



JAMES FISHER

Linden Lea

EAGLE GALLERY **EMH** ARTS



I Got it Bad 2022 oil on linen 120 x 150 cm



Hyacinths and Thistles 2022 oil on linen 120 × 150 cm



Pass Around 2022 oil on linen 120 × 150cm



Softly Falling 2022 oil on panel 26 × 24 cm

This text is an extract from the author's essay 'Linden Lea' to be published Summer 2022

The dearness of common things –
Beech wood, tea, plate-shelves,
And the whole family of crockery –
Wood-axes, blades, helves...

...Wool, rope, cloth, old pipes
Gone, warped in service;
And the one herb of tobacco,
The herb of grace, the censer weed,
Of whorled, blue, finger-traced curves.¹

"Every response to a poet, or more specifically to a poem," wrote Philip Larkin, "is in a sense autobiographical. The work appeals to, or coincides with, some part of our own nature, or perhaps to some deficiency of ours, of which we are aware, and it supplies some lack."²

James Fisher's paintings have that quality of shared identification that Larkin attributed to poetry. The connection between art forms is not entirely surprising. Painting, like poetry, combines representational and abstract elements; flourishes on metaphor and allusion; and relies on forms and tones, assembled in a certain order, to strike a chord in its audience. Both draw on multiple references outside themselves in order to construct their own imaginative space.

Poetry and music inhabit Fisher's imagination almost as much as painting. The title of this exhibition, *Linden Lea*, comes from the musical setting by Ralph Vaughan Williams of a poem originally written in Dorset dialect by William Barnes, a poet, clergyman and polymath. And Fisher's most recent compositions relate to landscape, possibly the most poetic of genres and, as that tradition has developed, the most emotive. He works in sequences and the paintings have something of the character of cantos or movements in a symphony that build a narrative or overarching theme.

The artist's deep attachment to landscape began in childhood in Bedfordshire when his home town was still mostly rural and socially homogenous. He was a pupil the same school that his parents had attended and the back route home took him unaccompanied through woods where he could linger among the trees and lose himself in imaginary adventures.

Those surroundings, ideal for an independent young person, have since been lost to urban development. Now resident in Gloucester, and living close to Barnwood Arboretum, Fisher's walks in nearby woods and copses retain that early secure immersion in nature. In 2020, when furloughed from his art school teaching and obedient to official advice to stay safe by staying local, his garden studio became a haven from understandable anxieties, an existence dislocated from reality. The relative seclusion of family life and studio routine generated the retrospection that flavoured his *Sylvania* series, miniature scenes in which trees are the principal feature that were painted in oil on board in radiant colours. The precursor of the *Linden Lea* works in mood and technique, Fisher spoke openly of them being a conscious attempt "to apprehend the memory" of the landscape of his childhood.³

Fisher's new paintings express a spirit of place that exists between eye and mind, memory and imagination. They portray trees, flowers and shrubs with a very personal sense of colour, design and touch. Accompanying titles employ the familiar language of the countryside, like 'spinney', 'clump' and 'wood', that are both realistic – those names are applied to wooded locations – and idyllic, as triggers for the rhapsodic concept of the countryside as blissful and redemptive. Indelible notions of this sort are embedded somewhere in the English cultural consciousness; abstracted from verisimilitude they fabricate a 'second order' of nature that is constantly being remade in the image of the beholder.

Times of adversity have been the regular background in recent years to these sentiments. Lucienne Day's *Calyx* textile design used botanical form stylised almost to the point of abstraction to reflect social optimism about growth and renewal, despite severe post-war austerity, that was encouraged by the Festival of Britain in 1951. Against the background of the Three Day Week, television advertising in 1973 fashioned the rustic nostalgia of the Hovis delivery boy, toiling past picturesque cottages up the soft-focused Gold Hill in Shaftesbury, and then marketed the pastoral ideal of the homespun Laura Ashley aesthetic to modern women in the 1980s, a decade when divisions in society noticeably widened. In the new century, not immune from strife, David Hockney's engagement with landscape, hugely popular with urban museum audiences, is based less on observation than on a sense of real presence, of being there just as the mind records what the eye sees with various degrees of nuance and recognition. "I do not think the world looks like photographs," Hockney has said. "I think it looks a lot more glorious than that."⁴

There is, then, a flourishing recent history of landscape being reshaped by the mind of the artist. In the case of James Fisher, the visual and verbal language of familiarity is used in

order to overturn expectation and create the ‘places of the mind’, a phrase coined by poet and art critic Geoffrey Grigson, that depart from the depiction of actual locations, even if he borrows names from spinneys and woods that exist, towards fabrications that harbour their spirit.⁵ Careful looking soon reveals that his images are spaces the imagination inhabits and are more about art (specifically what painting can do) than about content.

