

Fellowship of Professional and Amateur Artists'

Summer Art Exhibition, July 2013

at Wellingborough Museum

by David Rafer B.A. (Hons), Ph.D.

Thank you to the FPAA for inviting me to judge this year's summer exhibition. Over 150 entries were displayed this year, once again highlighting the great creativity and talents of the artists involved. During the last six years it has been highly enjoyable to not only view some of the society's output but also to have the opportunity to offer some thoughts on my personal selection through newsletter commentaries. Hopefully these thoughts have amused and perhaps encouraged interest by offering responses to the exhibited pieces. Whilst artistic expression is a highly personal creative journey, albeit nurtured through FPAA workshops, for me reception to the finished art is essential to connect to broader public audiences. Exhibitions and galleries offer opportunities where works can acquire kudos but the artist has to 'let go' of their work, to see if it lives beyond their nurture. This year again we have an eclectic range of art covering a wide variety of subjects, themes, techniques and skills.

Landscapes

Perhaps one of the most remarkable works in the entire exhibition was John Black's landscape painting, 'The River Nene at Ditchford' (acrylic on canvas), No. 11. This extraordinary work is all the more outstanding for having been completed by John in only an hour's painting master class. Working to this tight schedule, the artist realised a magnificent field of blood red poppies rising from the foreground, where their stems and leaves loom large, only to fall away towards the painting's focal point of two silhouetted figures standing on a ridge amidst trees on a narrow bank that is cut on either side by the Nene's flood water. These stretches of water are treated as mirror-like reflections of the sky's intense sunset reds and orange. Beyond the river a band of fields and hedgerows undulates on the horizon offering a truly magnificent vision that, like John's other exhibit this time (mentioned below under 'Fauna'), captures atmosphere and mood but also, for me, projects a psychological dimension.

In No. 144, Margaret Watt's 'Primrose Wood' (acrylic), the frame is made from actual bark, creating a rustic window. Our gaze is drawn into the picture through her winding path and there's the silhouette of a figure at the path's focal point. However, Hazel Claydon's No. 22 'Spring' is an intriguing watercolour of a woodland replete with a carpet of bluebells, the effect of bobbing blue rolling away amongst the trees providing a floating, ethereal quality. In Barbara Jones's acrylic, No. 51, 'After the Rain 2012', a crop has been flattened. White clouds drift against a blue sky whilst two trees break the horizon. There's attention to perspective in the forms created by the battered swathes of crop. In contrast, in No. 52, 'Lure of the Sea', Barbara Jones paints two figures that are scarcely more than silhouettes, standing on a beach with rocky cliffs curling round the bay and dark brooding cloud formations whilst energy and movement are captured through waves and foam. John Maclean entered two paintings, the first, 'Mull Sunset' offering a serene vista whilst the second, 'Lochranza Bay', No. 68 uses shadow and light to evoke atmosphere. Both works have a pleasing compositional clarity, simplicity transporting the viewer. Robert Pearce's No. 98, 'Isham from the River Ise' (oil on canvas), is a beautifully realised picture of fields cut with a meandering river with banks crowded with overhanging plants and woods. Hedgerows and fields roll towards houses on the horizon and river, houses, trees, sky and land all meet at the picture's focal point. Landscapes, for artists, inevitably involve choices including those of technical approach to planes, perspective and vanishing points that help

fool the eye into believing the work has transcended 2D. However, artists also strive for emotional impact that might move the viewer, for example, through colour schemes contributing to the evocation of mood, dramatic skies, and through using compositional elements for effect and impact.

Fauna

A single eye arrests the viewer in Carol Alderman's acrylic painting of a magnificent predatory avian, 'Golden Eagle' No. 1. There's remarkable attention paid to details of plumage and colour arrangement and the artist also contributed a winter landscape with deer in 'Montana Winter', No. 2. June Heath's, 'Stealth', No. 40, is a pastel picture of a black cat against a black background, thus, on initial viewing, only two luminous green/yellow disembodied cat's eyes stare out. Closer inspection reveals the impression of ears, whiskers and fur. Heath's black cat merges with the background becoming a presence rather than a substantial form, recalling for me associations of black cats with superstition and the supernatural. A concealed big cat becomes a similarly disembodied presence in Allan McIntosh's No. 77, 'Tiger Grass' (acrylic), in which a tiger's eyes are revealed through stripes of colour abstractly representing blades of grass. The tiger remains difficult to discern, its natural camouflage merging into its surroundings in an overtly stylised, patterned interpretation. Joy Barry takes hens for her subject using oils to paint 'Rare Breeds' (No. 8), whilst John Black concentrates on a vista of green fields for his grazing flock of sheep in 'Evening Landscape with Sheep' (oil on canvas), exuding an extraordinary sense of timelessness that evokes melancholy for the classic, traditional, pastoral painting.

