

Nicola Bealing Mono  
Kestle Barton 8 June – 14 July

Reading *The Divine Comedy*, by Dante Alighieri on the long train journey from London unexpectedly turned out to be perfect preparation for the exhibition *Mono* by Nicola Bealing. Greeted at Redruth station by Ryya, we take a thirty-minute car journey, past the otherworldly satellites of Goonhilly onto the Cornish peninsular auspiciously named the Lizard. Arriving at Kestle Barton, a group of farm buildings exquisitely restored by Alison Bunning, one senses that the massive cobb walls of the white painted buildings are breathing. In strong sunlight there are echoes of the adobe buildings painted by Georgia O'Keefe. A wooden kiosk outside the gallery door assures visitors that muddy boots and dogs are welcome establishing a lack of pretension and generosity which characterises the place and the people running it.

There are two galleries. One 'the apple store' approached by a small staircase, has a wooden floor and irregular beams taken from tree trunks which retain their curves. They hover discreetly above the white walls so as not to distract from the showing space below. The other larger space, a rectangular barn has a simple wooden 'A' frame roof, grey speckled concrete floor and white walls. The entrance door faces another door which invites you to walk straight into the garden, the adjacent flower meadow and the self-serve shed selling coffee, cake and apple juice. The invitation to walk straight through means that people who may hesitate to step inside a white cube enter anyway and may be drawn to examine the work on display.

The exhibition is an impressive demonstration of the potentials of mono-printing across an array of 16 large and 29 smaller mono-prints. The way the fluidity of the process, chance and accident are used to conjure character is reminiscent of the watercolour portraits of Marlene Dumas. But these images are differently inflected with the humour, scatology and language influenced by Bealing's interest in social history and folk lore as conveyed by printed ephemera and broadsheets. Broadsheets are single sheets of paper with stories often told in verse, interpreting and sharing popular stories, frequently illustrated with stock imagery from a local printers block collection. Along with chapbooks they mark the emergence of popular literature and mass publishing in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Often illustrating notorious people, gossip, crime and bawdy tales this cheaply sold fake news, seems oddly current. Broadsheets were circulated and sold by travelling 'chapmen'. Local printers would copy and remake the same story a kind of paper gossip internet. Some of the stories Bealing references grew from working with the archives of the Helston Folk Museum and later the archives of the Foundling Museum in London where there is a concurrent exhibition of different but related work.

The 'Head Series' seem to visualise characters Dante and Virgil might have encountered on their descent into hell. *Flatterer, Watchful, Dick Nose,*

*Champion, Waverer, Balloon, What, Dentist, Monk and Poet* emerge from and collapse into abstractions of smeared and scraped ink. Some heads appear to be in a state of transformation; is *Long Hair*, a lamb chop or a person is *Bunter* prescient of our prime minister? is *Cabbage* animal or vegetable? is *Flutter*, a face atop a blue neck which may be knitted, dissolving into a halo of dirty yellow-green liquid, it is a landscape, not a head at all? Here the accidents and possibilities of mono-printing are intimately bound with the subject as the distinct differences of the portraits emerge from the process of making. *Marble Head, Son and Heir, Told You So, Speechless, Yo, Cold Hands, Windswept, Ape, Beanie, Blue Nose, Yup, Ho*, are people or animals with their vulnerabilities and confusions exposed. The quietly comic and combative titles caricature types who could appear in a farce, pantomime or puppet show.

Five large prints of heads; *Green Nose, Schemer, Dame, Cowboy* and *Hypnos* are the culmination of this period of experimentation. Each figure has great presence and an entirely different character. *Schemer* is shifty, a narrow head red with anger perhaps. *Green Nose* describes a fact but set against the bright red background and with dashes radiating around the head it may be emitting light like Edward Lear's 'Dong with the Luminous Nose'. *Dame* and *Cowboy* both seem familiar characters though both are diffident in their roles. *Dame's* face is slipping, a mask about to drop. A sense of movement animates *Hypnos*, who enters the canvas from the side, as if peering into the room from an external space, their head (gender is difficult to specify) perhaps has winged ears.

