




THIS GREEN EARTH
BRIDGET MACDONALD

WORCESTER CITY ART GALLERY & MUSEUM

This Green Earth

BRIDGET MACDONALD



... Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods,
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth . . .

William Wordsworth
*Lines written, a few miles above Tintern Abbey,
on revisiting the banks of the Wye during a tour.
July 13, 1798 (lines 103–106)*

TWO SEASONS IN ARCADIA (DETAIL), 2012
charcoal and pastel on paper, 32 × 48 ins (81 × 122 cm)

This Green Earth

BRIDGET MACDONALD

AND THE LANDSCAPE TRADITION
OF CLAUDE LORRAIN, SAMUEL PALMER
AND PETER PAUL RUBENS

WORCESTER CITY ART GALLERY & MUSEUM



SIR PETER PAUL RUBENS 1577–1640

A Landscape in Flanders, c. 1635/40

oil on wood, 35 × 53 ins (90 × 134 cm). The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham

Please note that this work does not hang in this exhibition

‘The vast subject of landscape’

Bridget Macdonald is very much an art-historian’s artist. I well remember her residency at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts at the University of Birmingham in the mid-1990s. As Senior Curator there it was one of my pleasant duties to inspect the galleries daily and I would usually find Bridget carefully scrutinising or drawing from our masterpieces in landscape, such as Rubens’s *Landscape in Flanders* (The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham) or responding with a variation in her beloved media of charcoal, graphite or pastel. She would always have a searching comment or question about what she referred to as ‘the vast subject of landscape.’

This Green Earth by its very title recalls the pigment *terra verde* much used as underpaint by early Italian artists, while also setting a poetic note for the current exhibition, to which we will return. The works displayed here subtly demonstrate Bridget’s deep engagement with animals, myth and the landscape as mediated by her acknowledged fascination with the Old Masters, particularly Claude Lorrain (1604/5–82) and Sir Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) as well as more recent virtuosi in landscape such as Samuel Palmer (1805–81), one of Britain’s greatest artists of the Romantic period. Echoes of their vision are detectable in much of her work and acknowledged in such drawings as *Study after Rubens’s Landscape in Flanders*. This approach seems to have been stimulated by her time at the Barber, which suggested ways of tackling landscape that were both individual and also reflected her existing interests. Before that Bridget had been concerned mainly with the human figure, working from literary and poetic sources with a particular interest in the art of the Italian Renaissance—sources that are immediately apparent in *The Sacrificial Bull (Ara Pacis)*, with its echoes of Mantegna and classical Antiquity. During her Barber residency this penchant evoked graphic variations on Giovanni Bellini, Beccafumi, and Dosso Dossi. She also worked directly from Claude’s *Pastoral Landscape* of 1645 (The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham) and went on to take elements of this painting to make new images,



LANDSCAPE WITH A PINE TREE, 2014
oil on linen, 18 x 24 ins (46 x 61 cm)

relating recurring motifs to contemporary landscapes. Thus her painting *Lighthouse and Black Cattle* and other contemporary lighthouse pictures refer obliquely to the tower on Claude's cliff while many of the cattle, sheep and figures in the landscape which began to appear in her works can also be traced back to Claude.

Claude's vision gave Bridget a structure through which to explore the nature of pastoral landscape and its contemporary relevance, as well as its relationship to her own country background. Born into a farming family on the Isle of Wight (to which she often returns) she was to lose this paradise on the premature death of her father at the age of 33 when she herself was seven years old. His loss isolated the family from active farming life and transformed them into onlookers rather than participants in the rural round. In retrospect, however, she has come to recognise the role of observer as good training for any artist or writer. In her own case it led to an unusual sense of the past, linked to but not identical with a more conventionally idealised perception of bucolic life.

