SIMON LEWTY

The SIGNificance of Writing

29 April - 10 July 2016

Learnington Spa Art Gallery & Museum
Royal Pump Rooms, The Parade,
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The Men Who Lie In The Road (detail),
1991, ink and acrylic on paper, 220 x 107 cm
Innocence Speaks of Light in Ways, 2012, ink and acrylic on paper, 92.5 x 63 cm
The drawings by Simon Lewty assembled for this exhibition give viewers a chance to see the consistencies that run through his work over a period of almost five decades. These include the significance of dreamwork, which has been both a direct source material for the artist and also a deep formal analogy for his work. These drawings, manuscripts, images, graffiti and narrative fragments are exceptional in the way they convey the unexpected shifts of view in dream experience, and the complex dramaturgy of dreams – where we are held within a narrative that an inaccessible part of our minds is telling. Lewty’s long-term commitment is not so much to dream-pictures on the surrealist model, but to complex modes of self-experiencing, of being both in and outside a represented event, story, place or time.

The Men Who Lie in the Road (1991, Leamington Spa Art Gallery & Museum) shows this clearly, and is also an example of a period of Lewty’s work that remains best known. The peculiar tall format comprises a number of separate panels, and at the bottom right is a view of a field and what seem to be pine trees, traditionally planted as boundary markers. The view of the field is quite different in character to the other images. But we cannot be sure it is the end or conclusion of the story, or whether it comes ‘before’ or ‘after’ the other images showing built structures, roads, walls and a mandrake root.

The movement of the eye around the other panels follows the running legs (with no body on top, just a face) in a counter-clockwise movement, up to the horse and rider, a notional beginning point. Graffiti between and over the images adds additional complexities, suggesting that more than one author may be writing the story we still hope to find. Later works, from which image as such is no longer to be found, can work very similar effects simply from coloured script on a surface. The eye follows the strong habit of left to right consecutive reading, but circles back to the beginning, encountering disjunctions and repeated sequences, losing place and finding it again. It is a complex sense of relation to something inside and outside of oneself.

Lewty made an intriguing public statement in 1994, when he introduced a separate publication of his writings from Peter Larkin’s Prest Roots Press: ‘Cradles of the New has the feeling of a tale, but the telling has been intruded upon, disrupted and overlaid. The characters echo the dramatis personae of my pictures: the mocker and the mocked, the staunch pilgrim, the old man, certain animals, “he” and “she”. The
places are also familiar: the path, the field, the barn, the suburb, the shop. The incidents belong to a time which is antique, yet modern too. Not “once upon a time" but simply "the day before yesterday" – gone, yet strangely present.’ Lewty’s work has developed considerably since the 1990s, and the role of depictions and images as such has diminished, but the statement holds good as an account of his strategies of telling, overlaying and disrupting, and of the peculiar optic on the modern and the new provided by his various ruses of antiquity – from italic typewriter fonts to 16th-century ‘secretary hand’.

Crucially, Lewty is not motivated by a simple literary ambition. He has remained a visual artist while having a deep interest in, and understanding of, the modes and complexities of writing, script and inscription. He has developed a highly consistent approach to making works on paper, which he has always treated as a pre-existing surface rather than a simple carrier for his ideas, and he has an intense awareness of the significance of the surface on which the marks and words are inscribed or traced, as well as that of the marks and words themselves. A favourite method is to work in ink on tissue paper that is then laid down over stronger and thicker paper that has been flooded with acrylic and wiped back: the allegiance is to an element of unpredictability in the process, as the layers are combined. Works from different periods show signs of being carefully worked, treated with transparent acrylic and restored from the attack or alteration which drawing and writing at some level represent. Lewty’s long-term commitment to a complex remaking of a surface, one that possesses colour in a rather mysterious way, has a vital relationship to whatever we might call the ‘content’ of his work. His understanding of surface is of something delicate that is at the same time capable of healing itself from wounds, as skin does: ‘To alter it while letting it remain the same,’ he writes in his essay ‘The Self as a Stranger’.

Lewty’s invitation to us as viewers, readers and interpreters of his work (this interpretation including the totality of its coloured surfaces and the quality of the marks as well as the words) creates a very special bond. The intense experience of concentrating, and of our attention drifting and then again recovering – or is it that the work forgets us and then rouses itself to attention again? – turns out to be unexpectedly open in its mental effects. It stimulates collective as well as personal reflection; what is most personal opens out to what is most public. This is work that makes demands on us, and at the same time opens up an intimate inter-subjective
space of encounter. It may resemble a notary’s agreement, summons, legal title or claim, written in a language we do not speak or read. It can be bluff and forbidding in its block-like arrangements of script, which our mind, seeking for points of contact, have to break into. It may be coded into historic forms of shorthand or handwriting styles that only palaeographers can read. But look again: Lewty’s words can equally open out with almost complete limpidity, and the effect is like looking into a pool. The words frequently tell of everyday experiences, that are being related to us in as straightforward a way as possible. It is precisely in the shifts between obscurity and directness in his work that such unexpected power can be found. The knowing use of a language of VISION has the urgency of John Bunyan and other literature of revelation, but the experiences being processed are secular and familiar enough.

Looking at this work, it becomes apparent just how singular and remarkable Lewty’s enterprise as an artist is. We are entitled to ask, what connection does it have to the wider currents of both art and culture in the period in which it has been made? Lewty’s education and influences, and the complex ways in which his work was received in the 1980s as part of the figurative revival can only be hinted at here. (The testimonies, conversations and essays that can be found in the retrospective volume The Self as a Stranger, Black Dog Publishing, 2010, set out Lewty’s development in more detail.) It can be stated, however, that the artist has both ploughed his own furrow and been strongly aware of contemporary developments of diverse kinds, from an early enthusiasm for Dubuffet and Tàpies to land art and Joseph Beuys, through to discussions of the most innovative contemporary poetry and writing.

In some recent works, Shelton’s 17th-century shorthand (or tachygraphy as it was first known – Lewty enjoys the connection here with the word tache, mark) is used to record the sound of waves. Can the sound of the sea be magically coded into script? Perhaps there is a hint here of the doctrine of signatures, that for each thing or phenomenon, there is, somewhere, a secret name.

When we describe someone as singular it is not always understood as a term of praise, and it may be a polite way of saying that someone is rather odd. I mean it strongly as a term of praise, and suggest that Lewty’s way of working and of involving us in his thinking and what we might call his ‘world’ – it is also ours – is an expert and original way of making us aware of what is unknown in ourselves.

The singularity of Lewty’s aesthetic thinking is as prominent in the work of the last twenty years, which is rightly emphasized by this selection, as it was in the first works by him that came to be widely exhibited in the 1980s. This is work that is not simply humming to itself but which also, without warning, SINGS.
Mythe, 2006, acrylic on tissue paper, 98.5 x 99 cm

Opening Times
Tuesday to Saturday 10.45am - 5pm
Sunday 11am - 4pm
Monday closed (except Bank Holidays)
Admission Free