Space, colour and form are the prime indicators of this shift away from naturalism. While flat pictorial space unmodified by the phenomena of light and shadow is a classic quality of Modernism, its use by Fisher registers his interest in an older tradition of picture-making: Japanese print production from the seventeenth century which captured the ‘floating world’ of play and entertainment. One manifestation of this industry in particular caught his attention, the paddle-shaped hand fans, called *uchiwa*. (His late mother used the modern, mass-produced equivalent of these fans, a fact that injects an additional charge into their inclusion as a source.) Decorated with designs printed from woodblocks that featured landscape settings for the histrionic depiction of kabuki actors, warriors or female beauties, the original versions were executed in stylised compositions that emphasised linear design enlivened by translucent colours used in flat patches. This formula conveyed the mood Fisher sought for his own floating world, the time out of time that many others also experienced in periods of isolation.

The Japanese style also dovetailed with an existing, long-term reverence that Fisher holds for the unmediated colour and patterned structure of Pierre Bonnard’s canvases of everyday life, scenes transposed into flat shapes that subdivide a flattened overall design. Bonnard remained influenced throughout his career by the ethos of the Nabis, the group of Post-Impressionist French artists who set out to revitalise painting with a simplified style, inspired by Gauguin’s synthetism, of two-dimensional areas of vivid colour freed from descriptive function. “Understand a painting as a sum of chords,” Bonnard’s close associate Edouard Vuillard wrote in his diary, “and once and for all break away from any naturalist idea.” The result, for Fisher as for his influencers, is a bold artistic statement that is primarily an object in the world of objects before it claims to represent the natural environment, a poetic space that is nonetheless grounded in the known world.

From that point, however, his images connect with the overtly decorative organisation and intricacy of Persian carpets, for instance, or with seventeenth-century Pahari painting commissioned by princely patrons to reflect courtly culture of music, dance and poetry. It is interesting how he instinctively looks to examples that distance direct experience, either by

virtue of time or by technique, into an ambience that feels like illustration. Unfamiliar with the context in which they were created, Fisher perceived in the intense colour, geometric patterns and luxurious gardens of these Rajput miniatures a structural principle that happily accommodated many of the art historical inspirations he felt temperamentally closest to. It helped, too, that these exquisite scenes enacted deeds of love and longing, not among humans but among the gods. First seen when Howard Hodgkin’s collection was exhibited at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford in 2012, Fisher responded most of all to the dislocation they permitted of known treatments of peopled landscapes that he felt best embodied his own ‘places of the mind’.

Fisher populates spaces with incongruous presences. At first they are easily overlooked because, in intimate Nabi fashion, their form and clothing blends with their surroundings, as in *Pass Around* (2022). But once noticed (and they keep the composition interesting), they are eagerly looked for, either sinking into the image or falling out. They are not humans but curious hybrids – the hatted Humpty-Dumpty fellow with sightless eyes in *Free for the Night* (2022) who seems to want to push an ambiguous shape (an object or perhaps another figure) out of the speckled shrubbery and beyond the picture plane. These characters have their origins in the anthropomorphic mascot costumes called *kigurumi* that are popular in Japan (and featured in a series of paintings by Fisher in 2018). Often overtly cute in their appearance, their humour is disarming, since they also show up in *anime* and *manga* as protagonists in graphic novels.

