



Cathie Pilkington Pieta 2: Strange Coast 2018 photo Perou front: Marion Adnams Serpents In Your Tides 1940 © Marion Adnams Estate



Strange Coast
Cathie Pilkington & Marion Adnams
25 May – 23 June 2019

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The shoreline is a place where random and unexpected things fetch up, a place of rampant entropy where natural debris and lost or discarded human objects are transformed and reassembled. The exhibition *Strange Coast* is an imaginary version of that kind of shoreline, washed into a dimly-lit cave-like space in Hackney. Marion Adnams’ paintings often include a featureless, expansive shoreline. She wrote that she found the sea too restless and disturbing, so she kept it in the background, preferring hard, sharp, still objects that she could arrange to draw and paint in perfectionist detail; skulls, bones, shells and folded paper figures. But then a frozen tidal energy returns in both the empty shoreline and the foreground objects, making them forcefully beautiful and a bit deathly.

Strange Coast is also a transitional space, a meeting place for two artists, Marion Adnams and Cathie Pilkington, a staged dialogue between a painter who made and depicted assemblages of borrowed objects and folded paper figures, and a sculptor, who collects and arranges stuff which may be found or painstakingly modelled and painted. If the exhibition looks like a collaboration between two artists riffing off each other’s inventions, that is a testament to Pilkington’s ability to attune herself to others’ work and specific environments, thematising and augmenting small details so they echo round the space. The corrugated pattern of the gallery’s shuttered frontage returns in Pilkington’s pleated prints and Adnams’ folded figures, turning up again in layered blankets, containing sleeping heads like fossils in geological strata. Gathering, folding, pleating and doubling form guiding metaphors for the exhibition. Large spaces telescoped into smaller ones, creating a domestic-baroque habitat which nests multiple minor jumbled and entangled worlds.

Adnams worked as an artist in relative isolation in Derby. She was also a school art teacher and *Strange Coast* has the barnacled feel of a well-used art room, cluttered with natural forms and redundant artefacts. Pilkington has spoken about how school art rooms were a place of refuge. The nature table, especially, exerted a mystical fascination; a twisted tree root could insert some agitating strangeness into the banality of classrooms and corridors; a pebble with a hole could be an infinitely meaningful personal talisman, an object of passage to a precious inner life. There is a photo in the exhibition showing the elderly Adnams peering closely at a pierced stone. At this point she was almost blind, but she looks like a clairvoyant channelling a hidden force, oddly reminiscent of the teacher on the back cover of Led Zeppelin’s *Presence* album.

In *Strange Coast*, Pilkington’s and Adnams’ identities repeatedly merge and separate. They are generated out of a network of links, connecting past and present, interior and exterior, figure and ground. This continues Pilkington’s modus operandi of finding and supercharging unlikely resources in neglected corners; provincial British Surrealism, non-site garden ornaments, 1970s children’s book illustrations and fly-tipped remainders of art history, establishing her own minor genealogy and personal matrilineage.

Neil Walton 2019



Portrait of Marion Adnams by Jane England



Paul Nash (1889 – 1946) *Strange Coast* 1920 Lithograph on paper 315 x 406mm Pallant House Gallery Chichester (The George and Ann Dannatt Gift, 2011) Photo credit: © Pallant House Gallery

Cathie Pilkington and Angela Kingston
a conversation in the studio before the show

AK: In this exhibition, *Strange Coast* at Transition Two, you’re reflecting on Marion Adnams’ art practice in relation to your own. Could you talk about your approach?

CP: The last three or four years I’ve been working with the starting point of a historical object, or collection, or room – like the Royal Academy Life Room – which were very loaded spaces to work with at the outset. I wanted to see what would happen if I started with a more ‘blank’ space.

The title of the show comes from a lithograph by Paul Nash, *Strange Coast* (1920) which I became very pre-occupied with when I was building my installation *Working From Home* at Pallant House Gallery last year. This lithograph and works by other artists in the Pallant collection, like John Armstrong’s, really reminded me of Marion’s work. I had seen her painting *Serpents In Your Tides* (1940) a couple of years ago and I couldn’t get it out of my head. After finding out a bit more about her, I decided I was going to try and collaborate with her – by seeing if I could borrow some of her work and build a response to it. Transition Two focuses on two-person shows, so *Strange Coast* is going to be a conversation between myself and Marion Adnams (1898-1995).

AK: What kinds of connections are you making between Marion Adnams and yourself?

CP: My immediate reaction to *Serpents In Your Tides*, was all about the paper doll in this painting – the pleats, the ‘paper-ness’, the blankness of the figuration, the simplification and removal of any kind of subjective person, the painted depiction of this made object. There are a lot of things in the painting that are almost parallel to what I’ve been doing in my sculpture. Marion shifted between flat material and three-dimensional form and I make objects which I then apply paint to. And then the face in the painting, it’s blank, the features are eradicated. There’s short-hand for arms, it’s just a strip of paper, there are no hands...

