

JONATHAN DELAFIELD COOK CLOSE TO HOME

29 April – 29 May 2021

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Bull 2019
Charcoal on linen
180 x 272 cm / 71 x 107.5 in



UTTERLY LIFELIKE, UTTERLY OTHER

Paper. Scissors. Stone. Feather-charcoal. Surely they aren't compatible? In the hands of Jonathan Delafield Cook a stick of carbonised willow deftly conjures the very weight and texture of the lightest of feathers. The Dürer of the lump of coal, via his chosen medium you look into the soul of animate beings and feel a soul in the inanimate. From the sensuous hidden depths in a waxy magnolia flower to the poundage and vulnerability of an armoured rhinoceros, the tenacious power of a barnacle or the water borne magnificence of a whale, all are accorded their intrinsic spirit with no sense of hierarchy.

There is a self-avowed pre-enlightenment spirit to this natural philosopher who delivers fundamental truths about nature through the prism of soft subtle texture and tone. From the moment of Jonathan's first charcoal drawing of a fishmonger's box of minnows his gaze on the world shifted into a tonal exploration of the natural world. Nature has been his fixed star. Bird, beast, fish and flower are the circling planets he draws in consecutive phases. 2020 was destined as a year to explore botanical themes and the lockdown pandemic set him momentarily into retrograde motion. Unable to roam far afield his inquisitive eyes had to settle on the fields around him. Just as unease set in his wife, the illustrator Laura Stoddart, yielded a rich seam of inspiration and material from their garden.

So here we have poppy, dahlia, rose, tulip. Utterly lifelike. Utterly other. A young bull from the nearby village of Stogumber and a local Border Leicester sheep. Utterly lifelike, utterly other. You could put Jonathan Delafield Cook on a desert island with a box of matches and some very fine grade Fabriano paper, not too rough, not too smooth and magic would happen.

Jonathan's observational skills were honed as a child of nature, the son of artists; summers were spent in Deia, Mallorca where he was gifted a Durrellian freedom to explore coves and caves while the poets and painters explored their own inner child in a haze of smokey happenings. Binoculars, birding and barnacles were Jonathan's favourite things and then as now he would get lost in the detail of fissures and fractures. There is something of the cove and cave in all his work, a geological pattern he simulates in the haunch of a bull or the rock face complexity of a crinkle-petalled oriental poppy. He likes to capture plants at the moment they are poised between sumptuous strength and the onset of decay, when the cliffs and ravines he sees in the architectural structure of their veins and cells starts to crumble.

Jonathan claims there is not a hint of intentional eroticism in his work and that he chooses plants on account of the way light disappears into their twists and turns. There is however an undeniable voluptuousness to the divas and courtesans he has honed in on for this exhibition, individuals with luxurious satin folds and firm cusp-of-falling petals. The tactile quality of Jonathan's work, his sensory evocation of texture is so strong that as you edge closer in disbelief you start to feel the very temperature of his subjects. Like a Holbein fur cuff or a diaphanous Botticelli gauze veil you stand inches away gazing with a sense of wonder. Jonathan puts it all down to the charcoal. 'I mean, it's just *luscious* if you can get it right'. Something he seems to do each and every time.

Last year had been earmarked as his year to finally examine the world of the rose. ‘There is a challenge in doing roses because they come with a lot of baggage, flowers are beautiful to begin with so you’ve got to find another way into them that’s not just about prettiness’. A hybrid tea rose they inherited had been a mistreated thorny encumbrance on the building site of their new home. It bounced back from a series of dramatic prunings to reveal itself as the overlooked gem in Jonathan’s quest for the perfect rose. Sturdy ruby red stems topped by luscious scented blooms all summer, a creature henceforth destined to be treated with a bit more reverence. This serendipitous discovery was made just before the dahlias kicked off.

‘These ludicrous psychedelic things bobbing around just kept on coming month after month’. The object that caught Jonathan’s gaze for its graphic potential was the glorious bi-coloured ‘Tartan’ with wildly swirling petals of crystalline white that switch to a suffusion of brilliant scarlet and rich aubergine. Here as a gift from the well toiled soil of their vegetable garden was a flower with power to be rendered in a full spectrum of tonal glory. It seems the very image of perfection on a studio table but Jonathan points out its myriad faults: the edges of colour shift that need expressing, ‘I need to put some more punch into the right hand side, give it some balance and play those off against the whites’. And to do this he has his battery of tools beside him, small stubs and thick slabs of dry or waxy charcoal mixed with various amounts of oils to give them a warmer tone, an assortment of erasers from putty soft to diamond hard, soon to be extinct typewriter correctors, wire wool and an assortment of cloths that look like they have lived in a blacksmith’s forge. Is he not terrified of letting these go anywhere near the pristine paper? Obviously not as he proceeds to show the rough and tumble of mark making and rubbing out. He deftly adds some crisp lines ‘to reveal the dynamic passages in there offsetting these’. A curling white petal is immediately elevated to a classic evocation of Tartan. ‘Hopefully this is going to be a really vivacious image’. Its energy is already pulsating and palpable.

The flourish that marks the end of a flower painting is the composition of its stem. Laura’s unerring eye is usually called for to corroborate or criticise the final placing before a bravura moment of Pollockian fixative flicking. With tape to mask mistakes a signature abstract lichen pattern is splashed onto paper or canvas in a liberating moment of controlled chance. I am supposedly here to see the flowers but the bull and the sheep are practically moving around the studio and it is their hooves that have this speckled stamp. I want to run my hands through their dense oily soft coats, rub their muddy knees and avert the souls in their eyes.

Jonathan confesses that ‘the bigger the creature the more hefty and physically intimidating but more poignant they are because they are so totally beholden to us.’ These drawings are marathon tasks, they take months, sometimes years, of lavish attention. ‘You really have to love the subject and be able to respond to whatever the quality within it is that attracts you.’ His animals are full of wild swirling moments where Jonathan finds himself getting deliriously lost. ‘That’s kind of the interest for me, the getting lost and going down passages of drawing, it’s all about tone and what charcoal can do’.

It's actually all about what Jonathan can do with charcoal. Himself a very singular species with the mind of a scientist and the heart of an artist. We as viewers also get lost in Jonathan’s work, lost in awe and wonder at his capacity to channel the very heart and soul of the natural world.

(Tania Compton, April 2021)

Poppy I 2021
Charcoal on linen
80 x 98 cm / 31.5 x 38.5 in



Poppy II 2021
Charcoal on canvas
80 x 97 cm / 31.5 x 38.25 in



Poppy III 2021
Charcoal on canvas
80 x 112 cm / 31.5 x 44 in



Tulip 2021
Charcoal on paper
49 x 64.3 cm / 19 ¼ x 23 ¼ in





Rose I 2021
Charcoal on paper
66.7 x 82.8 cm / 26.25 x 32.5 in

Rose II 2021
Charcoal on paper
61.8 x 89.8 cm / 24.25 x 35.25 in



Rose III 2021
Charcoal on paper
66.8 x 82.8 cm / 26.25 x 32.5 in





Rose IV 2021
Charcoal on paper
61.8 x 82.8 cm / 24.25 x 32.5 in



Dahlia I 2020
Charcoal on paper
42 x 59.8 cm / 16.5 x 23.5 in

Dahlia II 2020
Charcoal on paper
42 x 58.8 cm / 16.5 x 23 in





Border Leicester Sheep 2020
Charcoal on linen
112 x 126 cm / 44 x 49.5 in



Zwartbles Sheep 2019
Charcoal on linen
100 x 145 cm / 39 x 57 in