

## ANNE HOWESON FEET OF ANGELS

Text by Jenny Blyth, © 2023

*“Art is to console those who are broken by life .... If you truly love nature, you will find beauty everywhere...”. Vincent Van Gogh*

Drawing is often overlooked, presented as sketches for ‘finished’ work, a journey towards the myriad paintings or sculptures that we enjoy. Rarely is it considered in its own right. But artists like William Kentridge have brought a whole new insight and appreciation to the fine art of drawing, and the different ways in which it can be expressed. Howeson’s work is a truly contemporary representation of the medium. Observed with a mind firmly fixed in politics, Anne Howeson reflects on the historical and the contemporary, noting intention and effect. Her desire to balance out fears for the future, or the wrong doings of the past, is manifest in an ethereal dimension that is apparent in her enjoyment of storytelling and imagination.

**Feet of Angels** is a new body of work responding to the photography of William Henry Fox Talbot accompanied by drawings from recent years that follow through from her last exhibition **Present in the Past** in which she explored the transformation of Kings Cross over 300 years. Working with engravings, Howeson overlaid the bucolic Georgian landscape of occasional villages, through industrialization and the building of major railways from St Pancras to the resources of the North, against a backcloth of modernity. Her 21<sup>st</sup> Century cityscape, distinguished by iconic landmarks such as the Post Office Tower, The Shard, The Gherkin and even the Twin Towers, reminds us of history in the making. Where previously she used 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century engravings, the new drawings are worked over Fox Talbot photographs from the Bodleian Libraries Collection, and their online Catalogue Raisonné of his work. (<https://talbot.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/>)

A tutor at The Royal College of Art for more than thirty years, Howeson embraces artists from early Renaissance to Contemporary. Her muses are many, from the quiet of Piero della Francesca and the humanity of Giotto, to Samuel Palmer embracing light in the landscape, the particular Englishness and detail of Stanley Spencer, and the living drawings of William Kentridge that critique the politics of apartheid and the challenge of a country in transition. She has always encouraged students to look to the giants of Fine Art, to be informed and inspired by fellow artists whether historical or contemporary, to learn from the best. Her intention is not to appropriate but to inhabit and extract, creating new imaginings that are distinctly her own. William Blake, who considered imagination ‘an instrument superior to reason’, is one of her most treasured muses.

There is a shared sensibility between Howeson’s drawings and Fox Talbot’s images. Pioneer of early photography, Fox Talbot created the first ‘photogenic drawing’ in 1835. Developing the process further over five years, he discovered that by exposing light-sensitized paper to bright sunlight briefly, he was able to record feint impressions that developed out into detailed images, or calotypes. Derived from the ancient Greek ‘kalos’ meaning beautiful, and

'tupos' meaning impression, it is these qualities that connect Anne Howeson's drawings with the early photography that Fox Talbot originated and shared.

Owner of the Lacock Estate in Wiltshire from 1828 until his death fifty years later, Fox Talbot amassed a collection of thousands of photographs, documenting family and workers on the Estate, at task and in repose, as he explored his methodology. From early teens, Howeson has been captivated by the beauty of his photographs, savouring the attention to detail in the characters, their clothes and the objects that he recorded.

Photography is a mainstay tool for so many contemporary artists, particularly painters, freezing that moment in time, from which they can work. But in the doing of that, there is sometimes a static, surface quality to the new creation which identifies it as anchored in photography. Not so for Howeson. Her work celebrates photography but is infused with narrative and dreams, peopled with characters drawn from plays and poems, perhaps a figure she has encountered momentarily. Her chosen photograph may contain much, or little of note, to anyone other than herself. It is a springboard to other worlds, for transcending time, a stage on which to choreograph her dioramas.

Her methodology remains the same - after scrubbing out selected original figures and features, Howeson introduces her own players, trees and greenery. Working in gouache, conté and crayon, she brings colour to the monochrome, accentuating light and dark. Chiaroscuro adds rigour, and vignettes of narrative unfurl as she introduces both period and contemporary characters to a re-orchestrated landscape. Whether pastoral and quiet, or politically charged and pithy, her work is complex, laced with moments from beyond with which she seeks to soften the grit of reality. The overall effect is unsettling, suggesting an unearthly presence.

Despite the processions of people traipsing across the land with their scant belongings in **Rustic Bench**, there is the frisson of angels moving unseen amongst the autumn leaves that crown above them. The figures clearly relate to people displaced, to the vast numbers of refugees seeking to find a safe place to be. Howeson casts our minds to recent conflict in Afghanistan, Syria and now raging across Ukraine. The photograph that triggered this work is a Fox Talbot of an empty bench beneath a tree. The richness and warmth of Howeson's drawing perhaps brings balm to the figures in their plight.

There are notes of William Blake expressed in many of Howeson's drawings. Recalling a childhood vision of a tree filled with angels, their '*bright angelic wings bespangling every bough like stars*', he believed in the afterlife, his poetry and paintings reflecting that belief, unconstrained by dimension. Blake was traditional yet subversive. Vehemently opposed to slavery and child labour, he eschewed the Church for defining and limiting religious belief and the free expression of love. His Christian faith remained profound, rooted in compassion and nature.

