

# ART FIRST CONTEMPORARY ART

## DIALOGUE

**8 July – 22 August 2008**

**Eileen Cooper / Chris Orr    Simon Lewty / Susan Michie,  
Will Maclean / Hughie O'Donoghue,  
Jack Milroy / Liz Harrison    Karel Nel / Brad Hammond**

Five established gallery artists have selected a co-exhibitor for this exhibition, 'Dialogue'. The result is a fascinating series of exchanges across a variety of disciplines. The relationships concerned range from close artistic colleagues to long distance mutual recognition, with work arriving from Australia, South Africa, Scotland and the English countryside, as well as London. Our faith in each participants' integrity is rewarded with new insights and different conversations coming together in this stimulating and heady mix.

**EILEEN COOPER** has been teaching with **CHRIS ORR** (Professor, 1998 - 2008) in the Royal College of Art's printmaking department over the past decade. Their figurative narratives share a vivid, imaginary approach to the human condition and while stylistically very different and singular, their shared love of drawing informs all of their practice.

Although **SIMON LEWTY'S** 'dialogue' with **SUSAN MICHIE** has been so recent in time, her ideas resonate so much with his own, and yet are so utterly distinct from them, that the connection has been an intensely illuminating and rewarding experience.

*"A little over two years ago, when I saw a drawing by Susan Michie at the house of a friend, and knowing nothing of the artist or her work, the word which came spontaneously into my mind was 'condensation'. It seemed to evoke the silent spreading of mist on a window pane. Something of my first intuition was confirmed in a slightly unexpected way, when I later found that the title of the drawing included the word 'precis': that is, the 'condensation' of meaning within a written text. And this work was indeed derived from her writing. The rhythms and patterns of written words are present, as traces upon a surface, but their signifying role has evaporated, along with their verbal content, leaving a residue of silenced writing, an abstraction of an abstraction."*

*"A little later, Susan showed me one of her early notebooks, bristling with ideas of which only a few would ever be realised. It was a revelation to see how many of her ideas had originated in language, its structures, its mysteries and its play. Here was a person intrigued, as I myself am, by words. Referring to one of Wittgenstein's aphorisms, she told me recently of her fascination with the idea of 'the space between the object and the word', a philosophical idea to which she gives, through her work, a visual, sensuous response born of an inner necessity."*

Of her own work, **SUSAN MICHIE** writes:

*"During a brief period of studying contemporary poetry I quickly discovered that language inevitably has limitations. There are some thoughts and feelings that are very difficult to articulate and I've found that it's the space between language and meaning that interests me."*

Two of these drawings are taken from my hand writing. I've always been interested in the signs and symbols of early texts. I've tried to find a way of making my own language that is writing without words rather like Mendelssohn's 'Songs without Words' but instead of a music I've made a visual language. A quiet surface.

The repetition of a small mark is usually my starting point. A repetitive action can be obsessive (destructive) or constructive and I wouldn't like to say when one becomes the other. The repetition of these small marks builds up an image that could be something and yet that 'something' can't quite be described."

**SIMON LEWTY'S** work marks a new departure:

***Passing Days and Nights of Oblivion Will Drain Reason Before the Strength of the Flower.***

"For this work I have used a new type of writing which is in fact very old. Alongside the italic script which I have used for many years is a section written in the style which immediately preceded it. 'Secretary Hand' as it was known in its own day, was the workaday script widely used (by those who could write) in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries for correspondence of all kinds, literature and business.

It dates from a time before spelling was standardised. It was 'home grown', unlike italic, which as its name implies was a creation of the Renaissance. Eventually it was italic that proved the more popular possibly because it is easier to read and to write, and also because it was made fashionable by the court and the nobility. By 1700 secretary hand had virtually disappeared. Thereafter all handwriting in the West up to the present day was to be derived from the classic beauty of the italic model.

I have used this obsolete but still semi-legible script not as an exercise in antiquarianism but rather the reverse – to give it a new lease of life through art, and for my own special purposes and my own (modern) texts. It is a cursive hand, with its exaggerated ascenders and descenders and its extensive use of abbreviations and contractions. Visually these make for a highly expressive rhythmic counterpoint running between the lines of the text, sometimes indeed tangling them up. These movements are unforeseen and spontaneous. They arise from the nature of this particular script, and inevitably affect the way it is read. Some of the secretary letters are similar to our modern ones, but others, such as c, e, h, k, p, r, s, are different. The pressure of the pen is also much greater than with italic writing where, in the hands of a skilful calligrapher, there is almost no hand pressure exerted.

