

Celia Lyttelton *Metamorphoses*

Serena Morton

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And Other Tales

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343 Ladbroke Grove, London W10 6HA

Against Oblivion; On Myth & the Rubble of History

Adrian Dannatt

"It is not enough to know an artist's works. You have to know also when he did them, why, how, and in what circumstances." Picasso

As we all know from mythology Perseus the sister of Zeus became a mortal to trick Hesperus the aunt of Aphrodite whose descendants Triton, Beatrice and Virgil....no, no, no.

My knowledge of myth is less than zero, only matched by my equal ignorance of Greek and Roman literature, Dante, medieval theology, whatever. The very stories on which Western culture were founded and sustained for several thousand years have recently almost entirely vanished from popular consciousness. We have 'lost the plot' quite literally and when it comes to the visual arts can no longer recognise the Christian saints and their activities any more than the Gods and heroes of the preceding epoch, their names and deeds meaning nothing. And I plead guilty, as bad as any iPhone addict teen nodding their head to some hidden beat in front of the stately Rubens with no idea of its meaning, peering at the canvas in a moronic stupor. That's me.

But I still enjoy, with a passion, the art of the past, the Catholic martyrdom whose details escape me as much as the Goddesses in regal battle and underworld adventurers whose narrative I can never quite remember. Instead I am left to appreciate such work largely in formalist aesthetic terms, their composition and colour, brushwork and form, their chiselled planes and artful angles, the larger percent of my love (if love can come in percentages) reserved for their physical structure and achieved effects rather than symbolic sense. The full meaning of

these works is tragically beyond me, lacking the culture and context in which they were created and intended to be received, leaving me with their visual delights instead; the altar panel, crafted to be seen in a dark church only lit by candle and daylight with the purpose of reminding sinning locals of their fate, I enjoy just for its vibrant tones and patterns, without any faintest qualm of religious feeling, spotlit in an air conditioned gallery.

All this failure, mine included, is very recent of course, a shift perhaps datable to the Romantic movement along with German aesthetic theory and the revolutionary ideas of 'modernism', abstraction itself eventually leading to a different way of looking at art. The battle between the 'ancients' and 'moderns' may rage back through the millennia but currently it seems particularly acute, pitching those few with the 'knowledge' - which in itself seems increasingly unnecessary - against the vast majority without any historical or even logical framework at all. How can we understand and appreciate the singular work of art when daily bombarded by images whose very purpose seems to be to try and sever us further from all continuities of time and place? As Donald Preziosi puts it in his book *Art, Religion and Amnesia*, 'The experience of art - and thus its resultant interpretation - is one of fabrication with varying degrees of deliberation, ambivalence and amnesia.'

Celia Lyttelton is one of those lucky few who has boldly maintained the continuity of time, place and culture and who extends and elaborates this central tradition with her own distinct idiom and intention. She is happily rooted in the past whilst remaining entirely contemporary, using the vast and rich vocabulary of our once communal mythology to build her own visual language as atemporal as universal. Whether this qualifies as 'modernist' or 'post' or even 'pre-modernist', avant-garde or archaic, radical or reactionary, will be decided by the long arm of art history

rather than ourselves, as Zhou Enlai said of the French Revolution it is still too early to tell. Certainly any work of art that asks us to recall the larger context of our ancient myth making and historic heritage is an immediate affront, insult, challenge to the convenient amnesia of our current way of living, and as such is inherently 'radical' in the true sense of its roots.

We may not be so conversant with the details of Ovid's *Metamorphosis* but looking at Lyttelton's paintings and etchings the potency of those stories remains an active force, as if half-remembered within our collective unconscious, and unlike mere illustration they seem to embody, own, the narrative rather than depict its outline. Mass culture is cheating us out of our own experience of time, what Bergson called the *durée*, and the hand-drawn line, the personally applied paintwork, the patient time taken by the artist and given back by the viewer in front of the painting, here act as some last ditch, defiant resistance. Any celebration of the past, the deep shared past, becomes revolutionary in a future predicated on its utter obliteration.

