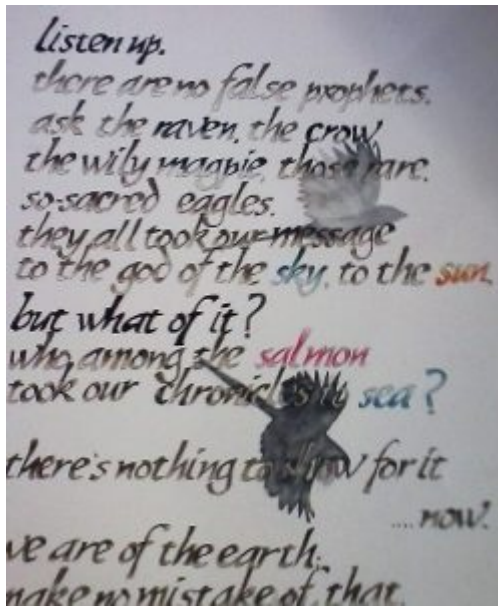


Cirque des Oiseaux: Artists & Augurs



Are Artists Augurs? asks the exhibition which opened in the Higher Bridges Gallery on the 7th of April and runs to the 29th. *Cirque des Oiseaux* is French for *Circus of Birds* or rather the circling of birds in flight, something we notice particularly at this time of year as new migrants begin to arrive.

Just as we look for signs of Spring, the Augurs of Ancient Rome used to interpret the will of the Gods through observing the flight and the calls of birds. The association of birds and poets is even older than that; it goes right back to the origins of writing itself. According to legend, Palamedes invented eleven letters of the Greek alphabet from the shapes that migrating cranes make in flight.

The exhibition is based around the closely-observed bird poems of Enniskillen-born poet Maria McManus, two of which – *Peregrinations* and *Corncrakes* are reproduced with permission elsewhere in this issue. They are re-interpreted and complemented through the work of eight other artists in photographs, paintings, sound, video, and sculpture. This gives the whole a pleasing unity, and a diversity that is not normally seen in one-person shows. The works speak to each other, sometimes using the same words and images, but none dominates. There is no predetermined path through, an effect heightened by excellent exhibition notes which, though they number each piece sequentially and map them clearly, do not list them in numerical order but by artist.

The connection with augury is perhaps most plainly seen in the work of Helen Sharp. What at first sight appeared to be silhouettes of birds in flight *The Jackdaws of the Newtown Butler Spar* are seen on closer inspection as shapes pierced in white cloth – literal rendings of the veil. The same image is used on a set of 'Oracle Cards' laid out like a Tarot reading on a table in the middle of the room.

Others are more oblique. Catherine Gaston's mysterious oil paintings contain

no birds at all (one is even titled *No Birds Here, Winter, Lough Erne*) except for the one titled *Murmuration for Maria*. Bernarde Lynn's photographs *Caged Birds of Hong Kong 1-6* and *People of Hong Kong* invite comparisons between the brightly coloured soft-focus close-up of the birds and the invisible people – represented by several floors of the facade of a massive block of flats – as neat and regular as a repeating pattern, yet no two exactly alike.

Some of the poems are presented in handwritten form. *Emigrés* is written in a tiny book perched on a swallow's nest and protected by a bell jar, *Corncrakes* on an accordion-fold set upright so that only a few lines are visible from any one position. It is accompanied by Simon Walters sound installation in which two recordings of the poem weave together in a sort of fugue, reflecting the tenuous lives of the birds themselves.

Others are meant to be handled (white gloves are provided) most notably Irene Uhlemann's massive handmade book *In Principio Erat Verbum* (In the Beginning was the Word) which with its illustrated excerpts stands somewhat in the tradition of the *Book of Kells* and evokes some of its reverence. *Home* is a collage of handwritten letters and poems contained within a folded map, as if remembering the journeys for which it was consulted, and *Peregrinations* is typewritten on luggage labels, one per line – a device that McManus also uses in her *Label Lit* project.

It is strange and somewhat delightful to experience poetry in such an indirect fashion, but does that mean that poets and artists are akin to augurs? Perhaps. As with all forms of divination, augurs relied on observations that were somewhat predictable (with a good knowledge of natural history you know what to expect expect from birds)

but never entirely so. They wove a story out of commonplace and overlooked details, always keeping a eye open for the extraordinary moments that give them special significance.

And so do these artists: go see for yourselves.

The Artists:

Maria McManus Tom Hughes Pearl Kinnear

Helen Sharp Simon Waters Irene Uhlemann

Bernarde Lynn Catherine Gaston Rosie McGurran