Today from the rooftop terrace of her house in the centre of Malvern, whose height and commanding aspect with a little imagination recall the towers of San Gimignano, she can look east to Worcester and the Severn Valley and across to Breton Hill and the Cotswolds. In doing so she believes that she has 'developed a sense of place in this expansive landscape'. Comparable feelings of familiarity and ownership are palpable in her forebear Rubens's image *Landscape with a Tower at Het Steen at Sunset* (Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford). For just as Rubens purchased the Castle of Het Steen near Malines in Flanders as a place of retirement, so for over a decade Bridget and her husband Angus have owned land at the head of the Suckley Valley, ten miles from Worcester, with panoramic views of the Malvern Hills. This is countryside which also conforms to the Claudean pastoral ideal with its hills, rivers, woodland and farms, depicted in her works such as *Snowy Woods*. Nevertheless, Bridget is acutely aware of the paradoxes and ironies that have in reality beset such landscapes over the last century. As she says, 'What interests me is that Suckley remains a beautiful and fertile valley and still has extensive orchards, hop yards and Hereford cattle. Yet the farmhouses are almost exclusively occupied by wealthy people who have not made their money from the land but are living the pastoral dream of a retreat from the city.' The land is actually farmed by contract farmers who live in more modest dwellings.

Given this background it is not surprising that Samuel Palmer seems to be a constant subliminal presence in her work. His *The Bright Cloud* (Manchester Art Gallery) was painted about 1833–4, when he had settled at Shoreham in Kent, an area he referred to as his ‘valley of visions.’ It is one of a number of cloud subjects that he executed there, all loaded with religious and poetic imagery and in this case reflecting lines from Book 11 of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*: ‘... yon western cloud, that draws /O’er the blue firmament a radiant white, /And slow descends, with something heavenly fraught . . .’ A comparably intense personal vision of nature is one that underlies much of Bridget’s work dealing with natural phenomena such as clouds, stars, trees or moonlight (see *Tree and Moon*). Palmer was a leading exponent of pastoral landscape in the early nineteenth century, best known for his visionary paintings and etchings of the English rural idyll, and the most important follower of William Blake, whom he met in 1824. But whereas Blake concentrated mainly on figurative subjects, Palmer presented the English countryside as an ancient, venerable place of fecundity and religious mystery. His reputation stems chiefly from the visionary paintings of the years he spent at Shoreham from 1826 to 1835, and from the series of etchings made after 1850. In both he succeeded in giving the rural landscape an ineffable timelessness, often by the reassuring glow of a gentle moon, whose beams add a benevolent, celestial dimension to an Arcadian landscape already charged with abundance and Christian symbolism. Such fascination with the moon, stars and night was a widespread romantic preoccupation, not only in Britain, where its roots lay in the paintings of Joseph Wright of Derby (1734–97) but also in Europe. Palmer’s devotion to the rustic calendar also finds a ready response in Bridget’s own fascination with flocks and herds, their essential dignity as part of the great scheme of Nature and their movement in line with the changing seasons in such works as *Winter Cattle* and *Ewes*. Her approach is markedly romantic in its endowment of each creature with individual character, echoing the overwhelming life force of the divinely-ordered natural world celebrated in Palmer’s *The Flock and the Star* (Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford).

Livestock feature in her work because she feels that animals do not date and thus provide a living but timeless presence. Often her images are intended obliquely to refer to previous sources. Thus one early drawing featured a bull which her aunt used to ride as a young girl. This reminded her of the classical myth of the Phoenician princess Europa, for whom Zeus turned himself into an irresistible white bull on the seashore before abducting her to Crete. The theme



SAMUEL PALMER 1805–1881

Drawing for The White Cloud, 1831/2

Indian ink over pencil, and pen and brown ink, 6 × 6¹/₃ ins (14.5 × 16.1 cm)

©Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

reappears in her more recent works such as *Bull in a Flowering Meadow*. Claude had more than once depicted this ancient Greek legend, as retold in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, notably in his painting, *Coast Scene with the Rape of Europa* (1667, Royal Collection, London). Such synthesis of memory, classical prototypes and reality is central to Bridget's practice.

