

13–28 June 2pm until 15 minutes before evening performance at Snape Pond Gallery, Snape

James Fisher

My hopes are not entirely hopeless

My dear wife, I have written an account of my journey or rather escape from Essex for your amusement and hope it may divert your leisure hours – I would have told you before now that I got here to Northborough last Friday night but not being able to see you or hear where you was I soon began to feel homeless at home and shall bye and bye feel nearly hopeless, but not so lonely as I did in Essex – for here I can see Glinton Church, and feeling that Mary is safe if not happy, I shall be the same – I am gratified to believe so – Though my home is no home to me my hopes are not entirely hopeless while even the memory of Mary lives so near to me –

John Clare: Letter to 'Mary Clare, Glinton, Northborough, July 27 1841'

James Fisher's exhibition of recent paintings and works on paper takes as its point of departure a small pocketbook that belonged to the 'peasant poet' John Clare. The book, inscribed 'John Clare Poems / Feby 1841', is a remarkable document which Clare began to use while incarcerated at Dr Matthew Allen's Asylum in Epping Forest. In it he composed several long poems including *Child Harold* – his heartrending account of love, the loss of love and the power of poetry.

In the July of 1841 Clare escaped from the asylum and the pocketbook contains details of his four-day walk home to the fenland of Cambridgeshire. The resulting story, *Recolections & etc Of Journey Out of Essex* [sic] is addressed to Mary Joyce, his childhood sweetheart, who he mistakenly believed had become his wife. Mary had died in a house fire a few years before the piece was written and Clare had married another woman, Patty Turner, in 1820.

The works Fisher has made in response to Clare's journey reflect the attempts to reconcile the decimation of the rural landscape and longing for Mary, in Clare's mind.

Fisher's work describes the unfolding of his sorrow in a series of vignettes rather than a

sequential narrative. Clare's yearning for his lost, long dead Mary has been transposed into a group of large canvases which depict a female figure holding an animal, protectively, to her breast. The images have been realized in paint as ethereal figures in a transient landscape. The paintings combine areas of graphic drawing with an erosion of the initial image. Fisher builds up the intense space of the picture plane in a sequence of layers and revisions. The paintings are initiated with a half chalk ground over which he lays bronze dust and glaze upon oil-based glaze. At intervals they are removed from the stretcher and sanded down so that colours are estranged from their chromatic identities and the drawn elements hover indeterminately within the picture's surface.

Interspersed with these are a series of smaller canvases, which depict, in an almost abstract mesh, the tangled branches of forest trees. Titled after the woods Clare passed through on his journey the smaller works act as a connective grid to the larger paintings, unfurling the narrative of the journey wood by wood and becoming less densely thicketed, as Clare escapes the confinement of Epping Forest and passes through covert and copse to the heath and marshland of East Anglia.

Just as Fisher's images emerge from the fragile sediment of paint, John Clare emerges from the landscape – as a fox, a pig, or a bird, perhaps.

Fisher's almost 'fugitive' images reflect not only the unreliability of fact in the source material but also of the possibility of painting to speak of and engender experiences that take place in the mind. 'More than illustration can achieve, these images proceed by painting the spaces between words'.¹

¹Martin Holman: 'I came here a stranger, as a stranger I depart' catalogue text, ISBN 978-0-9554046-7-2

James Fisher is represented by the Eagle Gallery / EMH Arts, London (www.emmahilleagle.com)



James Fisher, Host of Snares
2008, oil on linen, 81 x 71 cm