



Sacha LLEWELLYN is a Paris-based art historian specialising in women artists. Working in collaboration with museums and commercial galleries, she has curated and co-curated exhibitions internationally. As well as writing for the press, she has also authored and co-authored many exhibition catalogues; in 2017, her monograph on Winifred Knights was awarded the prestigious William M B Berger Prize for British Art History. She will soon be launching RAW (Rediscovering Art by Women), a European platform that promotes research into women artists. Her Instagram account, @Rediscoveringartbywomen, celebrates women artists every day.

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Morwenna Thistlethwaite, who spent much of her working life in St Ives, painted still-lives, interiors and genre scenes imbued with a hazy, dreamlike quality. This exhibition shines the light on a quiet talent whose work deserves to be better known.

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Pictures
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Morwenna
Thistlethwaite

1912 -2000

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Pictures in my mind

‘Whatever comes through your painting is part of your personality, like a feeling for poetry or music.’

Morwenna Thistlethwaite

A mother lovingly cradles her sleeping baby in a quiet corner of a room. A vase, filled with a bouquet of fresh cut flowers, is perched on a low, round table. A man, with his back to the viewer, contemplates the wider world beyond: the open Celtic Sea whose churning waves and sailing boats, bobbing up and down on the water, contrast with the delicate, sparse interior within. Soft prairies of colour – blues, pale pinks and dull bluish greens – enhance the contemplative mood and saturate the composition with a feeling of detachment. This small painting, entitled *Family by the Window*, is a perfect introduction to the world of Morwenna Thistlethwaite, whose beautiful work provides a valuable link to a quiet strand of art that flowered in St Ives towards the end of the Twentieth Century. Gifted and original, Morwenna, like so many female artists, has languished in obscurity for too long. Thanks to the recent emergence of a

collection of her paintings and the tracing of her children and other family members, it is now possible to piece together her remarkable story.

Morwenna Thistlethwaite was born Morwenna Brock in 1912 in Kew, Richmond to Charles Brock, a customs and excise officer, and Kate Edwards, who hailed from a Cornish family stretching back generations. Little is known of Morwenna’s childhood, except that she grew up in Tongue, a coastal village in Northwest Scotland, during a period when women’s lives swayed uncomfortably between the confines of patriarchal tradition and new opportunities for freedom. While still confined as wives and mothers, better education meant Edwardian women were often more enlightened and ambitious than their Victorian predecessors and the demand for women’s suffrage, which gained momentum as Morwenna came of age, characterised this progressive mood.

Family by the Window, oil on board, 50.7 x 41.2 cm

A meeting in 1924 with the St Ives artist Borlase Smart (1881-1947) while he was holidaying in Scotland, proved to be a turning point in Morwenna's life. Impressed by her drawing and painting skills, Smart advised her to follow her passion and study art formally. Acting on his advice, she eventually enrolled at Leamington Spa Art College in 1934, where she soon became the star student, first gaining the Board of Education's Drawing Group examination followed in 1936 by the Painting Certificate which she was awarded after one, rather than two, years of study. Accolades aside, as a female artist she still had to fight her corner: when she was voted 'Pupil of the Year' in 1936 one tutor (fortunately for him history has not recorded his name!) tried to prevent her from



Sir John Keir awards first place prize to Morwenna Brock. Leamington Spa Courier, 17 April, 1936

receiving the prize, believing that 'a woman shouldn't be allowed to win it'.¹

In 1938 Morwenna furthered her studies at the prestigious Birmingham School of Art which had risen to prominence in the last decades of the 19th century as a leading centre for the Arts and Crafts movement, and boasted many women artists among its famous alumni, including Marjorie Incledon (1891-1973) and Anne Constance Smedley (1876-1941). During her first year at the School, Morwenna won a competition to paint a large mural on the theme of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* for Tinker's Farm Senior Boys' School in Northfield, as part of a local initiative to decorate Birmingham Corporation Schools. A photograph shows Morwenna with her assistant, Stanley Simmonds, in front of a huge preparatory sketch composed of near-



Morwenna with her assistant, Stanley Simmonds. Birmingham Gazette, 23 November, 1938



Mother Nursing her Child, watercolour & gouache, 49.5 x 39.2 cm



life-size figures in medieval costume, painted in the tradition of 19th century history painting.²

As well as exhibiting locally, including at the Leamington Art Gallery's 'Exhibition of Work by Artists of the District' in 1937, Morwenna also received commissions for portraits, one of which, of Bernard Thistlethwaite in 1944 (a chartered accountant with Cadbury's Bros), proved to be especially significant. As Morwenna later recounted, Bernard 'wooed her with tinned peaches' (a luxury during

wartime rationing) and the artist and her sitter fell in love, despite the latter being 24 years her senior and married with six children.³ To make a fresh start, the pair moved to Upper Colwyn Bay in Denbighshire, where Bernard was given a new role in the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Association. Morwenna, unable to marry Bernard as he never divorced his wife, changed her name to Thistlethwaite by deed poll (a necessary decision in an era when living out of wedlock was still regarded as immoral). For the sake of posterity,

this served Morwenna less well, as records of the two artists – Brock and Thistlethwaite – have not always been reconciled.