Bridget works predominantly in graphic media and oils and feels that she has a particular affinity with charcoal, revelling in its simplicity of means, expressive power and capacity to evoke darkness, space, movement, light and flux. She also likes the immediacy, subtlety and versatility of oil, with its opportunities for working with soft brushes, fingers and rags; but she has never got on very well with printmaking or anything that requires too many processes. For her, drawing and painting are equal but alternative ways of realising certain ideas and have always progressed in tandem—yet in recent years figures seem to have appeared more frequently in her drawings than in the paintings. Most of the oils in the current exhibition are painted on a generous scale and one, *Winter Cattle*, is particularly big. An ongoing yearning for the imagined peace and tranquillity of rural life, rather than its 'obvious jarring realities' continues to drive her in all media. Thus *The Bridge across the Flooded River* showing Carrington Bridge spanning the River Severn out of banks, introduces a poignant contrast between the silent landscape and the intruding traffic, tail lights and noise. The pylons, too, are an essential element 'but so are the echoes in my mind of other associations, such as Noah's flood and rising waters due to global warming.' It may also be perhaps that Turner's *Rain, Steam and Speed* (1844, National Gallery, London) with its striking perspective of Maidenhead railway bridge, played a part—conscious or not—in the emergence of this composition.

Poetry is important for Bridget and has helped to validate landscape as a source of inspiration for her, creating images in the mind which she might want to capture in her own work. The cadences of A. E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad* seem inherent in some of her pictures:

In summertime on Bredon
The bells they sound so clear;
Round both the shires they ring them
In steeples far and near,
A happy noise to hear.



CLAUDE LORRAIN 1604/5–1682

A Pastoral Landscape, 1645

oil on canvas, 40 × 53 ins (102 × 134 cm)

The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham

Please note that this work does not hang in this exhibition

She can also relate to ancient Chinese poetry, evocative of landscape and the seasons, as well as to the Roman poet Virgil's evocations of the rustic life in his *Eclogues* and *Georgics*. The influential tradition of pastoral poetry in Britain is a long one, including Milton and James Thomson's hugely popular *Seasons*, first published in 1730. Nearer to her own experience, however, is Wordsworth's *The Prelude*—his great poem about growing up in the Lake District and the way he was shaped by that landscape; or the sublime melancholy of *Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey* (1798), from which the title of this exhibition is taken. She also feels responsive to the modern poet Seamus Heaney's preoccupation with his early life on a farm in Ireland in such poems as *Digging* or Ted Hughes's experiences farming in Devon in the 1970s and walking on northern Dartmoor. Recently she has been touched by the contemporary deaf poet Josephine Dickinson's *Silence Fell*, set in the remote Pennines landscape and telling of her six-year marriage to a much older sheep farmer.

A synthesis of observed reality, memory and artistic or poetic source material is the basis of Bridget's practice, underlain with flashes of nostalgia, dispossession and loss. A case in point is *The Arcadian Shepherd*, where the unfinished barren landscape with its wizened tree and single sheep are dominated by an elderly gnarled figure in unkempt dress, contemporary yet timeless, immediately subverting the traditional literary and artistic connotations of Arcadia as a classical utopia. However presented, the real landscape and its features are the essential subject matter of her work—the seasons (*Two Seasons in Arcadia*); the effects of weather and speed on the terrain and sky (*Rainy Country (Great Western) 1 and 2*); and indigenous birds (*Tree and Magpie*), along with cattle, sheep and horses. Even the long-established convention of the country house portrait finds itself subtly varied through her introduction of modern additions including pylons in *Spring Landscape*.