AK: ... and there’s a minimal palette, which is also similar to your work.

CP: A really minimal palette and strong lighting and unashamed emotional theatricality, as well.

AK: Looking at the painting with you, there’s maybe also a connection with the way the figure is displaying herself and yet she’s also turning away?

CP: Yes! She’s there and not there. Another painting she did just before this one is a naturalistic nude figure in exactly the same pose, and it’s interesting that in *Serpents In Your Tides* she uses the paper doll as a ‘stand in’, so there is a simultaneous display-cum-seduction and refusal. She’s written about her dad showing her how to make these paper dolls when she was little, and she talks very emotively about cutting the paper freely and curling it. The actual making process was really pleasurable to her.

AK: So, you are borrowing paintings by her for the show?

CP: Yes, I am really excited to have loans from Derby Museum and Art Gallery and also some loans from private collections. I will be showing *For Lo Winter Is Past* (1963), *Serpents In Your Tides* (1940), and *Alter Ego* (1947-58), which is a wonderful painting of a paper doll addressing a crow skeleton on a kind of dreamscape beach. I have also borrowed some objects from Derby Museum which Marion drew and used in her paintings, like the crow skeleton. I’m also borrowing the *Fante* figure from the Derby Museum collection which features in one of Marion’s strangest paintings, *Medusa Grown Old* (1947).

AK: Is that the one she was quite disturbed by?

CP: Yes, that’s the one she writes about, it had a strong effect on her. She borrowed it from the museum and had it in her house for some time, and she writes about loving it and hating it. One day she dropped it by mistake and it landed on some tree roots she had been drawing, and that gave her the idea for how to re-work the painting. I love this story! Because she was an art teacher, there’s a lovely back-to-basics observation of natural objects, which then find their way into her ‘imaginative compositions’. It makes me think about the ‘nature table’ at school and the lasting power of those things.

AK: Your mention of the nature table makes me want to ask about this owl figure you’ve made?

CP: This piece is actually called *Nature Table*. The owl sits in among all this studio bric-a-brac and paper, and the whole table will be installed at Transition Two. It’s going to be talking about material and process, maybe in a slightly shamanistic kind of way.

I’m moving, as is my way, a lot of stuff from the studio to Transition Two, and there will also be very domestic ingredients. Things like clothes horses, blankets, ribbon curtains, pegboards, all my familiar materials, built into the space so that it will be like a coastline. It might be quite

pictorial, maybe a bit like an elaborate improvised still life in an art room.

AK: It’s a bit like you’re a bird in her studio with all her accumulations. You’re being a bit cross-species here, you’re like the bower bird...

CP: ...I love the bower bird! It sweeps its porch and puts flowers round and then does a little presentation. On a psychic level, Marion reminds me of my grandma and how particular she was about her house. There’s something about how Marion looks in photographs and also how the interior of her house is ‘just so’ – and then she painted these really controlled pictures and there’s so much sublimation in them. She talks about the war years and how deprived she was of light when they covered over the roof in the classroom, and she said, ‘that’s it, it’s a lock-in here in Derby, so everything I need, I have to find here.’ It’s about digging inside of yourself, this whole show at Transition Two. It’s about digging around in Marion’s interior world – it’s mining this very deep well. Marion’s paintings are bristling with a kind of energy that I really respond to. And also, it’s uncomfortable as well. You feel like you want to open the door.

This owl is the kind of object that you’d find on a nature table, or ornithological cupboard, or natural history museum. It’s got this great relationship to Marion’s *Alter Ego* painting and the crow skeleton.



Cathie Pilkington *Nature Table* 2019 photo Perou

I often find the way I originally model something can be too depicted, too shut down, but there is something about painting three-dimensional objects: things can disappear and appear at the same time, and you can hold things back. My second owl sculpture, *Messenger*, has got a kind, human face but it’s empty and it looks hollow. So just when you would go ‘ah, it’s a human face’, you recognise that it’s a hollow object. It becomes related to Egyptian objects, dolls and all kinds of other things all at once. It’s that kind of collision of things that I am looking for.

AK: Its wings seem to be pleated?

CP: Yes, pleats are a huge part of this show. The pleats are picked up everywhere. The installation is going to be burgeoning with materials and it will feel very domestic, and like a museum, and a bit like the studio.

A couple of Marion’s beautiful, meticulous, preparatory pencil drawings are coming from England & Co Gallery. And fantastic portrait photos of her as well, including one of her holding one of her special stones, which was taken by Jane England in the 80s after Marion had gone blind. She is staring intensely at the stone, it’s a very powerful image. So, there will be preparatory things that were not made to be seen, private things, subjective things. I’m mixing all those things up.

