An abstract painting featuring a central, translucent, yellowish-green flower-like form with multiple layers of petals. The background is a complex, layered composition of colors including deep blues, purples, reds, and browns, with visible brushstrokes and textures. The overall effect is ethereal and textured.

Louise McClary

a d a m g a l l e r y



Photo: Tod Welch

adam gallery

Louise McClary

‘and into the morning green’

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*Like something struggling to be held
And underfoot and in the heart and*

Keeping that promise upon which sunlight takes its bearings

Alice Oswald : from Ideogram for Green (in 'Woods etc., 2005)

Struggling to be held

What information about an artist's work do we need? Louise McClary has lived and worked in the north-eastern corner of The Lizard for 17 years. Its landscape is characterised by narrow creeks that cut into the land, bringing tidal rises and falls into narrow clefts filled with trees and flowers. Light and shade are constantly shifting, and wider expanses of water are only glimpsed.

She recently showed work in the beautiful small gallery at Kestle Barton, a short distance from her home, and from the places that she visits to feed both her imagination and her knowledge of the landscape.

This was an opportunity to experience her work in a context that emphasized the specifics of her working life in the locality. Unusually, it included her sketch books. They evidence the places she studies, in intense moments of work in pencil, watercolour and body colour. Pages were filled with consistent address of particular places, each with their own subtle differences of light and detail as she went her way. It implied a specific route, a walk from Gear Mill to Frenchman's Creek.

Having followed her work for many years, I found the inclusion of these sketchbooks curiously troubling, beautiful and informative as they were. McClary long ago decided to not give her works specific place names. Instead her titles promote an open, ambiguous reading of the work.

So, looking at the sketchbooks as a record of place is only one way of gaining insight to the work, fascinating as it was to understand some of the directness of the connections and the empathy felt for each place. It became important to question whether we were being asked to see these as 'explanations' of the paintings? Does the information in sketchbooks, with dates, times, places all listed, demand a specificity of relationship between such details and the works? Or are we, instead, being asked to see how different the paintings were from this form of study?

Indeed, whilst the work begins as a layered evocation of form, colour and light in nature, they rarely end there. The surface of the picture plane works in tension with implied surfaces within the image, ensuring that we might not just look 'down' or 'up' but also 'past', 'within' or 'under'.



1. Memory River Sharp mixed media on linen 128 x 128 cm

It is also tempting to pursue imagery of the body, of organs as well as organic forms. Others have noted in comment on her past work and exhibitions the nature of these associations – specific but generic, provocative of natural or organic form but not descriptive.

To take a different example of study, a different starting point from the sketchbooks, one might ask – where is the poetry in observation? Out of what experiences is the experience of place built, transformed and shared?

Poetry and the work of contemporary poets have been another source of reference for writers about her work. In her studio, after all, the sketchbooks jostle for space with open anthologies, handwritten notes and transcriptions she has made from reading, and close to hand copies of works by trusted authors : Denise Levertov, and, particularly at the moment, Alice Oswald. She has recently re-read Ted Hughes, realizing new insight and feeling.

However, she is, after all, a painter not a poet. Whilst poetry helps us find ways of expressing to each other what is difficult to pin down in our reactions to her work, her work remains the paintings themselves.

She stopped painting for about four years when she moved to the Lizard. She devoted her energy and imagination to her new garden, and to her children, of course. The garden offers ideas to re-express our reactions to her paintings as much as poetry: flecks of colour waving and floating against dark spaces and emerging from passages of ethereal early light.

It is difficult to resist the idea that, like the great historic artists' gardens that we might visit, the garden operates as not quite a work in itself. We sense an opportunity to put color in space, to create passages of light and dark, and experience it through seasonal change with a tension of control between gardener as author and her collaborators, weather and time as generators and mediators.

And while she has left behind Penzance and St Ives' streets and studios, and Penwith's open spaces, cliffs and horizons, it may be worth remembering that at that time she made extraordinary quasi figurative paintings, which prompted the idea that they may be allegorical in some way, about the interaction between people or types of people, about human touch, empathy and distance. She reminded visitors to the Kestle Barton show about this when recalling the moments of contact with fellow occupants of her working places – a farmer tending a cow's hoof; or news that a bull has headed off for a new field for different action.

What was it in her painting language that fell away to reveal the more open ended enquiry that we now enjoy? Surely her first grasp of human touch and its physical expression in paint has persisted, even while her work has become ever more open in its associations of form and colour?



One reference to painting that McClary makes is to the work of Joan Mitchell. She first experienced Mitchell's work in 2003, visiting the Musee des Beaux Arts in Caen. Mitchell, in the last decades of her life, lived at Vetheuil, near Monet's garden at Giverny. What was presented as her first UK solo show in 2010 took place at Inverleith House, in Edinburgh's Botanic Gardens. It inspired McClary to make a one-off trip from Cornwall.

These settings prompt a kind of extended metaphor that has attached itself to Mitchell's work: that the idea of the garden and the flora of the landscape create a vocabulary of experience which is then translated into the space of each work.

In some ways Mitchell's gender, and her attachment to artists connected to centres beyond New York, most obviously Paris, has served to modify the framing of her work as 'Abstract Expressionist'. For a brief moment in the late 1950s, some of the artists she was close to, such as Jean-Paul Riopelle and Sam Francis, were defined by a term said to have been first used by Elaine de Kooning, 'abstract impressionism'.

Yet Mitchell's paintings still depend on our sense of the edge and surface of the canvas or sheet of paper as an arena in which to act. A comparison that this might prompt with McClary's recent work is a technical one: the way McClary has settled into a structure of using prepared square canvasses in squares generated by a multiple of 10 inches.