The question thus arises as to how artists treat background when considering their animal paintings. Perhaps, like Heath (above), they might negate the background or see their animal's adaptation to their environment so harmonised as to become part of it as McIntosh projects or, by way of contrast, realise that animals suffer extremes such as we see in Christine Fitch's watercolour, No. 34, 'Winter Coats' in which two ponies shiver in a snow scene.

Flora

Zoë Alexander painted a cheerful watercolour, 'Pumpkins and Petunias', No. 3, creating a dappled effect on a wall whilst painting plant pots and pumpkins placed on top. Flowers and foliage are realised through the interplay of light and colour in Alexander's composition. There's an apparently haphazard collection of elements with pumpkins, pots and spilling flowers jumbled together whilst, in contrast, there's a far more focussed, controlled feeling to Mary Morris's paintings, No. 84, 'Cowparsley' and No. 85, 'Aquilegia'. In these works, Morris uses acrylics to realise stem structures and white flower heads against dark backgrounds, tending to black. The brilliant whites are thus picked out and the stems of these plants make for extraordinary structures as though viewed at night in close botanic detail as opposed to being part of a larger scene. They thus make intriguing subjects for art that whilst familiar to anyone walking a country lane in summer, become much more alien and extraordinary through Morris's artistic interpretation. In No. 48, 'Golden Rose' Lin Hunt uses oils to realise a single magnificent yellow bloom, capturing the folds and curves of petals with delicate use of yellow tones against a black background.

Buildings

In No. 7, 'September Cottage' (oil), Joy Barry lets nature dominate her painting of a thatched cottage beneath a clear blue sky. Teasels and other wildflowers and foliage entangle and loom in the foreground whilst fields are relegated to the distant right horizon line as mere background suggestions behind the tops of her foreground foliage. There's a contrast in the unruly wildness of plants beneath a pleasing vista of open blue sky. Marion Smart used acrylics to paint No. 116, 'Carreg Cennon Castle', positioned on a promontory, with hills in the background and foreground fields falling away. Her colour scheme and

raised vantage point work to reveal the immense castle structure almost like some further shape etched from the rock rather than simply positioned on it. Brian Munton positions Cranford St Andrew's redundant church foursquare in his watercolour 'Cranford St Andrew', No. 87, using the angular slope of the roof lines and crenulations to point upwards towards the tower that actually sits behind these structures in this end view of a Northamptonshire church building. Trees are set behind and also to the left. This particular viewpoint and compositional choice gives the advantage of 'balancing' Cranford St Andrew's arched windows to either side with the dominant larger window centred and topped by a smaller arch tower window, these architectural elements pointing heavenwards as the medieval builders intended.

Portraiture

Carolyn Bushell exhibited, 'Jeremy Brett' (No. 17), a pencil drawing of the actor in his most famous role as Sherlock Holmes complete with melancholy smile and violin. The artist's second exhibit is a pencil portrait of Frank Sinatra (No. 18), the torn roughened edges of her paper somehow curiously appropriate given her subject's 'rough diamond' character. Whereas Bushell's Brett is unmistakably the actor deep in character, her Sinatra trumps any particular category we might like to apply such as singer, actor or rat-pack celebrity by bringing us to consider him as a young man. In 'A Lady of Contrasts', 109, Nadine Platt creates a variation of a portrait of Marilyn Munroe, previously famously reproduced by Warhol from a photograph by Korman. Platt's twist to this theme reminds us of the Korman negative by dividing Marilyn's face down the middle, with half largely in negative black whilst the opposite side reverses this scheme. A sense of duality emerges through the dark side literally being shown side by side with the light, reminding us of inner and exterior whilst continuing the tradition of stylising this American icon. Robert J. Payne's No. 97 'Abigail' (acrylic), is a portrait of a woman realised with Art Nouveau or Aubrey Beardsley-esque stylisation. Her long, flowing hair creates a pattern and the work tends to the two dimensional with a hint of exoticism in the model's unusual earring, flower-adorned hair and detached, aloof beauty.

Awarded Works

The award of Commended was given to Carol Woodland for No. 149, 'Shade-giving Vines' (chalk pastel), a picture of a walkway overgrown with plants, that also has a barrow and a garden machine that might be a tractor or rotorvator of some kind. Use of perspective channels our gaze beneath the vines towards an open doorway, taking us from deep foreground shadows out into the bright light that plays through the overhanging vines, breaking up the regularity of a picture that whilst apparently showing a haphazard collection of elements makes for a technically proficient, skilful artwork.