AK: And that connects with your works that seem to be in mid-process?

CP: Exactly. I’m using one of my *Degas Dolls* sculptures – number four, the dancing one, which has that sense of material transformation from something soft and dead into this slightly manic and alive, yet blank thing. Importantly, it’s still attached to its armature, still attached to its making.

AK: As with your previous exhibitions, your show at Transition Two will be teeming with things to pay attention to. This goes against the grain – contemporary art exhibitions are usually very spare, aren’t they? It’s very generous towards the visitor, what you offer them.

CP: Yes, it’s a surge towards ‘stuff’ – objects, images and shared transferable meaning. I don’t want to fix meaning. That’s what really interests me about sculpture, this open conversation. What makes this ‘art’ object any different to your grandma’s ornaments or the chair you are sitting in? I’m interested in this dirty ‘mixed-in-ness’ and ‘thing-ness’ and the enduring significance of objects.

AK: Actually, the sense of ego in those minimal displays can be really quite oppressive, can’t it? And you’re absolutely taking a different tack. Can you talk a bit about the idea of the ornament?

CP: I am interested in those relationships that you have with reproductions in the form of ornaments around the house. As a child, you don’t know that *The Three Graces* on the mantelpiece is a reproduction of a famous classical sculpture. You read ornaments literally, as a gesture or an idea about femininity or an idea about animals. I used to feel very strongly connected to those kinds of objects in my grandma’s house. I’d spend hours with her things, noticing that she was very particular about how she arranged

objects and colour, and that everything had its place. It was kind of erotically charged! And that’s definitely the very beginnings of what I was up to as a young sculptor.

But as you go through art school you have to get rid of that sentimentality and expressiveness. So, I spent a lot of time learning how to make something anatomically correct and bring it to life, and then I’d cover it up or smash it up and make it go away. I think I’m always in that process of making stuff, and then hiding it, and then bringing bits back. By playing around with two-dimensional and three-dimensional illusions and surfaces and objects and painting on the objects, I’m engaging with the problems of figurative sculpture. It’s like a dog with a bone, I just can’t leave it!

With my *Pietà* sculpture, I started off with this incredibly emotive classical sculpture by Michelangelo and treated it as a set of formal problems. I feel really strongly about this work because it holds the emotions at bay enough for you to project on to it, and materially it’s got all the things that I’ve been trying to do. And painting on to it was really key, I think. At Pallant House, I placed it with Paul Nash’s *Strange Coast*, a lithograph on brown paper of the Dymchurch coastline. When I work with collections, I can plan a certain amount, but things in the same room can suddenly have this connection that you see for the first time. So the shoreline and the waves in Nash’s lithograph became an equivalent to the waves in the hair of my *Pietà*, and there’s this incredible atmosphere. It’s like they were made for each other. My sculpture was originally called *Portrait of a Dead Woman* but I changed it to *Pietà 2: Strange Coast*.

AK: Looking at the images you’ve chosen to publicise your show at Transition Two, you’re drawing attention to surprising similarities between your *Pietà* and Marion Adnams’ *The Water is Wide* (1940) the folds, the curls, the shadows, the uprightness or stiffness of the female figures?

CP: There is this strange, compelling, compressed stillness and emotional tension that they both possess. Formally, the curls and the painted shadows and graphic folds in the fabric skirts link them. And the 1940’s black and white photograph of Marion’s painting heightens this connection.

My sculpture and Marion’s painting are also very different. *Pietà 2: Strange Coast* is darker and more absurd in subject matter. It deals with the big themes of great sculpture and humanity, albeit on a modest scale. *The Water is Wide* maintains its whimsical starting point of the paper doll, although looking at it now she seems quite monumental. I am very interested how small objects and simple materials, when concentrated upon enough, have massive power.

AK: How does it all relate to Paul Nash’s *Strange Coast*?

CP: Paul Nash is one of the well-known artists that crop up when Marion’s work is written about. Both are masters of stillness and atmosphere. *Strange Coast* is an image full of existential dread, muffled and heightened by the rhythmic, lapping waves. When I placed my sculpture alongside this print at Pallant House, I immediately thought of Marion’s painting. So, all these works became related in my head, and it seemed natural to title this show *Strange Coast*.

AK: Finally, you talked earlier about installing the show so that it’s like a coastline. Can you say a bit more about this?

CP: The coastline is a meeting of two worlds that are interconnected but separate. The installation will be pushed up against the wall, like materials washed up on a beach or dumped by the tide, leaving room for the audience to walk in and sift through.



Cathie Pilkington *Strata* 2019 photo Perou

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