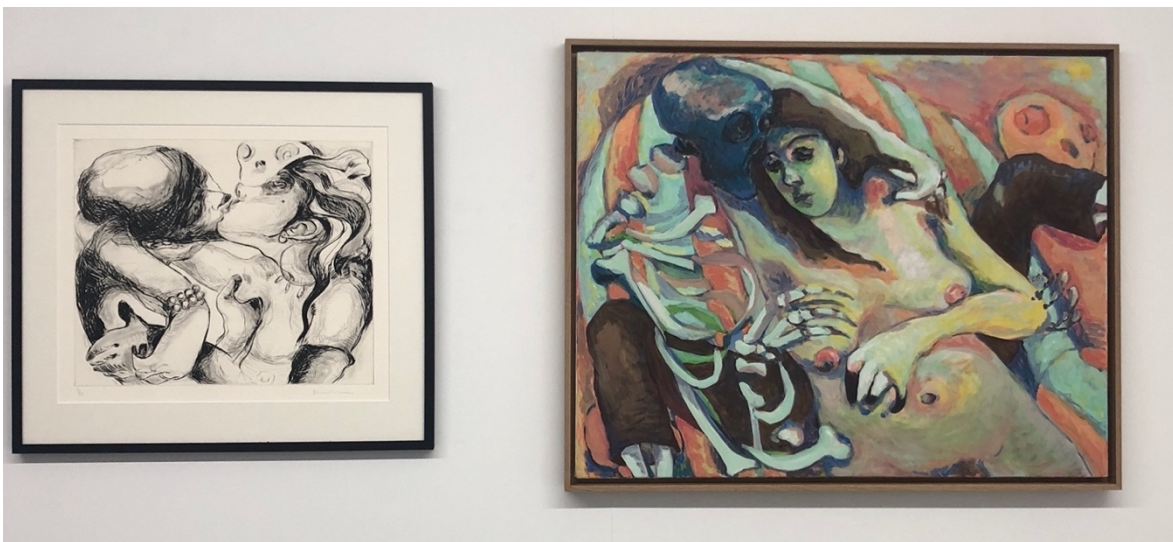


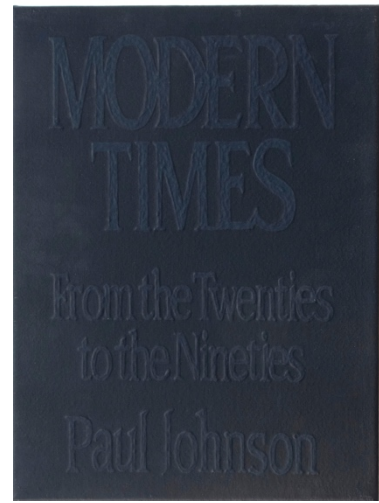
The figures in **Kate McCrickard's** painting *Death and the Maiden*, depict a skeleton wearing trousers, tenderly embracing a naked maiden. The work is from her *New Romantics* exhibition (May 2023) in which she explores, amongst other things, the post-pandemic interest in the 'Dance Macabre' but here there is a specific art historical reference to Egon Schiele's own 1915 painting of that title in Vienna. It was a central Romantic theme in music as well as the visual and verbal arts.

A different kind of embrace appears in her New Romantics *Punks* dry point. Seductive and beautiful, with a skeleton overlooking the lovers, her work aligns itself with that of **Joni Brenner**, whose rather sexy watercolours of two bellies from her *Navel Series* join the female gaze in relation to the nude in this exhibition. Brenner has worked with skulls and bellies, torsos and hands as fragments, as parts that speak for the whole throughout her practice. She wrote of her skulls that:

*"Every skull once belonged to an individual subject, and collectively, they are the most compelling of objects. They are deeply recognisable, and yet abstract – specific, and yet anonymous. It is perhaps what Warhol's assistant Ronnie Cutrone meant when he remarked of Warhol's Skull series that 'to make a painting of a skull is to do the portrait of everyone in the world'"*

**Teniqua Crawford's** *Seated Figure* is an inky blue back view of a female nude seated in deep shadow, barely there. She speaks of themes of emergence and embodiment in her work and being drawn to painting the back as it reflects the private and subconscious elements in life - our inner landscape.





