

Rapid Eye Movements

Exhibition Text by Sammi Gale

The first cut is the deepest. Whether it is your first love or the intensity of a Bacon, that being-seen-ness of a Kahlo, or the Diazepam of a Dali, it is common for teenagers to fall hard for Surrealist painters and Symbolist poets. Inevitably. Adolescence is a time when the clear messages of childhood are clouded by adult codes. Along with representing ambiguity, the processes of Surrealism – automation and drawing from the happenstance of dreams – provide sweet teenage relief, too, by momentarily bypassing our newfound self-consciousness.

The poet Stéphane Mallarmé wanted to ‘paint, not the thing itself, but the effect it produces’, and that is as good a definition as any for the (small s) surrealist impulse shared by Iwan Lewis, Molly Martin, Polina Pak and Morgan Wills, brought together in ‘Rapid Eye Movements’ at Sid Motion Gallery. Over 100 years after Mallarmé, the exhibition implicitly asks *why* we might return to surrealism – for many viewers, a deep cut – even as it answers with four oneiric painters, whose practices are nonetheless lemon-wince awake to the complexities of everyday, contemporary life.

Iwan Lewis is a painter of the in-between. He grew up in North Wales, moved to London and back again, as if called back to the rural – like the figures in *TikTokers and Cernunnos* (2024), who have come to capture something Celtic. The TikTokers risk melting into abstraction and/or diagram (the leftmost figure’s coat is moth-shaped and the tree not far off a Y). The palette is a sharpener: lavender with an acidic, light green.

With colour as much as subject matter, the viewer can sense Lewis reaching – in *Caledfwlch (Excalibur)*, *The Plebs Retrieval* (2024), painted directly onto ‘the towels I use in the studio to clean my brushes’, he reaches for what is immediately to hand. At the same time, Lewis hyperextends, following his curiosity beyond ancient folklore to etymology. ‘Caled’ means hard and ‘bwlch’ means gap, the artist explains of *Caledfwlch*, the Welsh for ‘Excalibur’, cracking open the word, just as his two figures are poised to break open the expanse of water with a splash.

Edvard Munch-like, Lewis' landscape leans into feeling. 'There is an immediacy and honesty in Munch's work that I really appreciate', Lewis says, a directness. In *Nôl Nôl Nôl Apparitions and Smouldering Cavities*, the warped cottages and trees rush the eye to the back of the field with the velocity of a swallow darting over it. At the same time – as if in affinity – the impasto brush strokes mould around the shape of a head in the foreground. An abstract red tendril drifts away, not unlike a searching root.

Speaking of roots, Polina Pak is another bilingual painter, far from her native Khavaroosk in southeastern Russia, near China, and its rich, swampy soil. At Sid Motion Gallery, Pak recalls her grandmother's patch of sugar snap peas in flashes of light and fantasy after Odilon Rodin. Beloved by multiple generations of her family, the peas are as nourishing as the lactating breasts found elsewhere in her work.

With watercolour on paper, form follows subject matter, Pak's gentle pencils tending to every hair on the head of the figure *Fallow* (2024). But reliance on the land is a double-edged sword – the person might be sleeping peacefully or simply exhausted. As in Lewis' work, landscape is enmeshed with mood, the ambiguously weightless saplings conceivably being tugged back down to earth or floating away from it.

Where Pak and Lewis are rooted in the rural – or occasionally uprooted by it – Morgan Wills is an observer of the suburban. The overlooked, neglected. *Black Mountains Tarn* (2024)'s blurry figure wading in the sea, at a neither-here-nor-there distance, on an overcast day, could be a camera roll cast-off. As such, the scene feels double-salvaged – once from memory, then from the delete bin – B-roll reclaimed as an essential part of the human experience.

A scavenging fox, fleet-footed on a fence at dusk writes itself: liminal. Meanwhile, the backs of houses as if glimpsed on a passing train are part of a new body of work inspired by the kind of kitchen-sink holiness you'd find in a Larkin poem. Whereas previous paintings have been characterised by a muralist, Stanley Spencer-esque work steering some of the sentiment, these are more hands-off, the figures inviting viewers into the frame rather than emoting out of them – 'a return' to an earlier part of his practice, Wills says. Trees over a footpath in a park seem too close together. The scene is uncanny. Still, yet full of the disorientating back-forward motion of cinema's 'Vertigo shot'.

Molly Martin's work is altogether cosier. Rather than peering out the train window at the backs of houses, her torch shines around her own skull and sketchbooks. She tends to work on an intimate scale (the largest work here is 40×40 cm), into which her figures are squished, all on the same plane, as if in a Petri Dish. The limbless figures in *The Dinner Table* (2024) have Sylvanian Families proportions and seem just as playful. With their vague features, they themselves could be a compressed, abstract dinner, like space food to which you need only add water. *Phthonus* (2024) shares colours and a kiss with Marc Chagall's *The Birthday* (1915), and the figures would likewise float if they weren't mired in a painterly jelly – or as Martin might see it, 'a cocoon'.

The gum-like reds of the mattress in *I Drift to Sleep / I Expand* (2024) recall joke-shop dentures. Fitting – reading Martin's works, in all their blunt simplicity, feels like explaining (and thereby ruining) a joke. Every word you might have for her paintings becomes slippery and up for interpretation, as in psychoanalysis, or perhaps a tutorial (one of Martin's tutors pointed out that, between her figures, she does not paint 'boundaries' – take that, Freud.)

Although Martin makes it seem fun, it can also feel squicky to return to those versions of ourselves we think we've already buried, but are kicking within us, occasionally drifting to the surface when we sleep. Pak with her peas explores how our motives (motifs) are passed down the generations. You would never catch Lewis sleeping: he is too alert to the gap between life and the words and tools we use to try and name it. Meanwhile, Wills demonstrates how even our most neglected spaces can be collected, curated, aestheticised, transformed into dreamscapes. 'Rapid Eye Movements' asserts that dreaming need not always be woozy. It can be incisive, full of wit, clarity and care. As sharp as Excalibur – or joke-shop dentures.