

ARUSHA

GALLERY

Palimpsestic impressions

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A palimpsest is a medieval manuscript or a piece of writing material on which later writing has been superimposed over its earlier contents .

The surface of the palimpsest is formed out of layers. Scripted line work written by different, overlapping hands contribute towards the production of this complex artefact, forming in years of concentrated focus something like the written equivalent of sedimentary rock.

They contain painstakingly transcribed histories and hagiographies. In the margins there are charms and magic spells. Secret messages and private jokes. Jocular observations, and absent-minded doodles. Delicately illuminated letters, the metamorphic line work signifying the most rarefied form of Celtic art, brushing up against pictorial illustrations of the natural world, bestiaries, and erotic cartoons.

The visual effect of a palimpsest is one of complication. Think a sketchy spiderweb, splattered and scraped in ink across parchment over many years.

Looking at its surface you are led to thinking about the hands which contributed towards its making. However accidental and contingent may be the composition, it ultimately forms what can only be called a work of art, the emotional intensity of which reflects the myriad versions of the imaginative life that it contains.

It is like a climbing wall in a gym or the polished floor of a school corridor, scuffed black by the movements of shoes upon the surface. It's like the stone stairwell worn down in the middle of each step by the weight of many walkers. A blue winter sky bearing the crisp network of condensation trails left by the many planes going somewhere, planes in which each passenger is like a moving container bearing a personalised equilibrium of expectation and regret. A landscape as seen from aerial photographs in which the remains of ancient ridge and furrow farming disrupt the patchwork quilt of open fields. A favoured tablecloth constellated by the stains and blemishes of many meals shared.

For the purposes of this exhibition - Arusha Gallery's first project carried out in collaboration with students from the Royal College of Art - the 'palimpsestic impressions' can be described as a mode of artistic practice.

It is articulated by the act of layering; by allowing ideas to converge; for disparate thoughts to associate; to build-up coincidence and accident, and so allow for slippages of themes across time.

Palimpsestic impressions here becomes a kind of moral intuition, a purpose felt, or at least a statement of attitude - one in which the artists have chosen not to flick in trancelike detachment through a vast array of

visual experiences, veering wildly between bipolar states of total absorption and impotent ambivalence, and reaching a state of complete befuddlement and disorientation... like a questing adventurer lost in a marvellous forest, disoriented by the strange sounds and visions which surround them... but instead to linger on a thing, to unravel it, to pursue it with focus, to playfully investigate where this thread might lead us. It is a moral imperative to *slow down*, and allow for complexity, even and especially where it doesn't make sense, or produce any obvious kind of meaning.

The viewer will surely find the result of these processes concentrated in the surface of the paintings. And so 'palimpsestic impressions' can also be understood as an interpretive device, a way of looking that exhumes a painted surface like an act of visual digging.

Tim Ingold's rumination on threads and traces in culture is useful here. A thread he defines as 'a filament of some kind, which may be entangled with other threads or suspended between points in three-dimensional space.' A trace on the other hand is a 'mark left in or on a solid surface by a continuous movement'.

The medieval manuscript is a record of human *traces* in the most obvious and refined sense. The monk's hand, holding its writing device, leaves traces of ink across the page. The sections of pages collected together are called leaves, and these leaves are bound to one another with waxed thread in order to form a single volume, the manuscript. As they are bound, the pages that are a record of human traces are brought into a direct and sequential relationship with other pages. And so the manuscript is bound together in a network of *threads* in two senses: in the information written on each page, that is brought into conversation with information on other pages, and also in the threads literally attaching the pages together. The palimpsest is a further concentration of this process where the written surfaces are worked back into, disrupting the traces already existing on the page, but also proposing new threads of meaning to the existing network, like a gardener grafting a cutting to a stem of a plant's complex, forking body.

In this exhibition we can discover a range of works formed in conversation with the idea of the palimpsest. We have bold, confidently handled images painted with the same anarchic and exuberant spirit as can be seen in the medieval imagination. In counterpart to this there are quiet, intensely concentrated works which effectively imbue the resonance or presence contained within the palimpsest, through their use of transparent layering, intricate line work, and a detailed attention to the materiality of paint. There are works grounded in observations of the natural world, forging a direct link back through the centuries to the quill and brush of the medieval artist.

The relationship between these works ultimately echoes that between each of the artists' developing practices as they undertake this special course of study at the Royal College of Art. Like the successive hands whose scripts over the course of time established the palimpsest, the artists whose work is presented for this exhibition are primed and ready to superimpose their own painted marks over the already-existing visual cultures of our time.