Commended was also awarded to Brenda McKetty for No. 81, 'Waiting for the Tide' (acrylic). McKetty's familiar seaside postcard humour characterises this delightful painting of a coastal scene with stylised figures and 'sweetshop' fishermen's cottages painted with child-like bright colours as they march steadily down a sandy promontory towards a striped red and white lighthouse. Seagulls and fishing boats dot the composition with broader spaces of water suggested through ultramarine for McKetty's blue sea and dark foreground tones that lighten towards a flat horizon. Cotton wool clouds fill the sky, rising from the horizon line and who could fail to be charmed by such McKetty-isms as the dog and the red wellies.

Commended was given to Maureen Lynn for No. 66, 'Glimpse of Fruit' (oil). The artist has painted a still life of a bowl of fruit upon a table with dark background to the left, choosing for her grouping to allow fruit to not only rest in the bowl but also spill out. Light falls on the curved surfaces of blackberries, peaches redcurrants etc. There's skilful attention to the definition of leaves, colour harmony and play of light on Lynn's fruit.

Commended was awarded to Hazel Britton for No. 16, 'Mumbles Head' (watercolour). Water, trees and brooding sky in a snowy background make up this Welsh winter night

scene. Colour washes evoke an interesting sky with the pale light of a full moon reflecting on the water and two bare trees with reaching, bony branches serving to act as the picture's own interior framing device.

Commended was awarded to Juliet Illsley for No. 50, 'Clematis' (watercolour). Illsley's picture presents clarity, definition and simplicity of arrangement. The artist paints a flowering clematis with illustrative, botanic accuracy, creating art that is pleasing to the eye through a stem rising along her vertical frame and delicate colour washes supplying tonal variations for mauve blooms.

Commended goes to Shirley Smith for No. 122, 'Peaceful Retreat in the High Country, Australia' (acrylic). Smith paints an Australian bush or woodland scene with flowing waters. Sun-baked tree trunks form verticals whilst the eye follows the stream laterally away from foreground mud and rocks. The artist uses shadow and light to delineate such details as roots, branches and the water surface.

Commended was awarded to Mick Watson for No. 142, 'Rajasthan Woman' (acrylic). This portrait is a study of a Rajasthan woman whose arresting eyes capture the viewer's attention, drawing us into closer appreciation. The artist realises the lines and character of her face and the way light plays across her. Also, such details as plaited strands of hair, necklaces, highly decorated native costume and hair adornments absorb our interest in this dramatic work. Whilst there's careful attention to the complexity of this figure, the artist avoids distraction by leaving his background a plain light blue.

Highly Commended was awarded to Graham Plant for No. 107, 'Lorna' (pastel). Plant's subject is a woman seated in casual pose with a hand on her lap. Her shoulder-length hair, falling in loose curls, is held from her face by a hair-band. She's dressed in a cool looking white trouser suit; the artist realising the folds and also paying attention to details such as the ring on her finger. Plant adopts a minimal approach to his background using loose red shading.

Highly Commended was awarded to Ian Luck for No. 62, 'Reading Chair' (watercolour and pen). Luck adopts an illustrative style with loose, sketchy lines and blobs of colour. The whole is presented in a vertical slice partly revealing an arm chair, cushions and window with blinds and curtains. An innocuous, calming border and frame and the general loose, easy flow of line and colour describe just the place for a relaxing read.

Highly Commended goes to Allan McIntosh for No. 76, 'Irrawadi Sunset - Connectivity' (acrylic). McIntosh incorporates an array of elements for his painting of this river in Burma including elephants, Buddhas and sundry mysterious figures. The stylised approach adopted merges water and sky into streams of colour that flow with vibrant activity and interest, filling the picture space and projecting a spiritual dimension.

Highly Commended was awarded to Ray Roadnight for No. 112, 'Life' (oil). Roadnight paints an attractive, posed life model with three artists ranged in the background intent on transforming her into art. A limited palette is used tonally to create an effect reminiscent of a sepia photograph. The picture also recalls late 19th century artists fascinated by using line and tone to create mood. The model appears oblivious to her surroundings and admirers with her eyes down-cast, her curves and form curiously contrast with the flat, blocky nature of the artists' canvasses and easels serving to remind us that although she has vibrant three-dimensionality, their best efforts are confined to two.

