

Searching Minds

Words by Emily Steer

Over the course of a lifetime, many artists struggle to keep surprising themselves. It can be challenging to take the lesser trodden paths, when the hand so instinctively knows its own favoured marks, lines, and intonations. Carole Gibbons, Roy Oxlade and Max Wade, brought together for *'Searching Minds'* at Sid Motion Gallery, have all dedicated themselves to an enduring, exploratory search for something unexpected. In their own way, each has done this by turning to their direct surroundings, whether repeatedly depicting the everyday items in their studio with varied accents in each final piece, or sketching the negative spaces and shadows that make up their local vicinity, before turning these drawings into works of pure abstraction. Across their knotty drawings and paintings, that which is solid and knowable dances with a world of feeling and individual interior life.

Carole Gibbons experienced a sharp shift in her artistic act of searching. She painted in Barcelona and Menorca during the 1960s, creating pieces inspired by mythology. She reimagined her own mother as a Goddess and brought the heightened drama of the Greek myths to landscape works. Early sketchbook pieces from the 1960s, displayed in *'Searching Minds'*, present a world drenched in vibrant blues and reds, in which elegant figures skip across the page, sometimes becoming entirely engulfed by abstraction. Gibbons embraced the idea of stream of consciousness, imbuing these works with a rich interiority and sense of intuitive creation.

This changed when the artist moved back to Glasgow and her process became merged with family life, her studio situated within the home. There was a sense that she had lost her subject, and what followed was a deep exploration of her immediate surroundings. Here, her still lifes are taken more from observation than her early works, but they retain a heady sense of the psychological gaze. She has since returned repeatedly to the same objects and motifs, always drawing something slightly new out of these quotidian items. A Moroccan vase, for example, threads through the years of her work. This item is cracked and damaged; the resulting paintings contain a sense of melancholy for an object that is granted intense attention in its broken form.

In *'Searching Minds'*, Gibbons' *'Studio Interior'* (1993) presents a bustling space, full of the comfortable markers of home – a self-portrait in a mirror, a potted plant, a snug armchair – but everything appears fluid, and it is the moments in between that draw the eye, from the pink walls that blush like rosy cheeks to the darkened ceiling that looks as though it could fall in and crush this warm domestic studio scene at any moment.

Roy Oxlade also depicted mundane objects, often exploring the idea of transformation, how one thing can easily become another through the artist's intervention or viewer's projection. He was a keen proponent of the exploratory potential of drawing, when respected as an art form in and of itself, not as a lesser preparatory sketch or expanded definition used to encompass every creative act.

In his paintings and drawings, items drift in and out of abstraction. *'Infanta with Black Easel'*, c. 1989, for example, shows a humorously rendered dog lost in a mass of frenetic activity, from which an easel, human figure and doorway become semi-visible upon longer viewing. The eye is tempted by the recognisable animal to find knowable forms elsewhere, but Oxlade does not put forth easy solutions and the rest remains partly beyond grasp. Items such as lemons, scissors and jugs also recur through his paintings, selected for their formal and aesthetic properties. These objects were chosen from his locale, providing clues to the rural location that housed his Kent home and studio. His pieces offer a tantalising meeting point between clarity and spontaneous mark making.

Wade has been greatly inspired by Oxlade's work for the last two decades, first exploring it in depth while studying for his undergraduate. Like Oxlade, he values drawing as a means to instinctively investigate his environment. All his paintings begin with sketches which map out the negative spaces, lines and gaps in the world around him. He then reinterprets these in paint. The final works, entirely abstract though suggestive of landscapes and external life, are divorced from their source material. In these paintings, the viewer may find themselves on a lengthy hunt for solid ground. This mirrors the artist's experience of making the work too; he sees the act of searching through pencil and paint as a never-ending process that should not promise closure.

Wade's 2023 painting *'Swinging on the Deck'* is featured in *'Searching Minds'*. Washed with jewel-like green alongside more grassy and pale tones, the painting is the first of a series which began, like all his bodies of work, with a renewed selection of tools. The introduction of new brushes, squeegees and primers is intended to throw the artist out of his usual habits, inviting alternative routes around the canvas as he interprets his drawings.

Together, these artists revel in the joy and frustration of giving oneself to the act of art making. Their final works begin very practically rooted in their environment before mutating into something almost beyond reach. The viewer is also placed in an in-between state, forever looking for an answer that even the artists themselves keeps at arm's length.