

Neil MacPherson: Life's Tender Journey

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THIS exhibition vividly celebrates the unique work of Caithness based artist Neil Macpherson.

Infused with Northern light and infinite skies, the beauty of MacPherson's work lies in its inherent mystery; the powerful subtlety of colour and paint handling that transports the viewer to their own waking world of dreams. The artist's treatment of the figure is characteristically compassionate throughout, his visual language distilled in poetic abstraction and a luminous, resoundingly optimistic palette.



Neil MacPherson - A Voice in the Wilderness (Oil on canvas)

Steeped in the artist's personal iconography, Macpherson's paintings are ultimately invitations to the viewer's own imagination. His abstract narratives hinge on a surreal juxtaposition of elements, combining the fluidity of collage with the tangible solidity of sculpture. Human form feels monumental and timeless, almost mythological in stature, yet carries an emotional weight that is intensely intimate, tempered by the natural environment.

A Voice in the Wilderness is a beautiful example; the placement of hands between man, woman and child on horseback cementing their relationship, heads rested together, occupying a landscape dwarfed and engulfed by human presence and memory. Behind the female figure shifting cloud in a myriad of pink, blue and yellow mirrors the dream-like state of her opaque eyes, a domestic structure within the cloud morphs like a fragile, trembling vision, akin to the hue of a spirit bird hovering over the man's left shoulder.

She appears as an iconic mother figure, respectably dressed in a green white collared dress and apron, a sheath of golden harvest under her arm, woman, Goddess and Seer. The father figure holds the child in the tender tracery of his hand, his shoulder cross hatched in a solid form of white, bisecting his blue suit and the child's body. The interplay of light and hue from the low horizon into bands of sky, shape-shifting and golden, add to the enigmatic interior life of the image.



Like the more consciously contained and stylised *Friday Night*, the blending of colour is masterful; the full scope of the palette visible within the figures themselves, particularly in the modelling of their faces. Use of colour conveys a certain serenity and oneness with the landscape that in *Friday Night* extends to the darkened descent of cloud which dominates the background. The gaze of both figures extends beyond the space in which the viewer stands, visible constraint in their pose- reminiscent of American Gothic, but strangely liberated by the nuanced treatment of colour and fluid mindscape which surround them.

A Nostalgic Love Scene extends the emotional range of MacPherson's palette in an earthy combination of colours like ripened fruit in rich cadmium red, orange, yellow and green. Aloft on a horse, the male figure is balanced on the shoulders of a woman, a white bird perched delicately on his hand while its shadow self sits perched upon his shoulder. The double track on which they are travelling is earthen red/ brown, mirroring the cut of his clothing and giving an autumnal turn to an idealised vision of a past relationship, surrounded in a cloud of brilliant cerulean blue. The totemic assemblage of figures stand between two way markers, one in the form of a bird house, the other marked with nails, the ground corrugated like the folds of their clothing. The horse with its mask, adorned in what feels like medieval jousting dress, suggests nostalgia in terms of past origins of romance and chivalry.



Neil MacPherson - While The World Sleeps (Oil on canvas)

MacPherson's command of composition is clearly displayed in *The Window of Dreams*, where human presence is represented in absence by the cut out male and female silhouettes in two yellow and orange chairs.

Temperature of colour is finely balanced in a composition boldly divided in triptych by the green wall, open window and dark receding corner space. In the foreground a red table, with a green and yellow seed seemingly aligned with each phantom sitter, completes the view.

A large jug upon the table holds one of the artist's recurrent visual tropes: a loch or pool of water from which exotic hybrid blooms emerge, an amalgamation of sculptural, architectural and organic forms. This enigmatic and fertile pool of the imagination containing the emotional conductor of water is often supported by a solid sculptural base, a visual metaphor for the way in which the artist successfully suspends disbelief. Form and colour are so solid in terms of the composition, so beguiling and lovingly painted, that abstraction and narrative/figurative traditions coexist harmoniously satisfying eye, heart and mind.

One of the most beautiful and lyrical works in the show, *While the World Sleeps*, visualises a couple on horseback, their world turned upside down above their heads, floating on an ocean of sky. The golden curve of the horizon meets their eye line as they gaze beyond us in a frozen embrace, triangular clouds suggestive of beasts freed by the imagination and miniature horses hovering around them. Equally lyrical and meditative, one of the smaller works in the show, *Pearls of Wisdom*, depicting a farmer in the landscape, is an absolute gem, tempered with a more subdued palette.



Neil MacPherson - Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow (Oil on canvas)

The contrast in handling in a mixed media work such as *The Harvest Thanksgiving* and *Chronicles of the Little Bird* with the intensity of mark concentrated in the corner of a white room are also a joy to behold. This element of movement in the drawn or brush mark animates the pigment and some of the best technical handling in the show

employs this to great effect, together with the more formal blocking of colour in many of the larger scale works. Bolder still is *From this Day Forward the Road Will Be Long and Winding*, a much darker work of human and beastly form in high contrast.

Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow perhaps epitomises the artist's strength of vision in a large portrait head flanked by parent figures on either shoulder, a farmer's rake – an emblem of labour – over the shoulder, a mountain pyramid, home and cross in the background. In the abstracted eyes of the central protagonist we see our origins in landscape and memory encapsulated in MacPherson's singular vision. This is an important and inspirational show highlighting one of the North's most enigmatic and accomplished artists.

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