That inner, spiritual aspect is central to **Partou Zia's** self-portraits, especially *Seat of Energy*, painted in 2006. She had cut her long hair short, to avoid massive hair loss during her chemotherapy treatment in a battle against cancer which lasted three years, taking her from us finally in 2008. Her double portrait shows the self and the beloved other, referencing the Persian literature that was a core element of her cultural background and infused her own poetic writing.

A more minimalist approach is adopted by **Simon Morley**, whose love of literature and history, of the monochrome and the book itself leads him to make paintings of book covers on 41 x 30.5cm canvases such as the 2010 deep blue *Modern Times: From the Twenties to the Nineties. Paul Johnson* and the dark red of *Age of Extremes: A Short History of the Twentieth Century 1914 – 1991. Eric Hobsbawm (1994)*. This is a tribute and a memorial to his respected teacher at Oxford and indeed a haunting title thirty years on. For his forthcoming exhibition here in February 2024, a key work is T S Eliot's 1922 *The Waste Land*, in which the titles, eg *The Burial of the Dead*, are shown, but the rest is blocked out in signifying colours - steel grey above, grass green below in this case.

Next to Morley's work is the sombre granite grey *Giben Ledge* by **Will Maclean**; a vertical, minimalist form of altarpiece with a deep central channel containing a bird lasso of the kind used by those former inhabitants of the far flung Hebridean island of St Kilda, before they were moved from that remote island in 1938 due to the spread of disease. Their survival depended on the sea and on those Gannets and Guillemots who nested in its vertical cliffs. A Gannet's egg, carefully filled with plaster by Maclean nestles on the lower edge of the recess with splattered white painted guano illuminating the lower section of the piece. A reductive tribute to a harsh life of survival and innovation, now relegated to history, this is one of the many quiet memorials Maclean constructs for those communities who are easily forgotten, but who have bound these islands together through their ingenuity and courage for centuries. As if to pick up this thread is his *Thoughts of Time*, an assemblage work of great delicacy and symbolic reference.



The sea and its marine light in Dorset – West Bay and Portland in particular – has been **Alex Lowery's** subject for decades. Flattened spaces, simplified forms, heightened colours, a compelling formal precision and painterly subtleties are the characteristics which attach themselves to Lowery's work - and to the work of the American realists, Alex Katz and Edward Hopper, whose influence he acknowledges. His architectural forms identify place and habitation without ever including human figures and the sea itself is often evoked through light alone, leading us to assume its presence.



**Gillian Lever** is also a remarkable colourist, working chromatically to suggest moods as her featured canvases *Solitude* and *Reverie* clearly demonstrate. She refers to her richly brushed works as 'soulful'. It is indeed spiritual and aligns itself closely with music - classical (often working with the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra) and Jazz. UB40 commissioned her to design their albums for 'Cover Up' in 2001!

The rich velvety charcoal drawings by **Donald Teskey** are the result of his current residency in Castlemorris, Ireland. The wild energies of his West Coast seas as they collide with the granite rocks in County Mayo have been harnessed here into nature's organic energies as the undergrowth bursts from the soil into the air and light, surging vertically. The expressionist vitality is astounding.

Earthenware is the material of Marisol Jacquemart Derode as she shapes clay into sculptural works and subjects them to the great heat of the kiln, where anything can happen. *Ruffles* is a bowl with a difference, sculpted, shaped, curled into a Baroque, organic object, while *Frou Frou* stands tall; a vessel in earthenware with a white sigillata exterior shimmering over finely incised horizontal lines and an explosive ribboned top glazed in burnt orange. "This is Balenciaga" declared Britain's leading moon jar ceramicist, on his mesmerised encounter. I think Crisóbal Balenciaga would be enchanted.



