

## Michael Bracewell

### *The Art of Gavin Bell*

For a viewer encountering Gavin Bell's finely detailed, densely worked art for the first time, in which shadowy figures and seemingly psychic cloudscape are conjured from meticulous, quasi-automatic mark-making, the predominant motif might be that of mountainous cumulus, at times ominous and storm dark, at others more resembling a supernova flare of celestial brightness.

At the more foreboding climatic extreme, in which dark masses appear to be encroaching on diminishing brightness, these gatherings and cyclones present with a supernatural aura. They appear - to borrow from the novelist Alan Garner - like the 'slow brewing' of magic, and yet remain as distant in temperament or idiom from fantasy as they are from cold forensic science. They might possibly sit somewhere between, in realms of the imagination described by mind-maps.

These presences, in addition to the highly distinct formal qualities of line, assemblage and pattern revealed in their execution, might likewise attend the viewer's perception equidistant to mysticism and natural science. And they are perhaps touched with the spiritualist (as opposed to the spiritual) as if on nodding terms with some of the art of (say) Austin Osman Spare in all its tangle of automatism and occult messaging. But the kinship is aloof, on both sides. We are closer, perhaps, to the eponymous motif of Denton Welch's novel 'A Voice Through a Cloud'.

Look closer, and the intricate detail and depths of Bell's drawings - media are principally pencil, paper, oil, found materials - are best compared to the dizzying layers and overlapping of the guilloché patterns on bank notes. Spirals, vertical undulations, concentric circles, flares of fine line and broiling swirls - all as lively or brooding with internal energy as they are redolent of anthropomorphic geometry - form shadowy presences or become tinged with vaporous colour: curves of blood red or mists of chemical yellow.

The complexity of these forms mimics that of nature - like trying to hold in focus the movement of the sea or the density of fog or the movement of a rainstorm. They seem to hold some quality of numinosity, and to inherit - whether knowingly or not - some of the attributes of British Neo-Romantic art (made loosely between the mid-1930s and early 1950s) and the acknowledgement by those artists of visionary nature in the art of William Blake and Samuel Palmer.

Certainly Bell's titles, 'Event', 'Mint Day', 'Night Sun', 'Love and Pity' seem to find their place on the line of modern visionary art, as it might stretch from Blake to Gilbert & George. As Paul Nash would famously propose in his 1937 essay 'The Life of the Inanimate Object', for 'Country Life' magazine, the natural world possessed its own animism, the artistic manifestation of which depicted the channelling of presences, or the creation of Surrealist portals to the unconscious within formations of stones, driftwood or fallen trees. The art of Gavin Bell, in terms of pictorial energy, corresponds to the wavelength of such thinking.

Figures emerge in Bell's drawings from time to time. They seem ageless, dateless, neither wholly impassive, wholly benign nor wholly relaxed. They could be ancestors of figures in the work of John Minton or Michael Ayrton. They could be courtroom sketches from some tribunal of memory or the unconscious.

What do you get? The depiction of the slightly inclined face of a person who is either empty-headed or whose reflections have taken them deep into themselves. The eyes express resignation, the mouth is set. Green-tinged yellow face, a vermilion fringe. The portrait sits alongside two other drawings: a burst of light and a gathering darkness. destinations that are by definition unknown, except to intuition.

Materials and materiality are intrinsic to the art of Gavin Bell, that appears so concerned with the workings of potentially invisible forces. Working with found mountboard and often on seemingly coarse paper, yet with very fine line and areas of delicate colour, these drawings have an air of rawness that bespeaks obsessive or intensely private activity.

What might be an automatic drawing - swiftly transcribed lines and cloud-like forms - sits upon a folded sheet of glassine. We could be reminded of the outer-limits German high romanticism: the chemical- elemental codes of Beuys or early Kiefer.

Are we viewing the object residue of a private exercise, or the carefully preserved results of a transcribed state of mind, that is unconcerned with further classification? Encased within pristine clinical acrylic frames, each work takes on the air of fragile and precious conservation or archival framed objects in a museum. They might also, more fancifully, be specimens within a laboratory for experiments in operational magic.

Within the installation of Bell's works, glass vessels of curious shape are half filled with pale gold fluid, placed at what could be the strategic points of an alchemical sigil - or equally be adjuncts, swerves of associative critique, to accompany the drawings as objective correlatives; sequences and repetitions of form and image to enable or translate an emotional meaning or impulse.

There is always the chance, also, that the art of Gavin Bell is the continuing exploration of form through mark-making, long since embarked on a voyage through uncharted waters, towards destinations that are by definition unknown, except to intuition.

- Michael Bracewell, London, 2026.