Lyttelton's belief in such continuity, faith in the redemptive possibilities of our communal heritage, is abundantly clear in her own experience of the Middle East; her profound personal understanding of those lands being based on the opposite of exoticism or 'Orientalism', rather on an appreciation of the shared humanity and history, the mutual kinship of an earlier epoch.

Many of the places depicted by Lyttelton, places which she visited and knew well from a young age, are no longer visitable or no longer even exist, their eradication has taken place in just a few years or a few months ago. Some Foucault might dare ponder a parallel between the west wiping clean our knowledge of the past and

fundamentalists destroying all trace of pre-Islamic existence, but whilst the physical evidence of any previous pre-existent culture has been almost eradicated in Syria, Libya or Yemen, at least western mythology is still accessible, alive, through our literature and indeed art.

Lyttelton has tasked herself with the safeguarding and sustaining of the ancient world, of fable, mythology and actual place, through the hopeful, healing making of art, creating images to hold steady what went before and in many cases no longer exists. As to charges that hers is a very Anglo-Saxon sort of Middle East, as well as a very English sort of Greek and Latin arcadia, Lyttelton bravely takes up the challenge by creating a memorial wall to her beloved vanished cities using the most specifically English form imaginable; an 18th century handmade wallpaper based on that at Carlton House, with fake frames decorated with tableaux of those fallen citadels, her poignant lament for the Levant and Southern Arabia. Likewise several of her paintings of the East are subtitled with the very western places they most reminded her of, *Southern Yemen*; *Manhattan in Mud* or *Tower Hamlets in High Yemen* making absolutely overt her position as an outside observer.

Lapsing briefly into the biographical, Lyttelton's father is an academic historian of Italy and her mother was an archaeologist, explorer and exceptional photographer who devoted much of her career to exploring this same Middle East, not least accompanied by her equally plucky daughter. Her motto is 'Live as Well as you Dare' and indeed her long desert camping experiences lend themselves to that pleasing anagram upon her name, 'Locality El Tent' It goes without saying that the English version of Italy and the English version of the Arab world are distinct genres unto themselves, subject of as many films as PhD dissertations, and I for one have always preferred them to the real thing.

The English have always been good at this, whether the Duke of Cumberland at Fort Belvedere adrift in opium in his red Chinese junk across Virginia Water or the Italianate follies of some remote stately lost in Suffolk brambles. Likewise, much of English Neo-Romantic art was devoted to this notion of the idealised 'elsewhere' and usually so yearning and fantastical as to short-circuit any possible charges of condescension or chauvinism, whether Rex Whistler's chinoiserie or Stephen Tennant's Marseille matelots, Minton's Caribbeans and Beaton's Berbers.

Whilst these artists did travel and sustained close connections with continental counterparts such as Christian 'Bébé' Bérard, Pavel Tchelitchew and Eugene and Leonid Berman, it was in their defiance of reality, of plain matter-of-fact consensual existence that they were at their best. It is hard now to realise just how defiant, how radical, these artists creation of their own alternative Arcadia, their personal pleasure dome, must have been in the context of a world dominated by realpolitik, news reels, hard politics of the left and right, an obsessive devotion to the factual business of the 'real world' at its worst. The enemy condemns this as 'escapism' whilst somehow forgetting that art is *supposed* to do precisely that, to allow us poor human beings some 'escape' from our ghastly times as well as our own personal mortality, for the viewer as well as the artist.

For myself, who knows as little of the Middle East as of the classical world, I am perfectly happy in my naive love for these works of art, a love entirely based on just the burnish and burin, gold and silver leaf, the stolen glances and saucy games afoot, the slate of gloaming and thick canvas, those beautiful buildings ashimmer, oblivious of any obligatory backstory. Well that is the way with art; you could give an hour-long lecture on the story depicted in a painting and another even longer lecture on the life of the artist, or on the pigments and chemicals used in the composition of the canvas, or indeed on the life story of the collector who first

bought it or maker of the frame. The person looking at the picture is under no obligation whatsoever; they can come to it with maximum knowledge of every aspect; its subject matter, its practical composition, its chemical ingredients, its maker, owners, its price and provenance, they may know one or two of these things, or absolutely none of them. And there is no guarantee that the reaction, enjoyment, understanding, of the former will be richer than of the latter.