What emerges from these constructed adventures that Fisher proposes is a collaged personality that might correspond with the artist’s own identity. As well as the familiar language of nature, he purloins song lyrics for use as titles: *I Got it Bad* is quoted from singer Nik Kershaw’s New Wave synthpop hit from 1984, ‘Wouldn’t it be Good’, which might well ignite an earworm of New Wave memories in those who latch on to the connection. A similar collaging of sources goes into making a painting. Drawing from life precipitates photographing and sampling existing paintings; he then might photocopy these photographs in monochrome to eliminate colour which can then be invented anew. He models his own *kigurumi* creations, figurines improvised from scavenged toys and bric-à-brac into incongruous constructions with ambiguous characteristics. That list is not exhaustive: other similar processes are set in train before work on the canvas, or the furniture ply panels on which he has begun to paint more and more, can start to unfold. And painting often takes place at night.

The surprising element in these paintings is that they reveal Fisher as a formalist who expresses himself in figurative terms. He is primarily concerned with pictorial form as opposed to representational meaning. In combining the two he explores their apparent differences, and in the process exposes the perspicacity that conditions every viewer's reading of his images.

MARTIN HOLMAN 19 June 2022

Notes:

1. From 'The Dearness of Common Things' by Ivor Gurney, *The Collected Poems of Ivor Gurney*, edited by PJ Kavanagh, Oxford, 1982, p. 119
2. Philip Larkin quoted by Michael Schmidt in 'PJ Kavanagh, from The Perfect Stranger to Father Ted', *The Guardian*, 5 September 2015
3. The artist quoted in Emma Hill's introduction to *Sylvania* (exhibition catalogue), Eagle Gallery EMH Arts, 2020, p.5. http://www.emmahilleagle.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Eagle-Gallery-Cabinet-Room_James-Fisher_Sylvania_December-2020.pdf
4. David Hockney quoted in Chris Stephens, *David Hockney* (exhibition catalogue), Tate, 2017, p. 172
5. The essays in Geoffrey Grigson's *Places of the Mind* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949) consider ideas about landscape as constructs of the mind and imagination of their creators.