Highly Commended was also awarded to Jacqui Tomlin for No. 132, 'Winter River Landscape' (mixed media). There's a warm auburn colour suffusing this winter scene, permeating the sky and reflected on the river surface, that counterpoints the coldness of cooler blue water and white snow-covered banks. Tomlin uses the river to provide a natural perspective line, drawing our gaze past tree trunks and bare branches.

Highly Commended was awarded to Pat Bustin for No. 19, 'Grey Skies, Burnham Overy Staithe' (acrylic). Bustin's atmospheric painting is filled with activity despite adhering to minimalist compositional elements. A brooding North Norfolk sky is created through impressionistic cloud forms whilst the horizon separates these mainly grey tones from the

salt marsh of Burnham Overy Staithe. A sense of engaging immediacy results with Bustin's marsh giving us greens and blues beneath an omniscient, open sky.

Highly Commended was awarded to Lin Hunt for No. 47, 'Romeo' (oil). A black male model's torso dominates the picture. He's adorned with an earring and positioned side on to the viewer, his head displaced to the top of the frame. Light falling from the top right illuminates his shoulder. There's sensuality exuded by the line of his body which provides an elegant set of curves from top to bottom of the picture and he's set off against a light blue background.

Highly Commended goes to Sue Lydia Taylor for No. 130, 'Still Life' (oil). Taylor groups an earthenware jug, mug and fruit. Her loose brushwork invests this still life with energy, the paint having a textured quality. A confident work results in which even supposedly flat areas of background remain full of interest.

Highly Commended was awarded to Linda Walton for No. 137, 'Willow' (acrylic). Walton's acrylic of a blue and white Willow pattern plate with apple and lemons is given a blue frame that picks up the colour of the ceramic's blue glaze. There's close attention to detail in the patterning of this ceramic and the folds of cloth or paper between fruit and plate.

Best 3D was awarded to Stella Benford for 'Darling Buds of May' (ceramic). Benford creates an aquatic-esque form sprouting mysterious fronds with sucker-shaped pads that are completed with small pictures of pink buds. The sense of buds emerging from this unexpected form makes for an unusual sculpture.

The award for Best Textile went to Dorothy McGuire for No. 73, 'Art Nouveau Poppies' (embroidery and stumpwork). The poppy heads are given 3D relief through sewn on petals jutting from the background in McGuire's textile, and the patterning of stems recalls the stylised approach of nouveau design.

The Patricia Glen Memorial Prize was awarded to Christine Fitch for No. 33, 'Hollyhocks' (watercolour). Christine Fitch uses viridian green and lemon yellows to create a serene picture utilizing the entire space with vibrant foliage, flower petals and angular stems. The overall effect projects a solid block of colour to viewers that we untangle as we follow the laterals of fleshy leaves and our gaze rises ultimately to lighter tones at the top.

The Peter Jenkyns Memorial Prize was given to Peter Phelps for No. 104, 'At the Recital' (acrylic). Peter Phelps paints the scene of a congregation gathered before the church rood screen to listen to a recital, allowing the Gothic architectural structures of soaring arches to channel our gaze heavenwards. The organist is just visible illuminated beneath the enormous pipes of the church organ that are suspended amid a 'cat's cradle' of medieval wooden roof rafters. Thus as the viewer explores this painting, we are brought into the space, imagining the great organ chords vibrating these monumental carved pillars.

The Vivien Schofield Memorial Prize went to Jean Daker for No. 26, 'Pheasants in the Snow' (oil). A magnificent cock pheasant with colourful, sweeping tail feathers provides the focal point of Jean Daker's painting from which the trees to the right, and to some extent the left, fall away in a perspective line. The whole work exudes a clean, crisp quality contrasting and picking out the colourful male pheasants and brown hen pheasants against blanketing white snow whilst the more vaguely suggested shapes of trees in the distance adds interest to the horizon.

The Celia Hanbury Memorial Prize was awarded to Ros Smith for No. 120, 'Awareness' (watercolour). The artist paints a small, neatly framed picture of deer that are captured as they look towards the viewer. They have presumably been grazing amid the high grass forming a carpet beneath them. Smith makes her grass as delicately spiky as the animals' pricked ears. It's a moment that will be swiftly lost the instant that the group decides to move, leaping away with tremendous agility, light as the wind.

Best Portrait was awarded to David C. Hunt for No. 46, 'The Explorer'. This pastel of Sir Ranulf Fiennes's weathered face dominates and fills its frame, the artist ably capturing the intensity of the subject's blue green eyes, flaring wild eyebrows, stubbly chin, unruly hair

and pursed lips. The silver frame picks up the silver streaks in hair and stubble and the face has a ravaged quality with staring eyes bedevilled by arctic wastes. There's a sense that perhaps the great explorer has just stumbled onto something extraordinary, an impression helped by Hunt's use of light falling on Fiennes's forehead and face whilst other areas drop into partial shadow.