The real test here is to simply cover the titles, for without these giveaway clues I would have no idea as to where we were or what we were witnessing. As such I always prefer the formulation of Paul Nougé that “The title should serve as an additional defence, suppressing any attempts to reduce genuine poetry to an inconsequential game.” Only thanks to such words, and marvellous words they are in themselves, words like the Aeneid, Petra, Ithaca, Villa Ovidia, Nubian Juba, Scylla, Cumaean Sibyl, Orpheus, Sanaa, The Temple of Isis, Palmyra, do I gather a sense of the subjects depicted. Otherwise, I would just have to enjoy them as works of art alone. In some sense this is the private autobiographical world of Lyttelton herself, but it could also be seen, in the most discreet manner, as a call for practical if not political action, to try and snatch back some of the past before it too is destroyed, to halt the continued assassination of our shared history.

As we know, to our cost, human beings have always been as destructive as creative and the task of the artist, ably shouldered here, is to memorialise what we have lost as well as build again for the future. Others, more cultivated than myself would doubtless be able to immediately identify these personages and places as conjured in these magic images but happily that does not ensure that they would appreciate nor adore them the more.

Adrian Dannatt, March 2018, West Cornwall, Connecticut



Juba of Volubilis

1993-2017

Oil on canvas

40 x 25 cm



The Burial Mound

2016

Oil on slate

30 x 20 cm



Cumaeen Sibyl I

2017

Etching on paper

17 x 11 cm



Orpheus Playing to the Trees and Birds
2018

Etching on paper
25 x 18 cm



The Damned going down into the Underworld

2018

Oil on wood

29 x 20 cm



Telemessos Burial Tombs

2013

Oil on canvas

29 x 25 cm



The Seventh Circle of the Suicide Souls and The Harpies Wood (Inf XIII, 15)

2018

Etching on paper

36 x 32 cm



Reading Ovid

2018

Etching on paper

10 x 10 cm



Temple of Isis, Sabratha, Libya

2013

Oil on canvas

29 x 25 cm



Palmyra, Syria

2013

Oil on wood

42 x 31 cm



Qelat Seman, Syria
1995
Etching on paper
15 x 10 cm



Saladin's Castle, Syria

1995

Oil on canvas

29 x 25 cm



Duchess of Montefeltro
2009

Oil on poplar
32 x 13 cm



Ritorno in Patria
2009

Oil on linen
49 x 40 cm



Black Narcissus and Echo

2018

Oil on canvas

35 x 35 cm



Ritratto di Vecchio con Nipote (after Domenico Ghirlandaio 1990)

Watercolour on paper

20 x 20 cm



Metamorphoses of Amimome

2018

Etching on paper

30 x 40 cm



Sleepers by the River Styx
2017

Etching on paper
14 x 20 cm



The Dovecote at Manorbier

2013

Oil on canvas

29 x 25 cm



Apollo and Hermes (Interior Ireland)