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Suddenly, Willow Trees 2022

oil on panel, 34.5 × 29.5 cm

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Kirsch Wet Earth 2022

oil on panel, 34.5 × 29.5 cm

Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White 2022

oil on panel, 34.5 × 29.5 cm

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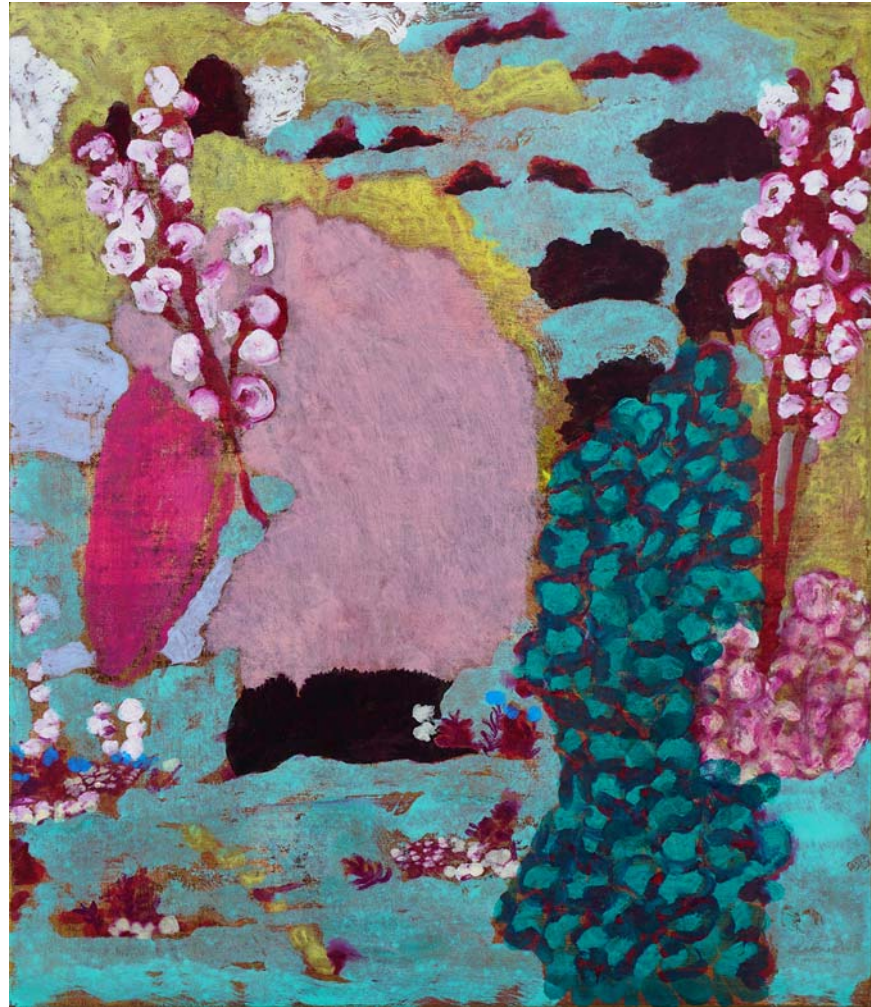
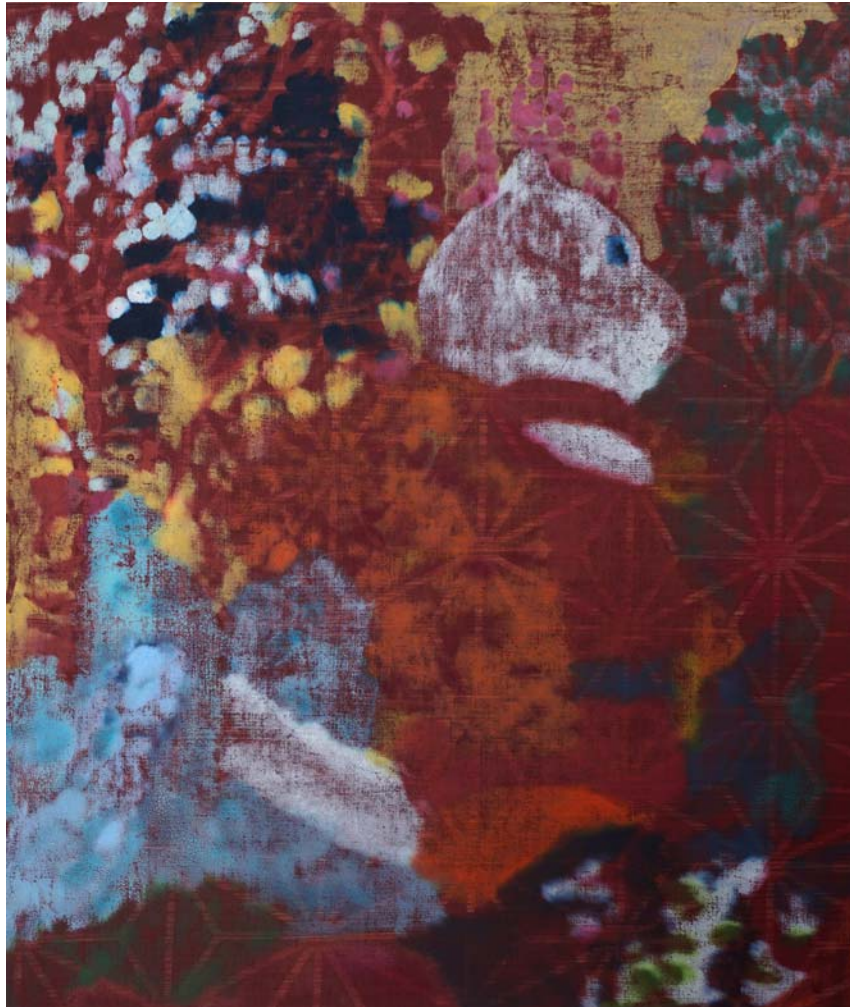
Smoke Signals 2022