This Green Earth demonstrates Bridget's careful and creative assimilation of Old Master traditions with her own experiences and contemporary sensibilities. Just as there was a renewed interest in the works of Claude in the heyday of the Picturesque aesthetic, as witnessed by Richard Earlom's mezzotints of the *Liber Veritatis* (1776, Richard Earlom after Claude Lorrain, published by John Boydell, London), so Bridget's vision uniquely relates the landscapes of the past to those of the present day that we all know.

Paul Spencer-Longhurst

30 November 2015



CLAUDE LORRAIN 1604/5–1682
Landscape with a Goatherd, c.1635/6
oil on canvas, 15 × 19 ins (38 × 49 cm)
©Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

THE BRIDGE ACROSS THE FLOODED RIVER, 2015
oil on linen, 40 × 60 ins (102 × 152 cm)







SUMMER CATTLE, 2015
oil on linen, 40 x 50 ins (102 x 127 cm)



SEPTEMBER FLOOD, 2015
oil on linen, 30 × 50 ins (76 × 127 cm)



RAINY COUNTRY (GREAT WESTERN) 1, 2015
oil on linen, 18 x 24 ins (46 x 61 cm)



RAINY COUNTRY (GREAT WESTERN) 2, 2015
oil on linen, 18 x 24 ins (46 x 61 cm)



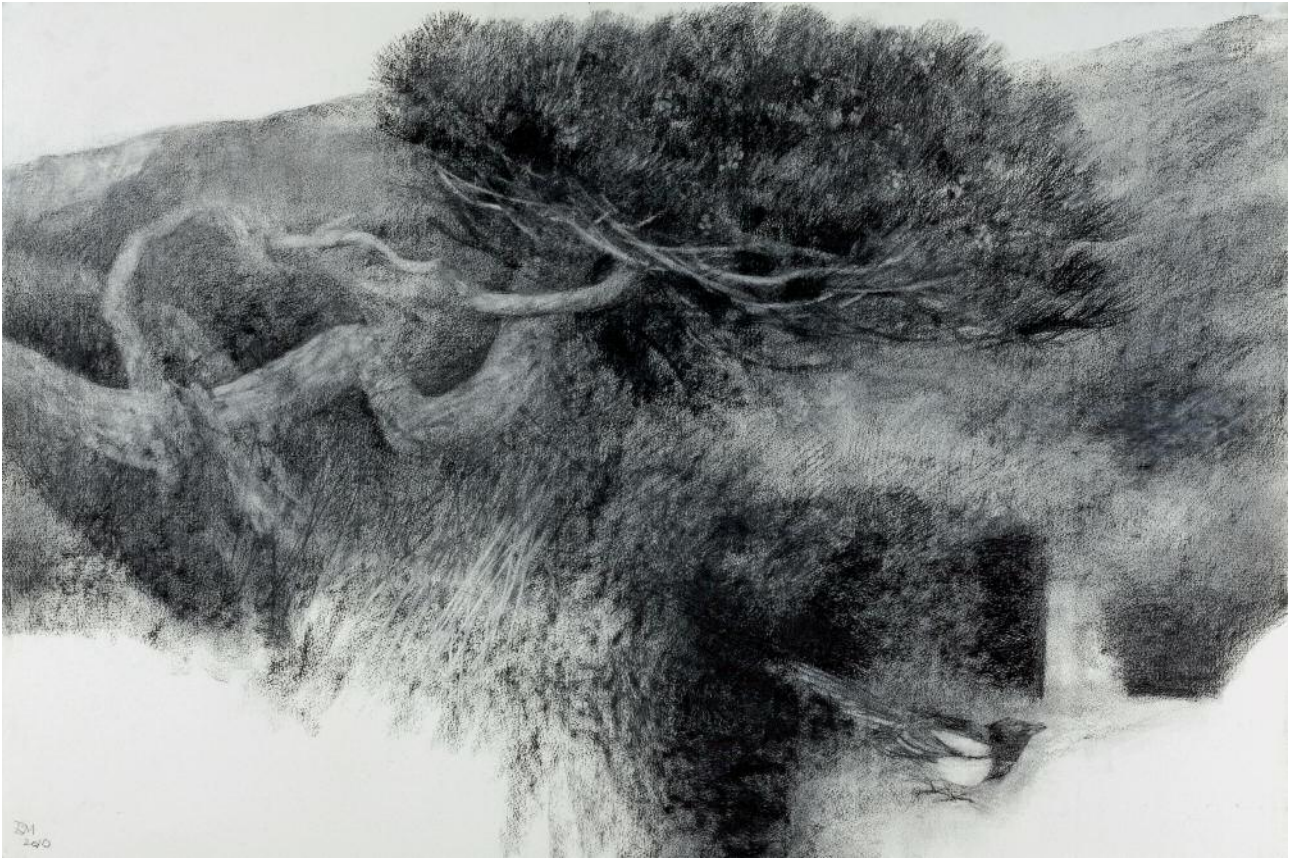
TREE AND MOON, 2014
sepia/Indian ink, watercolour on paper
4 × 6 ins (10 × 15 cm)