2017

Etching on paper

25 x 18 cm



'Manhattan in Mud', South Yemen

1997-2015

Oil on canvas

60 x 74 cm



"I seek You, whom Venus drives to my bed", Paris to Helen, Ovid
1996

Oil on canvas

25 x 30 cm



Apollo and Daphne
2017

Oil on canvas
20 x 12 cm



Apollo's White Crow

2018

Oil on canvas

15 x 10 cm



Wadi Hadramawt
2016

Etching on paper
36 x 22 cm



Tower Hamlets High Yemen

2002

Oil on canvas

29 x 25 cm



After de Chirico
1999

Oil on canvas
29 x 25 cm

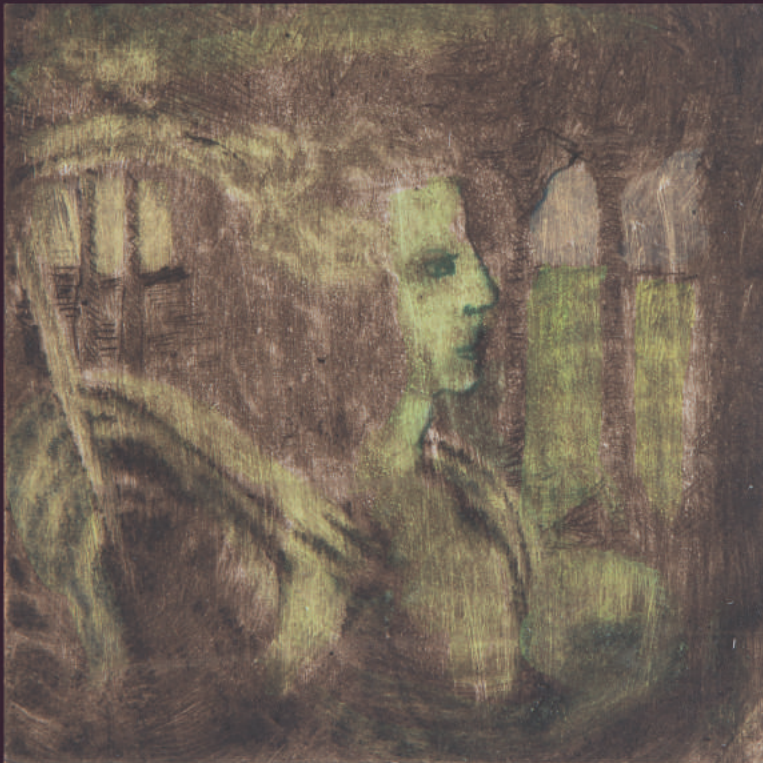


Wadi Hadramawt, South Yemen

1999

Etching on paper with colour wash

36 x 22 cm



Cumaen Sibyl II

2017

Etching on paper

20 x 17 cm



Medusa and Minerva

2017

Oil on wood

32 x 30 cm



Aqueduct

2000

Oil on canvas

16 x 23 cm



Ishmaeli Shrine, The High Yemen
1995

Oil on wood
24 x 24 cm



The Gloaming
2016

Oil on slate
30 x 20 cm



Villa Ovidia
1994-2017
Oil on board
15 x 25 cm



River Styx

2017

Etching on paper

16 x 13 cm



Orpheus's Trees

2017

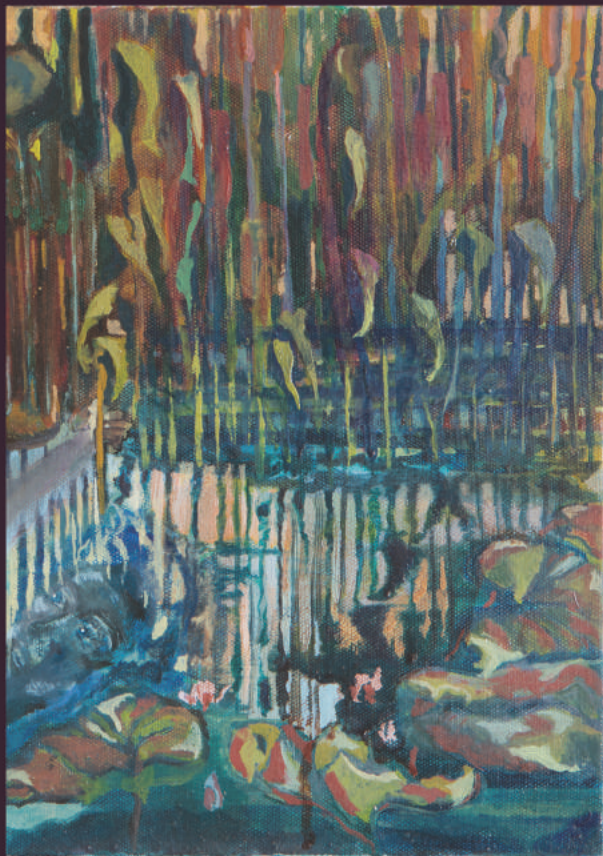
Etching on paper with colour wash

16 x 13 cm



St Simeon Stylites, Qelat Seman, Syria
1993

Etching on paper
13 x 16 cm



(Detail of) Narcissus

2018

Oil on canvas

30 x 40 cm



Venere in Paese

2017

Etching on paper with colour wash

30 x 20 cm



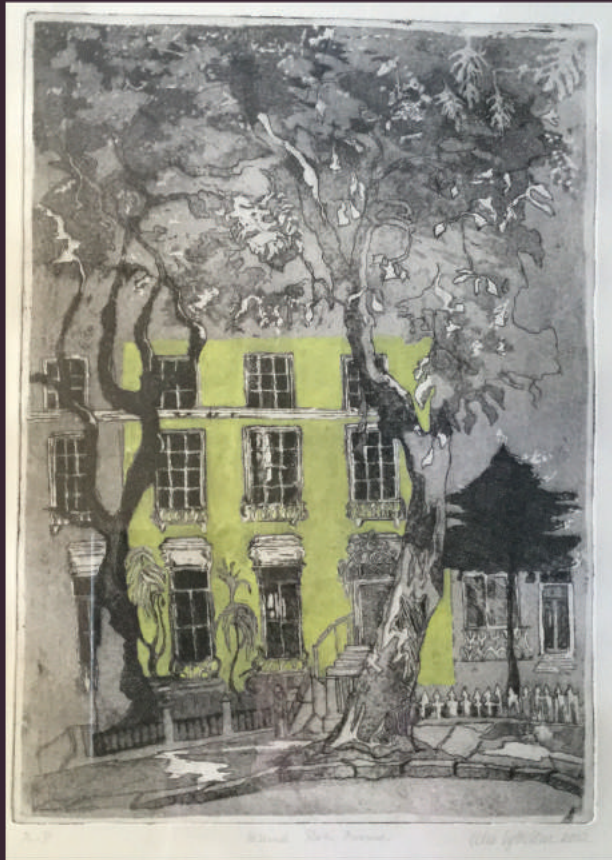
The Muses of Parnassus

2017

Etching on paper with colour wash

20 x 14 cm

House Commissions





Ulcombe Place I and II
Etching and gouache
2008



The Chapel at Madresfield
2007

Etching on paper
25 x 20 cm



Sir Walter Crane's House, London

2011

Etching on paper

25 x 20 cm

Celia Lyttelton

Born Oxford 1960

