

ANOTHER COUNTRY

Paintings and Drawings

Bridget Macdonald

**The Courtyard, Edgar Street, Hereford HR4 9JR
www.courtyard.org.uk**

10 January – 16 February 2020

When Bridget asked me to open this exhibition, after someone far more erudite and better known had pulled out, it was an easy decision and a great honour to say yes.

Bridget's art and practice are all about connections between **people, place and time**, and they reflect two great crises facing the planet in our time – **climate and nature**.

Her childhood home was Knowles Farm on the undercliff on the south coast of the Isle of Wight.

It's a place of landslips, coastal erosion and contrasting seasons – where wave tossed spume and winter grey sky merge to make horizon invisible; and in summer's heat, azure blue sky combines with flat calm sea to inspire some of the art you will see today.

Bridget and I share an intimate knowledge of that landscape, where my paternal grandparents, and since the 1990s my parents, also made their home on the undercliff.

I bought my first 'Bridget' in 2006 – it's called *Lighthouse Wall* (2005) and, as the name suggests, it's an image of St Catherine's Lighthouse on the undercliff.

The Lighthouse is a frequent subject of Bridget's art (often with cattle grazing in the foreground, a brilliant flash of yellow ragwort, and an attendant Magpie or Crow), a painting of which now hangs in No. 1 Millbank in London, having been purchased by the House of Lords Works of Art Committee in 2011.

The wind sculpted pine tree outside the Lighthouse gate is also recurring theme. I own a painting of that too, and there are two large drawings of it represented in this exhibition.

And there is a fine drawing of *Woodpigeons* flying beneath Gore Cliff, which is the upper cliff above the Lighthouse. These birds appear to fly with urgency, no longer without fear of predation as they once did, because Peregrine

falcon have returned to nest and Raven, Buzzard and (more recently) White Tailed Eagle patrol the sky – none of which were present in our youth.

These are images of hope and renewal, resonant with personal experience and acutely observed from nature.

Elsewhere, we can see a nucleus of new works, including several made as a result of Bridget's April 2019 residency at the estate of Michael Baron de Styrcea at Valeni in the remote North East of Romania.

We are privileged that Baron de Styrcea is able to join us here this evening A very warm welcome to Herefordshire!

The drawing of *Olga and Costica* (2019), and small painting of *Costica in the poultry yard* (2019) show a gentler, traditional and more sustainable way of living in harmony with nature, the last of a generation who have the skills to be self-sufficient on 2 hectares of land – a lifestyle tragically at risk from the Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union, which we are about to leave!

This may seem like nostalgia for a bygone age, but it's both topical and highly relevant to how we live today.

How will Brexit affect our landscapes and nature?

Will the new UK Government honour, the then Environment Secretary, Michael Gove's statement at the Oxford Farming Conference in January 2018 that the current farm subsidy regime, which mainly rewards land ownership, will be replaced by a new scheme to support farmers and landowners who provide environmental benefits?¹

It seems they might, because Theresa Villiers' speech on Wednesday 8 January at this year's Conference confirmed plans for a new agricultural policy for England which will reward farmers and landowners with public money for public goods.²

Public goods are those things which we all enjoy, but which are not rewarded by the market – e.g. clean air and water, thriving wildlife, adaptation to and mitigation of climate change.

What will that mean for the livestock industry? **Especially the cattle and bulls which so often feature of Bridget's art** – e.g. *Winter Cattle* (2005/06), *Eastnor Bull* (2005), *The May Bull* (2008) and *Bull in a Flowering Meadow* (2011) among the paintings and drawings represented here.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/farming-for-the-next-generation>.

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/a-vision-for-future-farming>

Must we all eat less meat, move beyond what George Monbiot presented as ‘*Apocalypse Cow*’ on Channel 4 on Wednesday evening 8 January; and rewild half the nation’s farmland to fight the climate crisis and recover nature (as recommended by Professor Sir Ian Boyd, a former Chief Scientific Adviser to the UK Government³)?

And what will it mean for those who those who travel to work on our land, like the young eastern European hop picker so poignantly depicted in Bridget’s drawing entitled *Exile* (2008)?

Just across Offa’s Dyke, in *Another Country*, the Welsh Government has already passed a unique landmark *Wellbeing of Future Generations Act* (2015) and an *Environment Act* (2016); it has committed to a new farm support system to reward public goods; and set out land use planning policies to promote sustainable communities, whilst tackling the climate crisis.⁴ The ambition is that, within a generation, Wales’ ecological footprint is reduced to just 2 global hectares per person. **We have much to learn from Olga and Costica!**

Closer to her home on the slopes of the Malvern Hills, Bridget has explored these themes through her response to how extreme weather events transform landscape, reminding us that severe floods have become more frequent in recent decades – e.g. see *Summer Flood* (2008), *Winter Flood* (2009) and *The Bridge Across the Flooded River* (2015).

Shown together with the new works, these images prick our collective conscience and demand action to address the stark reality of climate change and recover nature.

Finally, there is another connection to place in Bridget’s art which finds inspiration in Herefordshire’s traditional standard orchards, their wildlife and how they sustain and nurture us in mind, body and soul.

Some of you will know that in the ‘noughties’ Bridget’s husband, Angus, bought a field looking due north up the Suckley Valley. It was an antidote to his day job in the business of art transport (cleverly named C’Art). He planted much of this land with ancient and modern varieties of dessert, culinary and vintage fruit which now provide raw material for the excellent Coombe Beauchamp apple juice, sold at his new venture *Malvern Cellar* along with fine cider and perry made by local craft producers.

Bridget says she doesn’t really approve of Angus’ shopkeeper ‘retirement enterprise’, but it has profound influence on her work.

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/dec/31/convert-farmland-to-nature-climate-crisis>

⁴ Through its [Technical Advice Note 6](#) (TAN 6) and [Planning Policy Wales \(PPW\)](#) the Welsh Government sets out land use planning policies to support sustainable communities.

Lichen encrusted skeletal trees with high balls of mistletoe appear dormant at this time of year, but orchard floors are vibrant with the rattling, chattering voices of winter thrushes⁵ squabbling over what remains of fallen fruit. Often with scattered bloody feathers of Sparrow Hawk prey victims among them.

This exhibition includes two stunning new images of *Crows in the September Orchard* and *Herefordshire Orchard in Winter*, as well as several closely observed studies of orchard blossom and fruit – all of which capture brilliantly the colours, mystery, allure and seasonality of the traditional standard orchard.

Thank you, Angus for your hang of this exhibition and enabling us to ‘drink the view’!

Now please enjoy the visual stimulus of Bridget’s art, including three large works on the lower floor.

James Marsden
10 January 2020

⁵ Redwing, Fieldfare, Mistle Thrush and Blackbird