

Robbie Fife

Kist

155A Gallery, 155A Lordship Lane, London, SE22 8HX

3 – 12 September 2021

Open Thurs – Sun 11am – 5pm

Mon – Weds by appointment only

This exhibition celebrates a body of work that explores the idea of above and below, imagining worlds that exist under the surface. Sticks, roots, kists, the bellies of icebergs, fishing nets and Greenland sharks all appear in these paintings as phenomena that could have been left behind or buried.

Several of these pictures were started during the artist's month-long residency in 2019, at the Albers Foundation in Carraig-na-gcat, West Cork, Ireland, where their gently surreal imagery was informed by the rural, coastal location of Fife's studio. This environment allowed for working in a quiet and focused manner away from his usual south London setting. During the pandemic he again returned to the countryside, this time to North Yorkshire, which helped him reconnect with the root themes of the work – local goings-on and eccentric behaviours. Recent paintings see his protagonists armed with metal detectors and wheelbarrows, searching amongst tree roots for mysterious phenomena including horseshoes and crescent moons.

Fife's influences are diverse and often personal, ranging from finding inspiration in the 'face' on his father's vintage bathroom scales, memories of his mother painting sealant for weeks on end over decorative Moroccan tiles, his stepmother's antique Victorian wheelbarrow and some particularly endearing oddball neighbours. His artistic points of reference are similarly broad – from the explorations of Robert Macfarlane in his book 'Underland', Mary Newcomb's pastoral scenes, Paul Klee's hand puppets, to the ambience of German artist Norbert Schwontkowski's imagery. Fife's work achieves a similarly delicate balance between playfulness and melancholia.

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Surface patina is a defining feature of this body of work. The paintings often comprise more than one component; featuring areas of collage or joins, where, as the work has evolved, one painting has become two, or part of a previous work has been incorporated into another. A piece of card that was initially used as a protective surface for gluing onto, might later become the basis of a new painting, the dried-on glue providing a unique resist. Fife often reworks pieces in a variety of media – oil, watercolour, coloured pencil, acrylic and collage – until a satisfactory composition emerges. “The accrual of mistakes is vital in my decision-making. I want my paintings to feel like they have been built over time and that their surface patina gives evidence of that longer duration.”

Fife’s time spent in the changeable climate on the coastline of West Cork and rural Yorkshire relates comfortably to his established preference for a palette and visual language that evoke the cooler climes of northern Europe (despite him citing the warmer tones of Early Renaissance painters and Indian miniaturists as further influences). His preference for working late into the night has infused this body of work with a particular luminescence – he feels they are paintings that are best experienced by the viewer in the twilight hours. During these moments, dropped objects appear magically to rise or hover.

One advantage of this exhibition having been postponed twice is that Fife has had time to experiment with printmaking. A limited-edition drypoint etching, ‘Moon Diviner’, was launched in early 2021, and this show features three new monotypes. These unique prints are made by painting with watercolour onto a plastic plate. The paint is then allowed to dry before damp paper is laid onto the plate and it is passed through a traditional printing press. The resulting images feel looser and more spontaneous than the paintings; the mechanism of making an impression in this way removes the artist’s hand before the print is finished, creating an element of chance and surprise; there is alchemy inherent in the process. In the artist’s words: “Printmaking, particularly making monotypes, offers a different way of arriving at an image. There is an immediacy that I don’t find in my painting; fewer opportunities to agonise.”

Although the appearance of sharks in many of these pictures may represent a fear of being out of one’s depth, there is a quiet confidence in Fife’s decision-making. This has resulted in an impactful body of work that evokes a sense of grandeur, in spite of the works characteristically diminutive scale.