LIGHTHOUSE AND TREE, 2014
sepia/Indian ink, watercolour on paper
4 × 6 ins (10 × 15 cm)



MAGPIES AND TREE, 2014
sepia/Indian ink, watercolour on paper
4 × 6 ins (10 × 15 cm)



TREE AND MAGPIE, 2010
charcoal on paper, 32 × 48 ins (81 × 122 cm)



SPRING LANDSCAPE, 2012
charcoal and graphite on paper, 32 × 48 ins (81 × 122 cm)



SNOWY WOODS, 2012
charcoal and graphite, 32 x 48 ins (81 x 122 cm)



BULL IN A FLOWERING MEADOW, 2010
charcoal on paper, 48 × 60 ins (122 × 152 cm)



THE SACRIFICIAL BULL (ARA PACIS), 2010
charcoal on paper, 50 × 60 ins (127 × 152 cm)

EXHIBITED WORKS, LOANS

The Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

Claude Lorrain (1604/5–82), *Landscape with a Goatherd*, 1635–6, oil on canvas, 15 × 19 ins (38 × 49 cm)

Claude Lorrain (1604/5–82), *Farm Buildings under a Tall Tree*, 1638, red chalk with brown ink on paper, 12 × 8½ ins (31 × 21.7 cm)

Claude Lorrain (1604/5–82), *The Herd Returning in Stormy Weather*, 1650–1, etching, 6 × 9 ins (16.2 × 22.3 cm)

(After) Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), *Landscape with a Tower at Het Steen at Sunset*, oil on panel, 11½ × 24¼ ins (28 × 87 cm)

(Attributed to) Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), *Landscape with Farm Buildings at Sunset*, oil on panel, 10½ × 15 ins (27 × 39 cm)

Samuel Palmer (1805–81), *The Flock and the Star*, 1831–2, Indian ink over graphite and brown ink, 6 × 7 ins (14.9 × 17.7 cm)

Samuel Palmer (1805–81), *Drawing for 'The White Cloud'*, 1831–2, Indian ink over pencil, and pen and brown ink, 6 × 9 ins (14.5 × 16.1 cm)

Manchester Art Gallery

Samuel Palmer (1805–81), *The Bright Cloud*, 1834, oil and tempera on mahogany panel, 9 × 12½ ins (23 × 32 cm)



STUDY AFTER SAMUEL PALMER'S
'THE WHITE CLOUD', 2015
sepia/Indian ink and watercolour on paper
4 × 6 ins (10 × 15 cm)

BRIDGET MACDONALD

PAINTINGS

Winter Cattle, 2006, oil on linen 60 × 60 ins (152 × 152 cm). Worcester City Art Gallery collection

Farm, 2008, oil on linen, 6 × 8 ins (15 × 20 cm). Private collection

Landscape with a Pine Tree, 2014, oil on linen, 18 × 24 ins (46 × 61 cm)