Despite knowing some of the rudiments, I am not a skilful calligrapher, and I discovered secretary hand, as is so often the case, when I was looking for something else. I was utterly captivated by its flowing spirit and I also liked the play on the idea of 'secret' which it contains. All I had to do was to teach myself to write it! The work in this exhibition, which undoubtedly contains errors, is the first I have done (but not to be the last) using this script."

**WILL MACLEAN and HUGHIE O'DONOOGHUE** have exhibited together over the past decade in group shows, such as those at Art First, and in the *Great Book of Gaelic* travelling exhibition. The artists themselves, and those collectors who have acquired their work and followed their developments, have observed an evident dialogue in the sensibility of memory as a central part of their practice.

**WILL MACLEAN** writes that:

"The essay by Aidan Dunne for the catalogue ***Last Poems*** (work by Hughie O'Donoghue) contains the lines. "A forceful act of will, a conscious gesture of remembrance in the face of what is fading."

*These lines brought to mind a mixed media construction that I had made in 1989 and was in the process of reworking. Archaeology of Childhood could be described in equivalent terms.”*

**Blue Horizon**

*The cross as a marker in the memory rather than a religious reference*

**Archaeology of Childhood**

*Excavation as a marker of the memory rather than emotive reference*

*I would like to thank Hughie for agreeing to this dialogue.*

**HUGHIE O DONOGHUE** has included a piece that was constructed rather than a canvas, as a way of complementing Will's own works. **Blue Horizon**

Is one of a number of recent works on the theme of fading memory. The image on the left is a fallen statue from the graveyard of Kiltane in Mayo, where his grandfather is buried, now overgrown and abandoned. The rough hewn structure embedded in the panel symbolises a marker in the memory rather than any religious reference.

Aiden Dunne wrote about this work for the catalogue *Last Poems* (an exhibition in Berlin at Galerie Michael Janssen). He describes it as a composite, made up of distinct sections and inclusions, mostly though not all consisting of found pieces of wood, and suggests that a recuperative impulse lies behind this method of working.

*“It is about making good what has been fragmented and dispersed, of putting back together what is broken, and the physically emphatic nature of the assembled panels underlines the energy entailed in achieving this,”*

**JACK MILROY** first came across Liz Harrison when she married a former student of his, Chris Marshall. He remembers seeing her installation at the ICA in a striking group exhibition called *10 Sitting Rooms* in the 1970's. Since then he has admired her work over the years, sensing areas of shared interest. His wish to invite her as his co-exhibitor for Dialogue testifies to his respect and sustained curiosity.

**LIZ HARRISON** says of her sculptural installation and video projection, **Utopia**,

*“A now demolished block of flats was re-constructed with transient material (graph paper) into an uncertain and fragile structure, as a utopian dream. The object's immateriality underlines the precariousness of the housing estate, as menacing real-life footage of its destruction (Wood Dene in Peckham) is on screen in the space. The video was shot over a duration of 4 months and records the gradual demolition of the site, in an edited version. While **Utopia**’s magical construction has evident links with Milroy’s work, **Log** resonates beautifully with the concerns of Maclean and Lewty.*

**“‘Log’ 2007 DV projection and book (duration 6 hours)** is a digital video of the writing of selections from Bligh’s logbook, presenting the historical context, bringing past and present together, written by myself in the 21<sup>st</sup> century but experiencing Bligh’s activities, through the re-writing of his thoughts.