**Jake Harvey** carves stone wall reliefs in basalt, granite and marble which in 2022 lined the walls at Art First with an intensely tactile body of work. *Red Moon* is the beautiful colour exception, deviating from the black and white. The polished red surface gives way to the shimmering outer radius where the

stone is chipped to create a whiter luminosity. *Seed* and *Land* are from the white marble and dark basalt reliefs, all simple, silent forms, distilled to a contemplative essence.

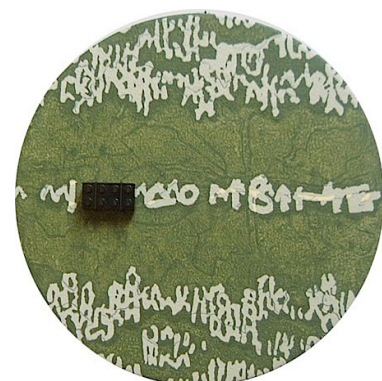
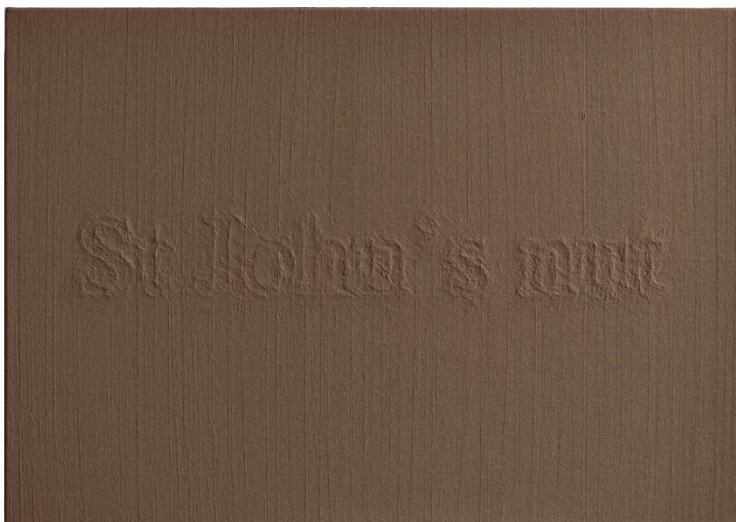
Harvey's worked, reductive surfaces share with **Helen MacAlister** an interest in what carries memory and meaning. Stone, like language builds gradually over the millennia and language rather than stone is her inexhaustible quarry. From her exhibition which launched the new gallery space last September, *The Glamour of Backwardness*, we present *St John's Nut*. The canvas appears to be mute. But look carefully – within the striated layers of built-up oil paint, browns and beiges, to reflect elements of the Hazel tree, you will detect the words of the title embedded, like a mysterious concrete poem. Everything she does relates to her investigation of Scottish culture, each painting in the exhibition has its file of notes back in the studio, taken from vast reading, and active dialogue with writers.

Of her work, Duncan Macmillan has written this:

*'Just think of the writings of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault and the whole argument about the opacity and inescapable tendentiousness of language, of the insidious gap between sign and signified that they explore. In the subtlety of her own inquiry Helen MacAlister may match them, but she never follows them so far as to lose faith in language. For her instead it is a rich landscape of shared experience and, like a landscape, it invites the painter's exploration.....for her, painting and language elide; words become painting; painting becomes words. There is no difference; her paintings [and drawings] of words are as visual as are her paintings of landscapes. '*

*'They are there in the unravelling of the layers of meaning of her reflections on language, on the exchanges between Gaelic and Scots, on poetry and on the poets and their commentators, to all of which she also adds her own words in the notes she writes as guidance to her work.'* (Duncan Macmillan, 'Hutton's Rock' catalogue essay.)

In many ways, MacAlister is a presiding presence, along with her older exhibition companion, Simon Lewty. When he was alive, he was fascinated by this young brilliant Scottish artist and asked me quietly if they could co-exhibit at some stage. Which they did. And do!



Paintings, drawings, assemblage work, sculpture, prints and ceramics are featured, with prices ranging from £500 - £30,000.

An illustrated and PDF with prices and details is available on request.

Please contact Clare on [clare@artfirst.co.uk](mailto:clare@artfirst.co.uk) for further information or to visit out of hours.