Angels are implicit in Howeson's work, an ethereal nuance watching over and bringing compassion where there is none. Titled simply **Angel**, Howeson selected a 19<sup>th</sup> Century engraving of the railway tunnels beneath Kings Cross. She has added in figures disembarking onto the tracks towards the tunnels beyond, referring perhaps to WWII. Their despair is

evidenced in their bowed stance, and the procession is witnessed by Angels with huge wings that flank the scene on both sides. They are unseen in the shadows, silent and protective, and there is light at the end of both tunnels.

**Burning Books** is Howeson's sister drawing to **Angel**. It is both extraordinary and perturbing in equal measure, and the first of her drawings based in photography. Extraordinary even epic, it follows through from **Present in the Past** reflecting the grandeur of St Pancras expressed in the architecture, at the time of a burgeoning British Empire. The content of this drawing however commands a shift in history and geography, and the manifestation of suppression and persecution. She has drawn figures lined up on the platform on the right awaiting the train, silent and subdued, as they watch their burning, smoking books. The crowd of figures beyond officers in the foreground on the left are in a state of chaos, and through the windows in the rear, we can see smoke tails curling skyward where Howeson suggests the burning of bodies. But she has planted trees onto the platform, and shafts of sunlight stream through the girders that arc above the station. Effectively she is using nature to try to balance out the unbearable, to bring some measure of comfort.

**Rake & Basket** is a different creature. Ghosts from the past, picnic in the style of Manet's *Dejeuner Sur L'Herbe*. The original Fox Talbot photograph is an unusual choice with simply so little going on. Whatever may have occurred has passed, a lingering flavour where the 'presence of absence' is evidenced by a discarded rake and basket in an unexceptional country setting. The reinvented scene is rich with colour and quietly reassuring. Howeson portrays herself seated on a stone, a contemporary player in the group, gazing directly at us. Besides her are two Victorian ladies in hooped dresses with neat collars and bonnets, and in the foreground are the Rake and the Basket. Useful objects that transcend the passage of time, they are drawn with quiet attention, as are the beautiful oversized dove and hound, seated either side of the artist. There is an almost surreal element to Howeson's compositions, but the figures are true each to their time, and the animals and objects such as the bowls and vases, the rake and the basket are real, links to the ghosts of lives passed that cohabit side-by-side with the living.

**Spade and Broom** is similarly worked over a Fox Talbot print. It is more monochromatic in tone, and again, very little of the original photograph has remained. Although Howeson's 19<sup>th</sup> Century figures are lifted from further Fox Talbot images, the third figure on the right, an 18<sup>th</sup> Century creature in breeches and buckles, recalls the blood thirsty *Flea*, an insect beast of William Blake's dream. The Spade and the Broom command centre stage exuding surety and comfort, whilst hidden in the bushes to the left are two contemporary figures whispering to each other.

Bunker style and makeshift, the buildings in **A Shed and a House** are barely habitable. A fire smokes, untended in the foreground. The lie of the land nods to Palmer, but there is something very wrong in the landscape. Howeson's composition has a distinctly dystopian feel. Despite the willowy saplings, the tone is unnerving, post-apocalyptic. In the 'house', Howeson has drawn a group of people who are discussing what to do.

**Possibly a Soldier** was triggered by a Fox Talbot photograph of a single period figure. A play on 'Possibly a Sailor' titled by an archivist perhaps, he appears more gondolier than sailor, but

intrigued by the character, Howeson has flanked him with two soldiers, one in fatigues, American, possibly from the Vietnam War, and the other distinctly British, from WWII. As ever, it is the occasional figure who seems to get under her skin, to prompt her musings.

The last of the new drawings is ***Fox Talbot's Chair*** covered over with a dust sheet. Although the drawing room is empty, it is lit up and coloured with the reflection of a fire remembered from Howeson's childhood that raged in the fields beyond her home, threatening to engulf it.

Memories pervade and colour our conscious perception of the world around us. Thus, for each of us the narrative and our view of the world is unique. Whilst highlighting beauty in the world around us, artists are often charged by the politics of the day that underscore our realities and unseat our notions and aspirations for peaceful and meaningful existence. Like artists, we are as much drawn to the darker corners as we are to the light, but where we are so often silent, artists step forward : Van Dyck captured the extravagant opulence of Charles I that precipitated his demise; Winslow Homer witnessed the American Civil War that transformed the slavery of his early years to an unliberated emancipation; Picasso's unparalleled painting of the bombing of Guernica, a reportage of the fascist war crimes of Franco and the far right, banned him from his homeland for life. Where William Kentridge has documented the ravages and chaos of Apartheid in South Africa, Richard Mosse lays bare the devastation of deforestation in the Amazon. Artists, at every level, are the visual journalists of our day. They are our voice and our conscience. Such an artist is Anne Howeson.

*Front of catalogue...*

Farewell, green fields and happy grove  
Where flocks have took delight  
Where lambs have nibbled, silent move  
The feet of angels bright

William Blake, *Night*

*Jenny Blyth, curator & gallerist*

*Jenny Blyth Fine Art*

**At Carey Blyth Gallery**

8 Woodstock Road Oxford OX2 6HT Wed-Sat 12-5 pm

[www.jennyblythfineart.co.uk](http://www.jennyblythfineart.co.uk)

mobile: 07798 526 252

Facebook & Instagram @careyblythgallery