This creates a known 'edge', a space into which colour flows, surfaces layered and marks and gestures formed. Into this arena is brought the experiences of the artist, distilled and displayed on that surface and within that space.

It is in this understanding of other artist's painting that we must understand Louise McClary's mining of poetry. It is in this way that we must also understand her collecting of information and experiences in the landscape. It is all, and equally, at the service of her self reflection on the physical, emotional and imaginative experience of her environment, and particularly at the service of how this comes to form meaning and experience on the surface of the painting.

Michael Tooby



3. Dark of Water, Bright of Sky mixed media on linen (triptych) 120 x 40 120 x 50 120 x 40 cm

4. In the Sky of Water mixed media on linen 150 x 179 cm





5. Pouring the Light In mixed media on linen 65 x 65 cm



6. Broken in Air mixed media on linen 100 x 100 cm



7. At the Edge of Dawn mixed media on linen 65 x 65 cm



8. Caught in the Mantilla of Empty Tress mixed media on linen 100 x 100 cm



9. And the Morning Green mixed media on linen 46 x 46 cm



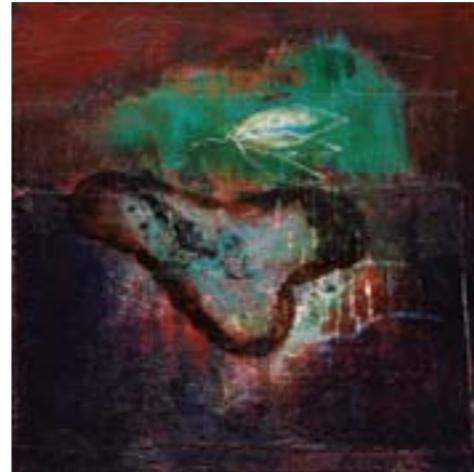
10. From the Stillness mixed media on linen 25 x 25 cm



11. Rush if Wind Carries her Voice Downstream mixed media on linen 100 x 100 cm



12. Into the Jewel of the Morning mixed media on linen 46 x 46 cm



13. Trees Shake Out their Shadows mixed media on linen 25 x 25 cm



14. Into the Dust if Being mixed media on linen 40 x 120 cm



15. Bright Jewels Shine in the Morning Dew mixed media on linen 65 x 65 cm



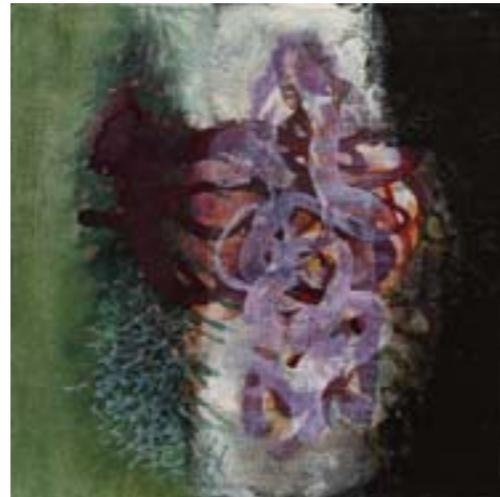
16. Hymn to Cloud mixed media on linen 25 x 25 cm



17. Gathering Songs from the Night Air mixed media on linen 78 x 78 cm



18. Into the Cool Morning mixed media on linen 65 x 65 cm



19. Dancing in Shadow mixed media on linen 25 x 25 cm



20. Beneath the Song of the River mixed media on linen 78 x 78 cm



21. Mantilla of Dusk mixed media on linen 65 x 65 cm



22. River Shakes Hands with the Sea
mixed media on paper 30.5 x 30.5 cm



23. Going Beyond the Clouds mixed media on linen 76 x 76 cm



24. This Evening's Single Song mixed media on linen 65 x 65 cm



25. Autumn Finds Her Way to the River
mixed media on paper 30.5 x 30.5 cm

Biography

Born Penzance, Cornwall

1974-76 Penzance School of Art, Cornwall

1976-81 Head decorator, Troika Pottery, Newlyn, Cornwall

1990-95 Tenant of No. 6, Porthmeor Studios, St. Ives, Cornwall

1993 Elected member of Newlyn Society of Artists, Cornwall

1995 Moved from St. Ives to Lizard Peninsula, Cornwall

Member of : The Newlyn Society of Artists, Newlyn, Cornwall

Awards

2003 Arts Council of England

Selected Solo Shows

- 2010 Millennium Gallery, St. Ives, Cornwall
Adam Gallery, Bath, Somerset
- 2009 Bohun Gallery, Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire
- 2008 Cadogan Contemporary Gallery, London
- 2007 Bohun Gallery, Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire
New Millennium Gallery, St. Ives, Cornwall
- 2005 'Stations of the Cross', Truro Cathedral, Cornwall
New Millennium Gallery, St. Ives, Cornwall
- 2003 New Street Gallery, Plymouth, Devon
'Transition 4', Newlyn Art Gallery, Newlyn, Cornwall
'Stations of the Cross', Southwell Minster, Nottingham
- 2002 Badcocks Gallery, Newlyn, Cornwall
'Stations of the Cross', Harbourside, Kingsbridge, Devon
- 2001 New Street Gallery, Plymouth, Devon
Badcocks Gallery, Newlyn, Cornwall
- 1995 New Street Gallery, Plymouth, Devon
Beaux Arts, Bath, Somerset
Porthmeor Gallery, St. Ives, Cornwall
- 1993 Beaux Arts, Bath, Somerset
- 1991 Beaux Arts, Bath, Somerset
New Street Gallery, Plymouth, Devon
- 1990 Southgate Gallery, Launceston, Cornwall
- 1989 Young Unknowns, London

Photography: Steve Tanner

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