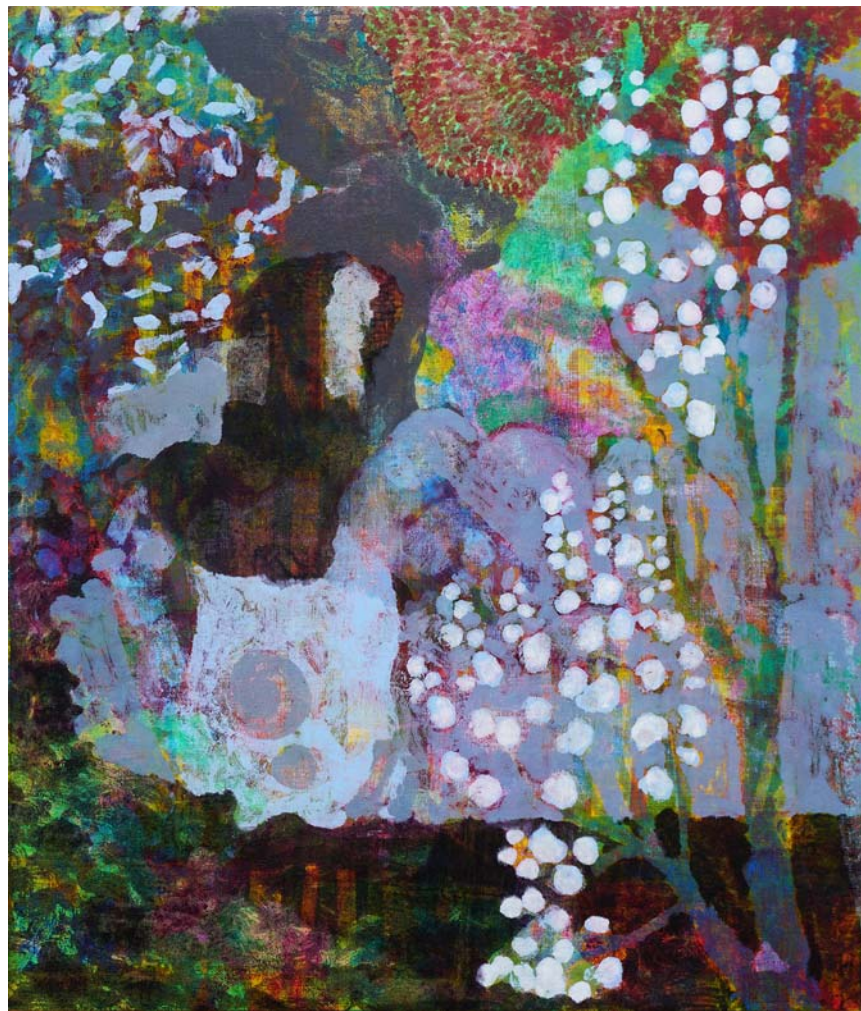
oil on panel, 34.5 × 29.5 cm

Sweet Eclipse 2022

oil on panel, 34.5 × 29.5 cm





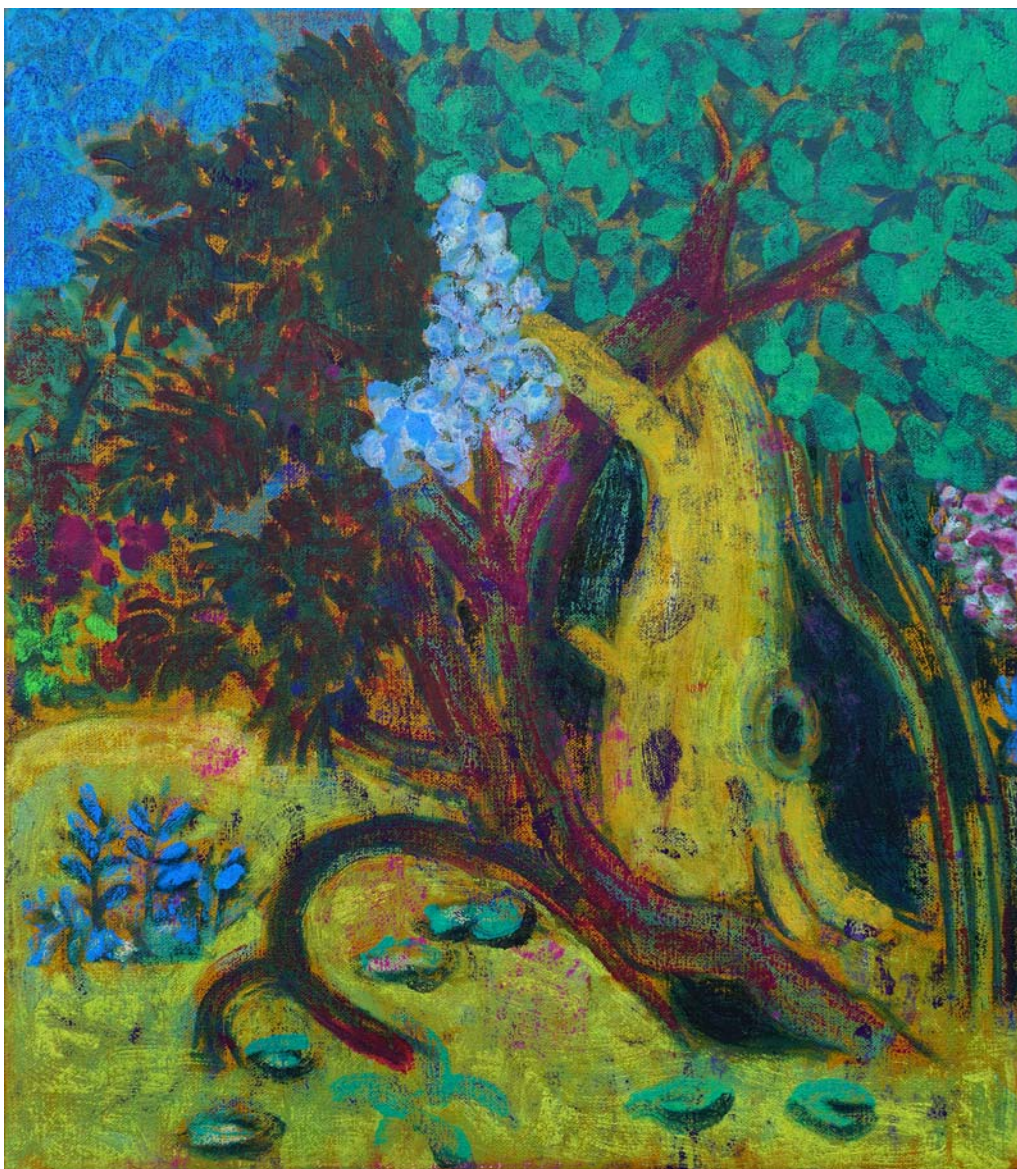




It's a Stinging Sensation 2022 oil on linen 40 × 35 cm



Free for the Night 2022 oil on panel 51 × 45 cm



Twilight Soon 2022 oil on linen 40 × 35 cm



Crow Camp 2021 oil on panel 40 x 30 cm



Growing, Billowing 2022 oil on panel 42 × 32 cm

JAMES FISHER

1972 born UK
1992–5 University of Brighton
1995–7 Royal College of Art, London
2006–9 PhD University of Gloucester

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2005 *The Wanderer* Rochester City Art Gallery, Rochester
and other recollections Eagle Gallery/EMH Arts, London
2008 *I came here a stranger* Eagle Gallery/EMH Arts, London
As a stranger I depart Campden Gallery, Chipping Campden
2009 *My Hopes are not Entirely Hopeless* Aldeburgh Music, Suffolk,
curated by the Eagle Gallery/EMH Arts, London
2010 *A Quiet Companion* Campden Gallery, Chipping Campden
2011 *Uchiwa-e* Eagle Gallery/EMH Arts, London
2012 *Objects in the Mirror...* Campden Gallery, Chipping Campden
2015 *Lies & Camouflage* with Denise de Cordova – Eagle Gallery/EMH Arts
Project at the London Art Fair, Business Design Centre, London
2016 *Doppelgänger* Eagle Gallery/EMH Arts, London
2017 *Plaything* with Denise de Cordova, curated by Katrina Blannin,
Blyth Gallery, Imperial College, London
2019 *Flotilla* White Conduits Projects, London
2020 *Sylvania* Eagle Gallery Cabinet Room, London

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2003 *20 x 5* Eagle Gallery/EMH Arts, London
2004 *Rose Pavilion Interior* (with muf architecture/art)
5ème Biennale d'Art Contemporain d'Enghien-les-Bains Enghien-les-Bains,
France
2005 *Conscious Fiction* Eagle Gallery/EMH Arts, London
Ex Roma APT Gallery, London
Fokelore APT Gallery, London
2006 *Cartoon Collage & The Decorative Motif* Eagle Gallery/EMH Arts, London