History of Art British Institute 1979

Diploma in Fine Art and Printmaking at the City and Guilds of London Art School 1980-83

Individual exhibitions

1984 Chenil Galleries Chelsea

1985 Gallery 24

1993 Long and Ryle Art International

1993 Shiseido Gallery Tokyo

1997 Rebecca Hossack Gallery

2013 Liu de Biolley Gallery, Beijing China

Collective exhibitions

1982 Seven Dials Gallery

1982 Royal Academy Summer show

1983 Young Painters Langton Gallery Chelsea

1983 Cadogan Gallery Knightsbridge

1986 *A celebration of London* Smiths Gallery

1986 Christie's Contemporary Art London

1987 'I Criticus' Crucial Gallery

Public Collections

Leeds City Art Gallery

The London Transport Museum

Commissions

- 1986 Poster for London Transport 'Take the Tube to The West End' of the Criterion Brasserie on Piccadilly (formerly the Cafe Royal).
- 1988 Illustrated the 'Good Cellar Guide
- 1988 Illustrated the 'Long Weekend Book'

From 2001 -2018: Commissions for 'House Portraiture'; etchings of houses including Madresfield Court, Worcestershire, Ulcombe Place, Kent, Fawler Manor, Oxfordshire, A folly in Northumbria, a castle in Ireland, Manorbier Castle, Wales, Sir Walter Crane's house, London and the British Ambassador's Residency in Beijing.

Article Reviews

- 1994 The Guardian
- 1995 The Observer colour magazine
- 1997 The Saturday Telegraph Magazine
- 1997 The Week
- 2010 The Lady

In addition to being an artist and printmaker she is also an art correspondent and author of three books: *The Scent Trail*, *Floating Worlds* and *The Now Art Book*.

Celia will undertake to make etchings of houses; however big or small.

Catalogue photography by David Owens.

