

Melissa O'Faherty: 'drawings'

*Awe is the salve
that will heal our eyes
- Rumi*

In order to draw something we must look at it closely, give it our full attention. We must allow it to be, just as it is. In return it reveals itself to us - and, if we are lucky, teaches us something new. This simple, patient act of drawing can open a new door of perception or lead the artist in a direction previously unimagined.

The work in this exhibition was made during a period of change in Melissa O'Faherty's life. A move from a successful career in graphic design into the more intimate realm of fine art coincided with the illness and death of her much-loved father. So it is not surprising that life, death, transformation and transcendence are everywhere in it.

Her studies of the body of a wood pigeon - found on a country road - and a song thrush, are the results of an observation that is both tender and curious. These are simple, everyday creatures - nothing rare or exotic about them. But once subjected to O'Faherty's compassionate scrutiny they remind us that big mysteries are contained in commonplace things.

Birds have been a source of fascination to us throughout human history and have always been symbolic - of power and freedom, of both life and death. They are part of the creation myths of many cultures and were often seen as a link from the human world to the divine.

And so it is here. *Lost Song* is an exquisite study of the delicate and spindly body of the thrush. *Homage*, in which the bird's corpse is laid out, as though on a funeral bier, is a poignant *memento mori*, reminding us that from the moment of death, the body becomes an empty shell.

In *Flight* we see only the nether half of the bird, as it appears to take off and leave the paper - and us - behind on earth.

Birds have a long history of representation in art, so when we see them, we are subliminally reminded of a myriad of images, from ancient cave drawings to doves in Renaissance paintings to the sweeping angelic wings of Victorian grave sculptures.

O'Faherty brings her clear eye to both the vulnerability of living things (the lightness and softness of the down on the thrush's breast) and their viciousness (the pigeon's tough, gnarled feet, the wicked curves of its claws).

Her choice of materials is no accident. She uses paper, home-made charcoal (driftwood found on local beach and baked in the fire) and burnt cork (blackened in a candle flame). Their elemental and sensual qualities were essential ingredients in the making of this work that so sensitively reflects the beauty and cruelty of nature and the beauty and transience of life.

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