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Press Release



Antony Williams

Memento Mori

14 April - 7 May

An exhibition of new still life paintings from one of Britain's leading figurative painters, Antony Williams, opens on Cork Street.

Williams is renowned for his extraordinary portraiture, which has included the Queen, characterised by an astonishing attention to surface detail and prolonged observation. He paints with egg tempera, an ancient and painstaking medium, well suited the slow and measured looking that defines his practice. Before now he has never made still life paintings continuously, but elements of these can be found in the

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backdrop to his portraits, where every part of the picture is subject to the same intense focus. Now the background has become the foreground in a new exploration of still life.

Over the years his admiration has ranged freely, from Bellini and Piero della Francesca through to Turner, Cezanne and Morandi. In terms of modern British art, Williams feels particularly stimulated by the still life paintings of Euan Uglow, who was close to William Coldstream and the painters of the Euston Road School. Uglow's measured approach, aided by a metal instrument of his own design, has links with Williams' intense urge to paint what his eyes see without using conventional perspective.

Extract from Memento Mori, an essay by the art historian and critic Richard Cork

An accumulation of objects in his studio play a crucial role in these paintings; fir cones and chestnuts from Chobham Common, a Dolls House from Kempton Racetrack Antiques Market, a sea urchin from Greece, a bird skeleton discovered in a boarded-up fireplace.

They are carefully composed, layered with sheets of patterned paper and fabrics. We see him playing with scale; a toy house dwarfed by a towering pinecone or a seed pod cramped in a dolls house room. There is an interplay of abstraction and figuration too, with geometric compositions disrupted by chestnuts shells or a dried agapanthus.

This collision of abstraction and figuration follows a trend found throughout Williams' practice of combining diverse references with apparent ease. David Boyd Haycock described his style as 'like a collision between David Hockney and the early Italian Renaissance master, Piero della Francesca', while for others Lucian Freud seems to meet the early Flemish portraiture of Jan van Eyck.

The egg tempera medium lends itself to conveying the small-scale intensity in these still life paintings. They are made luminous and incandescent through his use of minute brush strokes, a semi-pointillist technique, that dance together on the canvas creating an unparalleled depth of colour. As with his portraits and landscapes, you are intensely aware of the surface detail. The art critic Martin Gayford describes seeing 'more insistently perhaps than one does in life, the little marks of wear and tear, the furrows and wrinkles'.

Antony Williams trained at Farnham College of Art and Portsmouth University and is a member of the New English Art Club, the Royal Society of Portrait Painters and the Pastel Society.

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The overall meaning can surely be summed up by two poignant words: memento mori. Williams' achievement in creating such heartfelt paintings shows that, despite everything that continues to afflict us during this pandemic nightmare, he has turned it into a fruitful time for art.

Richard Cork, 2020

Notes to editors:

M E S S U M S W I L T S H I R E is a leading multi-purpose gallery and arts centre set inside a restored thirteenth-century tithe barn and surrounding buildings with exhibition space, sculpture garden and restaurant.

M E S S U M S L O N D O N is a modernist gallery space on Cork Street, a historic centre of the London art world since the 1930s. Messums has had a presence here since 1992.

M E S S U M S Y O R K S H I R E opened in early July 2020. The third Messums gallery to open in England, it hosts a rolling programme of exhibitions with a focus on clients and artists in the North of England.

A comprehensive list of past and future exhibitions can be found on our websites.