*Captain Bligh’s logbook from the HMS Bounty is housed at the Kew Archives, and the selection chosen for re-writing is taken from the specific period of arriving at Otaheite to the leaving, and centres around accounts of the propagation of the breadfruit for transportation. Within these documents are accounts of the daily lives of the Otaheitian chiefs, their wives, rituals, sexual diseases and variations on their origins. It encompasses a selection of 57 pages of writing and spans from October 1788 to April 1789. It is shot in real time, written with pen and ink, but transferred through new technology documenting a very specific place*

and space almost 300 years ago. The ghost like presentation of the work, through its liminality, illusion and transience of time belies the physical presence of a 'me' re-experiencing Bligh in 2007, as he writes in 1788. "

**KAREL NEL** taught **BRAD HAMMOND** ten years ago at the University of the Witwatersrand. Born in Zimbabwe, Hammond is now resident in Australia, from where he shipped two remarkable works for this exhibition at Nel's invitation. Of **Cicadas, Manildra, Australia**, Nel writes:

*"The quietness in Brad Hammond's work is palpable. The very subject seems to encompass the radiance of an emptiness of mind, the recreation of a tabula rasa, but one that recognizes the invisible traces left in deep time by sheer friction on its erased surface. In his work, fields of impulses flicker and form as raw scripts of dissolving marks that hiss quietly like the non-sounds of deep space or consciousness itself. These soft rectangular forms blur the Western dominance of the page as a site of meaning. The dominance of this rectangle in our books, newspapers, television and computer screens and mobile phones is naturalized as the site of reading, recording, mapping and making our world. It is this authority that Hammond's work challenges.*

*Hammond's work has certain resonances with the pre-literate cultures whose worlds are recorded in very distinct ways. His work attempts to access deep consciousness in a way not too dissimilar to the great aboriginal works that map human consciousness in the form of vast landscapes, using songs as ways of mapping terrain during their far reaching 'walkabouts'. The complex aboriginal paintings made of dots, dashes and resonant circles have no horizon line and seem more like musical scores to the Western eye. The act of perception, of recording, gives rise to a world interconnected and animated, a terrain of being that is not linear or brazenly goal orientated.*

*Hammond's work seems to share many of these characteristics. His perception of our world trembles like a heat mirage. His choice of the title '**Cicadas**' helps viewers to focus on the spatial/sonic nexus in his work, the boundaries between silence, sight and sound. The works are visually barely audible, a soft bandwidth, like the sound of cicadas, so high pitched that their sound seems to approach and then change direction, like a sonic plane. It is these sleights of perception that Hammond probes with deft intelligence and, skill, a world of ineffable beauty and significance."*

Of his own work **KAREL NEL** writes

*I am at present engaged with thirty of the world's top astronomers on one of the most ambitious projects ever undertaken, to map two square degrees of the universe. The COSMOS project, now in its fourth year, has recorded over a million new galaxies in this small sector of the sky, galaxies as large as the one our own solar system exists in, and larger. The team's radio, x-ray, and infra-red telescopes have revealed awesomely beautiful worlds beyond all imagining, in this seemingly small, seemingly dark, two square degrees of the universe.*

*This survey of space views depths towards the centre of the universe by a series of slices entitled red shifts, like cat-scans. The red shifts closest to us, red shift 1 for instance, has revealed inordinate numbers of galaxies, which decrease dramatically by red shift 4 as one moves closer toward the centre of the universe and the singularity of the big bang.*

**Hidden Beauty's** nine squares, speckled with faint light traces are stacked onto a deep black of background radiation, from the beginning of the universe. The nine squares, slices of red shift closer to us, have the potential to reveal the great beauty of galaxies, galaxy formation and the formation of stars only if we are able to penetrate the vast distances and darkness with the scientific technology of our time.

*Members of the COSMOS team have meticulously observed and recorded hundreds of thousands of galaxies and have created a lexicon of different types and sizes of these structures to attempt to quantify and understand galaxy evolution. These lexicons form the basis of my work **Light Fossils** where I am fascinated by recordings of these fragile images of light, that we perceive left their source millions of years ago. They have taken so long to reach us that we are no longer sure whether their source still exists. Yet here we have these perfect images of how they were, just like early fossils, exquisitely preserved in every detail, petrified into stone and systematically laid down in the stratigraphy of our geological record.*

*These fragile images of light are made momentarily tangible in my work as they are imaged in materials commensurate with their subject: 540 million year old black carboniferous dust and radiant white salt; two deeply primordial substances, one from Gondwanaland (the great land mass before splitting into today's continents) and salt, a medium from the primal undifferentiated ocean. The shimmering refracting surfaces of both **Hidden Beauty** and **Light Fossils** evoke the evanescent phenomenon of photons travelling through deep space, here materialized into dense matter."*

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