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Susie MacMurray: Murmur, Pangolin London, 17 October 2020 - 22 December 2020 www.pangolinlondon.com

The Susie MacMurray exhibition *Murmur* at Pangolin London is a sculpture exhibition for textile lovers, if ever there was one. MacMurray's work has always stepped unapologetically over categorisation boundaries. Her work sits most comfortably under the title of sculpture but also involves elements of installation, performance and textiles. This makes it exciting. You find yourself looking at work that you might not otherwise have seen. Which is always good for the eyes, the brain and the soul.

Pangolin London is an airy white gallery space, specialising in sculpture. It sits on the roadside corner of Kings Place, a large office and arts space next to Kings Cross Station. *Murmur* celebrates a collaboration between MacMurray and the Pangolin Editions foundry (affiliated with the gallery) through which she has made her first cast metal pieces. This exhibition was postponed once due to Covid restrictions. For MacMurray it has been really important to have had purpose for her making throughout lockdown: 'It was an absolute joy to have this show to work towards. It's been a lifesaver. To have some structure and some hope.'

She made most of the work on show during the last two years, although some works had their origins in older ideas and works. Pulling you into the exhibition is *Murmur*, the title piece. A large gently moving wall-mounted installation of single

ostrich feathers, their ends dipped in wax and hung on fish hooks, then sprung from the walls on piano wires. It floats across one gallery wall, twitching in the breeze, referencing murmurations of birds. An example (like much of the work in the exhibition) of a piece of MacMurray's work that 'lockdown has given much more pertinence.' The installation of it was, she says 'An act of drawing. I didn't have a plan for it before it went up.'

MacMurray's work is driven by materials and never those you might expect. Many of her works have a contradiction at their heart; they are about death and hope, symbolised by her use of contrasting materials. Her piece *Strange Fruit* (from Billie Holiday's song) is a burst of dark red velvet 'fruit' gatherings twined around barbed wire - that came from MOD Aldershot. MacMurray's own father suffered from night terrors after World War Two and the piece (literally) carries evidence of soldiering, of PTSD and the damage that conflict does to societies and individuals: 'I use materials that have power. I try to choose materials that have a physical reaction. With the barbed wire, immediately your mind goes to being caught in it. With velvet your mind goes to feeling it. These materials have a sort of subconscious, pre-verbal conversation with your body.'

MacMurray originally trained as a classical musician and worked as a member of the Hallé Orchestra in Manchester. After having children, she decided she didn't want to return to music and took an art foundation course, followed by a sculpture degree at Manchester Metropolitan University. She'd

experienced some art therapy 'which was absolutely explosive for me' and it triggered an interest in art. Its influence is still there today: 'What I ended up carrying on doing was interrogating how the world works.' Her work is threaded through with her internal monologue, made external. Motherhood, self, women's bodies, pain, remembrance, secrets. All seemingly on the dark side. But that is not her sole intent: 'I'm not trying to scare people, it's about having a grown-up conversation.' MacMurray also uses her experience as a woman to continue that dialogue and she has no difficulty placing her art practice within feminism. In her work *Eve*, made from air compressor hoses flopping forth like vessels, ending in wax bulbs, she looks to women's bodies for her inspiration, specifically the first woman, Eve. Although the title of the work didn't come until after she had finished it, something that often happens. She likes titles that leave her work open to conjecture: 'Titles that give some clue but don't close down the meaning.'

Throughout the exhibition her works are presented as objects on white plinths or hung, free and open, on walls. But there is also a selection of framed works: a huge drawing of hair nets called *Tied Hairnets no 2. Oversized*, unravelling gauze bandages: *Gauze Bandage Drawing III*, about 'breaking free, celebrating life.' And even a small embroidery *Lockdown Thread Drawing I*, which she refers to as being: 'Drawn with thread. Freehand thread drawing is something I would never have done if lockdown hadn't happened.' In her piece *Heresay*, individual wriggling barbs of feathers are gessoed on to a cream canvas, almost disappearing

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into it. For MacMurray: 'They seem to be having murmurs and whispers. They are caught frozen in a moment, holding their breath.'

MacMurray doesn't use drawing as part of her sculpture process, she goes straight to her materials. For her framed works she meticulously uses pen and ink to recreate her subjects. The huge scale of most of these framed works is satisfying. Her collaboration with the Pangolin foundry has resulted in several cast metal pieces in the exhibition. For *Shards*, she dipped velvet in wax, which was then cast in bronze. She enjoyed the alchemy of the process and found it 'quite magical.' Another piece, *Carapace*, was originally sculpted in green modelling wax, and then cast in bronze. Smaller, related versions have been cast in silver and made into a jewellery series. They have a feel of small, abandoned nests, of conversations finished. And lost.

Outside the Pangolin gallery space (but inside the entrance to Kings Place) stands Medusa, the biggest piece in the exhibition. It is a larger than life-sized figure made from hand-formed copper wire chainmail, meticulously made by MacMurray with help from a group of female students. It forms a full stop to an exhibition of work that is both thoughtful and visceral. MacMurray's work is about hope and hopelessness and the oddly vulnerable place in the middle that we all (especially now) inhabit.***Jane Audas

Right; Pangolin Director Polly Bielecka looks at Susie MacMurray's velvet installation