2006 *Campden Gallery, Chipping Campden*
Disrupted Narratives Eagle Gallery/EMH Arts, London
The Worcester Pilgrim Project Worcester Cathedral
2007 *From Elsewhere* Campden Gallery, Chipping Campden
Cities and Eyes Aldeburgh Music 2007, Peter Pears Gallery, Aldeburgh
Enchanted Eagle Gallery/EMH Arts, London
Baroque Eagle Gallery/EMH Arts, London
2008 *Exchange* Paul Kane Gallery, Dublin
London Original Print Fair, Royal Academy – Eagle Gallery/EMH Arts,
London
Royal Academy Summer Exhibition
2009 Northern Print Biennale, Newcastle
2010 London Original Print Fair, Royal Academy – Eagle Gallery/EMH Arts,
London
Royal Academy Summer Exhibition – invited artist
Memory's Images Eagle Gallery/EMH Arts, London
ING Discerning Eye Mall Galleries, London
Then and Now Eagle Gallery/EMH Arts, London
2011 *BITE* Mall Galleries, London
2012 *Generations* Arch 402, London
Royal Academy Summer Exhibition
2013 *Panel Paintings* Eagle Gallery/EMH Arts, London
Ceramics, Paintings and Prints Eagle Gallery/EMH Arts, London
2014 *Enclosures, Elsewhere* Lion and Lamb, London (curator)
Some of My Colours Eagle Gallery, EMH Arts, London
Garden Campden Gallery, Chipping Campden
Panel Paintings 2 Eagle Gallery/EMH Arts, London
2015 *Multiplied* Christie's South Kensington, Eagle Gallery/EMH Arts, London
Neiland's Choice GX Gallery, London
Unfolding the Archive NCAD Gallery / F.E. McWilliam Gallery & Studio,
Dublin
2016 *Summer Mix* Turps Gallery, London
Orpheus Ascending Eagle Gallery/EMH Arts, London
Towards Night curated by Tom Hammick, Towner Gallery, Eastbourne

2016 *So we beat on* Eagle Gallery/EMH Arts, London
2017 *Wunderkammer* Eagle Gallery/EMH Arts, London
2019 Royal Academy Summer Exhibition
2020 *The Collector's Room* JGM Gallery, London
2022 Royal Academy Summer Exhibition

AWARDS

1995 Travel Award, East Sussex County Council
1996 Artist in Residence, The University of Calgary, Canada
2001 Abbey Scholarship in Painting, The British School in Rome
2002–6 Acme Live/Work Programme, Sugar House Studios, London

COLLECTIONS

DLA Piper, London; Fidelity Investments, London; Jerwood Foundation Collection;
 The Hive, Worcester County Council

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

Encountering St Ippolyts Etching and letterpress folio; Eagle Gallery/EMH Arts, 2005
The Invisible City Eagle Gallery/EMH Arts, London, 2007 ISBN 978-0-9554046-3-4
I came here a stranger, as a stranger I depart Martin Holman, Eagle Gallery/EMH Arts and
 Campden Gallery, 2008 ISBN 978-0-9554046-7-2
The Comic Power of Ken Kiff's Sequence James Fisher, Turps Banana, issue 19, 2018
Ken Kiff: The Sequence Emma Hill, Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, 2018 ISBN 978-0-
 9460097-5-6

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

The Independent, 4 November 2003 – Sue Hubbard: '20 X 5 Drawings'
Galleries Magazine, January 2005 – Corinna Lotz: 'Conscious Fiction'
The Independent, 17 January 2005 – Sue Hubbard: 'Conscious Fiction and other recollections
 Eagle Gallery, London'
The Pilgrimage Books, published artworks 2006
Printmaking Today, winter issue 2006 – Emma Hill: 'In Pilgrims' Footsteps'
From Elsewhere, Campden Gallery, Chipping Campden, 2007
The Irish Times, 9 April 2008 – Aidan Dunne

Aldeburgh Music 2009 Festival Programme
Galleries Magazine, June 2009 – Blake Hall: 'Aldeburgh Festival'
Royal Academy Illustrated, 2010 – Richard Cork ISBN 978-1-90511-87-1
A Quiet Companion, Campden Gallery, Chipping Campden, 2010
Uchiwa-e, Eagle Gallery, London, 2011
Towards Night, Towner Gallery, 2016

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