

## Artist Statement

Nina Royle

## *And so, the magpies multiply*

23 March – 9 June 2024

*And so, the magpies multiply*, is an exhibition of paintings, bronze mirrors and ceramics whose imagery thinks through symbolisms related to growth, reflection and vanitas (a witness of life's temporality... our mortality).

Symbols featured in the exhibition, (a mirror, a keyhole, a pomegranate) are condensations (or deposits) of abstractions; they are imagistic way-markers for navigating the strangeness of the wider and the vaster. Such symbols fascinate me because of their ability to transcend (with more ease than words) geographic boundaries and to persist with a life-force of adaption and return that crosses millennia. As a result of this movement, symbols accrue complex lineages of meaning, as relevant and irrelevant, as the tracings of ivy on a wall.

The symbol of the pomegranate with its many seeds, is a shorthand for the fruit of life that appears in many of the world's major religious texts. In the French language its name - grenade - is shared with bombe á grenade (grenade bomb). The complexities of bloody love, like veins and arteries that turn into one another at the heart root-through this symbol. In a present tense of news both marred and fuelled with depressing stories of war, I think particularly of the pomegranate's poignancy as a symbol shared between the Abrahamic faiths of Christianity, Judaism and Islam. And then, how prior to the formation of these religions with their systems and stories, are deeper layers of systems and stories, where figures such as pagan Persephone stood in her Ancient Greek underworld consuming the fruit's ruby seeds in preparation for spring's rebirth. Her eating of the fruit decreed her fate, where half of every year must be spent in Hades' realm: a harbinger of Eve's tasting of the forbidden fruit. Here at Kestle Barton, there is an orchard of gnarled apple trees. The red fruit is a closer, more native (whatever that means) symbolic cousin of the pomegranate.

The hand mirror is another leitmotif that occurs throughout the exhibition. It references other mirrors – from paintings (Courbet's *Jo La Belle Irlandaise*; *Fresco of a Lady at her Toilette*, from Villa Arianna de Stabiae, Pompeii (Unknown artist, Archaeological Museum of Naples); *A painting of a woman looking in a mirror*, (unknown artist, c.1730, Mankot India, Victoria and Albert Museum)). The hand mirror's symbolism in the exhibition represents a close, domestic, graspable apparatus for seeing. But what is ever truly graspable? What is a mirror? An object or image, a way to understand, an opening, a keyhole, a truth, or an untruth?

Historically there are many examples of mirrors made from polished metal, such as the St Keverne bronze mirror found in a field close to Kestle Barton. Bronze is an alloy made from tin and copper. Different to gold (which does not rust), its surface can be rubbed until it shines but it will scab with a moss-green verdigris if left to oxidise, steeling or concealing the mirror's reflective ability. Pupil of the moon, a mirror is a symbol that glitters with possibilities for meaning. An object that is an image which shows inconstant reflections, its very form can cause fixed understandings to unravel and multiply like magpies. Duplicitous; sometimes prophetic; sometimes emblematic of the feminine; by way of their inconstant shine they are objects related to the lunatic rather than to the solar; and they are understood as reminders that all things in the world are set to change. From my desk in the studio, I wonder to what extent these poetics are influenced by a long taproot of material understanding and observation about the encroachment of rust on metal.

If the word 'vanitas' is looked at as a picture, its meanings seem to conjugate in the skating effect that happens between the dot that sits above the *i* and the bar that crosses the *t*. The bearing of these shapes to one another appear like an aquatic bird about to touch down and glide across a body of water.

One is for sorrow, two is for joy. Or in another rhyme: One's sorrow, two's mirth... seven's heaven.

Why do seven magpies get a heaven?

Is heaven no more than what is constituted by the symmetry, echo and slide of two V's?

Can that be enough to hold and form meaning?

Again, from then studio desk I think about the strange possibility of this.

To pause in thought risks an unravelling and a submitting to motion causes a coming together – an understanding. To think about symbols and to think about images, particularly during the act of painting where everything thought and seen seems to move around - is somehow a play between these two states – stasis and motion; thinking and unthinking. How do the black and white chevrons of road signs slip into the black and white feathers glimpsed of a magpie's wing in flight?

Nina Royle, 2024