The eight polymer gravure 'Broadsheet Etchings' which are on show in the apple store gallery retain the fluidity of the mono-prints. Drawn on a translucent paper with a grain which holds the mark of pencil, chalk or liquid ink, the images are transferred to a photo sensitive plate with exceptional capacity to reproduce texture and line. *Mary Toft* shows a woman with rabbits tumbling out of her rear end, based on a true story of a woman who tricked doctors into believing she had given birth to rabbits. Toft was the subject of a popular 18<sup>th</sup> century broadsheet as was *Shameless Joan* who walks on all fours with a lighted candle in her backside. In other prints a dog bites its own tail, a head is all mouth and otherwise entirely pustular (*Dorothy was handsome her teeth white as snow*) and a shitting she devil tugs the hair of a worried looking man in *To Father a Child that's None of Mine Own*. *The Disappointed Pastry* – shows a cook rolling out his turd confectionary, no doubt an eighteenth century commentary on money making swindles and food adulteration. Displaced eyes float in front of an oddly photographic face in *A Looking Glass for Lascivious Young Men*. One of the effects of the way ink is totally absorbed by paper through the pressure of traditional presses can be to confuse a contemporary viewer. The mimicry by photo-shop of material traces can be mistaken as the method when most people print by pressing a keyboard to send a file to a laser printer.

Alongside the head prints are a series of exotic birds. Initially these seemed unrelated but a quizzical bird looking at its own underwater feet shares the

sense of absurdity present in other work. *Night Bird* shows a human dangling from the beak of a flying bird in a reversal of power relations often depicted in *The World Turned Upside Down*, a popular chapbook subject in European political satire which seems pertinent to our current political situation. Two black swans with intertwined necks in *An Argument, (since forgotten)* read almost like an emblem or printers mark but also evoke daft decision making and strangled possibilities.

To make mono-prints requires a decisive approach as the ink is drying as soon as it is applied to the matrix holding the image, in this case plastic sheet (but glass and metal are also common). An exhibition video by Alban Roinard shows Bealing mono-printing in the studio of Simon Marsh an expert printer based in Cornwall. In it we see the confident gestures of the artist as she paints with oil paint and draws with oil stick onto a sheet of plastic afterwards manipulating the image with a scraper and thinners. She then carries the plate through a garden to the print shop where it is rolled through the press by Marsh. To print a large print requires a kind of choreography of bodies, paper and ink. Care is needed when handling damp paper, which picks up every mark, and it takes two to handle the larger sheets. Precision is needed to register more than one plate, lining up the inked up matrix exactly with the previously printed work. The process of exchange, problem solving, experimentation, and the close collaboration between two highly skilled artists, requires trust and understanding. As Bealing describes;

*'The apparent simplicity of the process requires intense focus, both happy and unhappy accidents can randomly happen. All printmaking is a kind of magic, but I've always been drawn to mono-printing for the speed at which that magic happens and the way in which it works as a springboard to bounce ideas and problems out of the studio.'*

What is the relation between studio, gallery, location and memory? Bealing was the first studio resident at the impressive CAST complex in Helston, she spent her childhood in Malaysia. Her studio is packed with paintings and clues to other influences; Goya and Hogarth. The intricate brushwork of her large canvases is very different from the bold sweeps and singular central image of the prints. A visit there reminds me of studying for my BA at Falmouth where palm tree surrounded studios, ship repairs in the docks, making and beachcombing merged in my every-day. Kestle Barton and its surroundings revivifies my senses as someone now habituated to the accelerated city.

There is a different temporality in remoteness and Cornwall is saturated in myths and legends. A small ferryboat crosses the Helford Passage a ten-minute walk from the gallery. A gauzy pattern of bright green and white dried seaweed fronds, all moisture sucked out by the sun, laminated onto slate confuses my sense of art and life, isn't there a gum made from seaweed? Death and time; a large jellyfish is slumped and partially baked onto rock, perhaps ballooning and

reanimating as the tide comes in. To be immersed in such a dramatic local landscape, in the vivid impressions of Bealing's mercurial prints and the strange intertwined beauty of both, makes for a transformative journey in body and mind.

Professor Jo Stockham (2019)

Head of the Printmaking programme at the Royal College of Art