Summer Cattle, 2015, oil on linen, 40 × 40 ins (102 × 127 cm)

Lighthouse and Black Cattle, 2015, oil on linen, 30 × 40 ins (76 × 102 cm)

September Flood, 2015, oil on linen 30 × 50 ins (76 × 127 cm)

The Bridge across the Flooded River, 2015, oil on linen 40 × 60 ins (102 × 152 cm)

Rainy Country (Great Western) 1, 2015, oil on linen, 18 × 24 ins (46 × 61 cm)

Rainy Country (Great Western) 2, 2015, oil on linen, 18 × 24 ins (46 × 61 cm)

DRAWINGS

Drawing after Claude's 'A Pastoral Landscape', 1995, charcoal on paper, 22 × 33 ins (56 × 84 cm). Private collection

Study after Ruben's 'Landscape in Flanders', 1995, charcoal on paper, 35 × 53 ins (89 × 135 cm). Private collection

Tree and Magpie, 2010, charcoal on paper, 32 × 48 ins (81 × 122 cm)

The Sacrificial Bull (Ara Pacis), 2010, charcoal on paper, 50 × 60 ins (127 × 152 cm). Private collection

Spring Landscape, 2012, charcoal and graphite on paper, 32 × 48 ins (81 × 122 cm)

Snowy Woods, 2012, charcoal and graphite on paper, 32 × 48 ins (81 × 122 cm)

Bull in a Flowering Meadow, 2011 charcoal on paper, 48 × 60 ins (122 × 152 cm)

Two Seasons in Arcadia, 2011, charcoal and pastel on paper, 32 × 48 ins (81 × 122 cm)

The Arcadian Shepherd, 2012, charcoal and graphite on paper, 32 × 48 ins (81 × 122 cm)

Ewes, 2012, charcoal and pastel on paper, 37 × 48 ins (94 × 122 cm)

Lighthouse and Tree, 2014, sepia/Indian ink, watercolour on paper, 4 × 6 ins (10 × 15 cm)

Tree and Moon, 2014, sepia/Indian ink, watercolour on paper, 4 × 6 ins (10 × 15 cm)

Magpies and Tree, 2014, sepia/Indian ink, watercolour on paper, 4 × 6 ins (10 × 15 cm)

Study after Samuel Palmer's 'The White Cloud', 2015, sepia/Indian ink, watercolour on paper, 4 × 6 ins (10 × 15 cm)

Study after Samuel Palmer's 'The Bright Cloud', 2015, sepia/Indian ink, watercolour on paper, 4 × 6 ins (10 × 15 cm)

BRIDGET MACDONALD

Bridget Macdonald trained in Fine Art in the mid 1980s at the School of Art and Design, Wolverhampton Polytechnic. She lives and works in Great Malvern, Worcestershire.

Her work is in the collections at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, Wolverhampton Art Gallery, Worcester City Art Gallery, the House of Lords at Millbank, and in private and corporate collections in the UK, the USA, Italy, and France.

She is represented by Art First, London.

www.artfirst.co.uk

EXHIBITION

This Green Earth, Bridget Macdonald and the Landscape Tradition of Claude Lorrain, Samuel Palmer and Peter Paul Rubens

Worcester City Art Gallery
Foregate Street, Worcester, WR1 1DT

13th February–25th June 2016

Curator: Emalee Beddoes

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Unit 7 Brunel Court, Enterprise Drive
Four Ashes, Wolverhampton, WV10 7DF
01902 791797 • info@cart.uk.com

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REPRESENTATION

Art First
21 Eastcastle Street, London W1W 8DD
020 7734 0386 • info@artfirst.co.uk
www.artfirst.co.uk



INSIDE BACK COVER

THE ARCADIAN SHEPHERD (detail), 2012
charcoal on paper, 32 × 48 ins (81 × 122 cm)