Best Mixed Media was awarded to 'Anemones' by Angela Melhuish (ex. catalogue). This work has a textured, almost quilted effect, appearing as though pieces of cord or cotton may have been shaped into the surface. Stems in this work are green 'twig' like structures forming uprights on top of which bob colourful flowers positioned so as to loom from the swirl of background colours and tones.



Best Pastel was awarded to David A. Hunt for No. 44, 'The Flour Mill' (pastel). Here the mill pond's deep green shades reflect the columns of black that hang in the air above a flour mill. Buildings are mere suggestions that, unlike the artist's Scarborough hotel steps, defy location! A very evocative, atmospheric picture results full of mood and intent and all apparently effortlessly achieved through pastel.

Best Watercolour was awarded to David Miles for No. 83, 'Geese on Floodwater' (watercolour). This is a large confidently painted scene of a lake or coastal marsh. Flocks of birds tumble through the air and dry brush work has been used for the bank. Miles depicts the great changeability of a brooding watercolour sky, adding mood and a psychological dimension. The artist employs techniques such as wet on wet and confines himself to a limited palette with only a hint of blue and magenta to offer a key. Areas on the water are left without paint in order to suggest the sparkling reflection of light whilst reeds and bulrushes line the foreground. The illusion of depth is enhanced through the scaling of foreground reeds and rushes and the smaller, thus more distant, details of geese in flight.

Best Acrylic was awarded to Jill Smith for No. 117, 'Fuchsias' (acrylic). Fuchsia flower heads are suspended against an impenetrable black background that helps impart a 3D effect, heightening the colourful flower petals and bell-like shapes through a curious chiaroscuro effect. Smith's Fuchsia leaves create intricate green forms behind the brightness of her flowers and further draw the viewer into this enigmatic plant's intricate entanglements.

Best Oil goes to Brian Mutton for No. 89, 'But Winter and Rough Weather' (oil on board). Mutton depicts a knotted interweaving of twigs, branches, roots and trunks in this oil painting. We see a sawn tree trunk laid diagonally, stretched out like a whitened skeleton that draws our gaze from the right/foreground up and across to the mid/back left from where our view snakes around into the verticals of trees to the right and back. The sawn stump left in the ground remains a curious mote to the painting's mid-right whilst the titular ravages have mostly stripped away bark, leaves and any vestiges of life. Mutton excels at realising such natural forms, his work zooming in to fill the smallest areas with extraordinary abstract detail.



Runner-up Best in Show was awarded to Robert Pearce for No. 99, 'Breaking Wave, Southwold' (oil on canvas). A powerful wave rolls towards us in Pearce's oil painting. The artist involves his audience by 'putting' us into the foreground since we see no beach and mentally make the leap that we're about to get wet feet. The fact that nothing distances us from the immense force of sea rolling towards us on a stretch of coast containing a nuclear plant, is something that governments should ponder. The white foam filling the foreground space is as intricate as a lace-maker's pattern. The frame is deep and thickened around the sides adding to the sense of depth and imparts a



vertiginous feeling to Pearce's scene. There's the sheer power of the wave's timeless, elemental force to contend with and the framing, positioning and exclusion of anything human that might suggest scale all works to confuse our ordering of local environment. We don't quite know where the 'ground' is and are not offered the reassurance of a boat or a gull to offset the powerful effect achieved.

Best in Show was awarded to Clifford Knight for No. 58, 'Ruined Church, Segenhoe' (oil). Clifford Knight depicts a haunting vision of a ruined, decaying church, laid out like a broken skeleton. Our eye is lead from the right along a perspective path that takes us under a broad Roman arch and along the weathered, nature-ravaged nave. The discarded remnant of a stone block is all that remains of the font and grass and darkness shroud windows, arches and walls, penetrating the broken floor. The blackened stumps of roof rafters and shattered walls recall war artist John Piper's paintings of bomb damaged buildings but this has been painted in 2013 and thus Knight's bleak vision reminds us of declining interest in religion and the loss and abandonment of architectural heritage. The large canvas has a textured surface with liberal, loose swirls of black giving a loose, charcoal-like sketchiness that adds to the sense of abandonment. The only suggestion of hope lies up in the sky where bright hues of blue struggle to break through greying cloud, evoking a feeling of unsoiled, heavenly space above.



Once again, judging was made difficult this year due to the high standards achieved in this exhibition. The Mayor attended and addressed the preview evening's gathering, and I find myself in agreement with his sentiments congratulating all concerned.