Happily, Morwenna found work in her new location, painting a mural for the Ministry of Food, which had recently responded to a call by the Artists International Association (AIA) to give employment to artists to decorate canteens and restaurants at a time when private commissions were few and far between. Morwenna's mural, which is known from a photograph, shows a shift from her previous style of naturalistic figure painting towards a softer-edged and more lyrical approach, and depicts a playful rural scene filled with reapers, farm animals and women and children, the sentiment of idyllic peace far removed from the devastation of World War II.⁴

When the war ended, Morwenna and Bernard embarked on a new chapter of their lives, moving to a large house at 2 Gordon Place in Kensington. As well as being a lively family home (Morwen was born in 1945 followed by Felicity in 1947), the house was also a meeting place for artists and musicians, including Margot Hamilton Hill, an illustrator and costume historian, and Alfred Daniels (1924-2015), whose colourful scenes of everyday life in





London have much in common with Morwenna's art of this period. Filling sketchbooks with drawings of figures observed on the streets and in the nearby Kensington Gardens, Morwenna worked these up into paintings in a make-shift studio in the sitting room. 'I take a walk and see tones and colours and figures', she later explained. 'I have cloudy pictures in my mind, nothing definite, but I start from that point'.⁵

Although Morwenna regularly exhibited at the Royal Academy (RA), including *Bernard* (1944), *Still Life* (1965), *Felicity* (1958), *Girl Reading* (1959), and *Passers-by* (1960), she was never elected an Academician; the RA's policy of involving women was still ungenerous and tokenistic at best. She also exhibited watercolours at Liberty & Co's Art Department. Characterised by a stronger sense of graphic design,

opposite: *Flowers in a Vase*, gouache, 34 x 30 cm

Chess Game, gouache & watercolour, 16 x 22.5 cm

with an emphasis on linearity and a contrasting palette, these works enjoyed both critical and commercial success.

In September 1960, following the death of his first wife, Bernard and Morwenna were free to marry, although, sadly, this was not to last: Bernard died the following month. After his death, Morwenna continued to work and exhibit in London, with her first solo show, aged 60, finally taking place at Ansdell Gallery in Monmouth Street in 1972. This received mixed reviews, with Evan Anthony of *The Spectator* finding the work 'pseudo-cubist' and 'rather unexciting' although he did admire *Leaves in a Greek Vase* and 'the artist's wonderful name'.⁶

Four years later, Morwenna's life journey came full circle, when she moved opposite an old family home at 18 Victoria Place in St Ives, Cornwall, where her mother had been born. Like the generations of artists that came before her, she was inspired by the temperate climate, the brilliant light and the comparative freedom and ease of life in this small but cosmopolitan town peopled by groups of fellow artists. Years of observation had prepared her to capture this novel world of passers-by, of well-kept white cottages, hills and valleys, and brightly painted fishing

boats in the harbour. With a renewed burst of creativity, Morwenna responded to her new environment with expressive freedom, producing in the last decades of her life a series of works characterized by inventive and bold analogies of form and a strong use of colour. These imaginative compositions show the influence of continental modernism, with elements reminiscent of artists like Kandinsky, Matisse and Cézanne, but fused with a genuinely British sensibility.

Morwenna's most characteristic paintings show interiors with large windows opening on to the outside world. Strongly rooted in narrative, these scenes are imbued with an air of mystery and loneliness, willfully refusing to tell their tale. Dreamy figures, who rarely engage with each other, are lost in a reverie of thought tinged with melancholy. Sometimes there is a woman reading, as in *The Golden Hour*, or schoolgirls playing, as in *A Game of Draughts*. But sometimes there is just an empty room, with books abandoned on a bed or a shadowy figure passing through the door. "I wonder what is going on there", Morwenna herself would ask.⁷ Occasionally her paintings develop into a series, with views out of a window at different times of the day, respectively drenched in the bright and





cheerful morning light or in the fading blue-green-grey of dusk.

Her favourite artist Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964) was the reference for her still lifes, which blend the geometric and austere shapes of tables, teapots, vases and jugs with the softness of flowers and plants.⁸ Works like *Still Life, Grey, Pink and Green* or *Still Life, Pink Rose*, possess the same quiet, meditative sparseness of her interior

scenes and a shared mood of serene, internal retreat. Alongside these works, Morwenna also produced semi-abstract paintings which are clearly influenced by her exact contemporary Wilhelmina Barns-Graham (1912-2004) and the younger Patrick Heron (1920-1999), whose studio, above the Cornish village of Zennor, she is known to have visited. *Still Life, Orange and Green* and *The Farmyard* are examples of these works,

which are lovingly created from layered fields and veils of deliquescent colour, the shifting, translucent forms combined with an awareness of formal qualities and an eye for poetry.

Morwenna was happy in St Ives, becoming a familiar figure in the 'Downalong' area and a regular of the local art scene. Her paintings, many signed with a bold monogram signature, were exhibited widely, at the Porthmeor Gallery, Newlyn Art Gallery, the Wills Lane Gallery and the New Craftsman Gallery. In 1980, she had a solo show at the New Grafton Gallery (London) and in 1992 her work was included in the Royal West of England Academy's 'Arts from Cornwall' exhibition. In 1997, poor health forced

Morwenna to leave St Ives for Surrey, where she died in December 2000.

Over the last few decades, art history's neglect of women artists has been challenged by feminist endeavours in writing and curation and there has been a growth in long overdue exhibitions focusing on women artists. The value of this exhibition, which highlights 65 previously unseen works by Morwenna, is that it now ensures her legacy. As the feminist writer Adrienne Rich (1929-2012) wrote in 1972, 'Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival'.⁹

Sacha Llewellyn, March 2022

¹ Recollection of Felicity Taylor (the artist's daughter), (email to Sacha Llewellyn, 18 March 2022).

² 'Recounting Chaucer in Giant Sketch', *Birmingham Gazette*, 23 November 1938

³ Email from Beki Orr, the artist's granddaughter, to the author, 19 March, 2022

⁴ Sadly, none of the murals from the scheme, including those by John Piper and Kenneth Rowntree, survive.

⁵ Quoted in Whybrow, *Twenty-two Painters who Happen to be Women, St Ives* (Marion Whybrow Publication., St. Ives: 1993), p.44

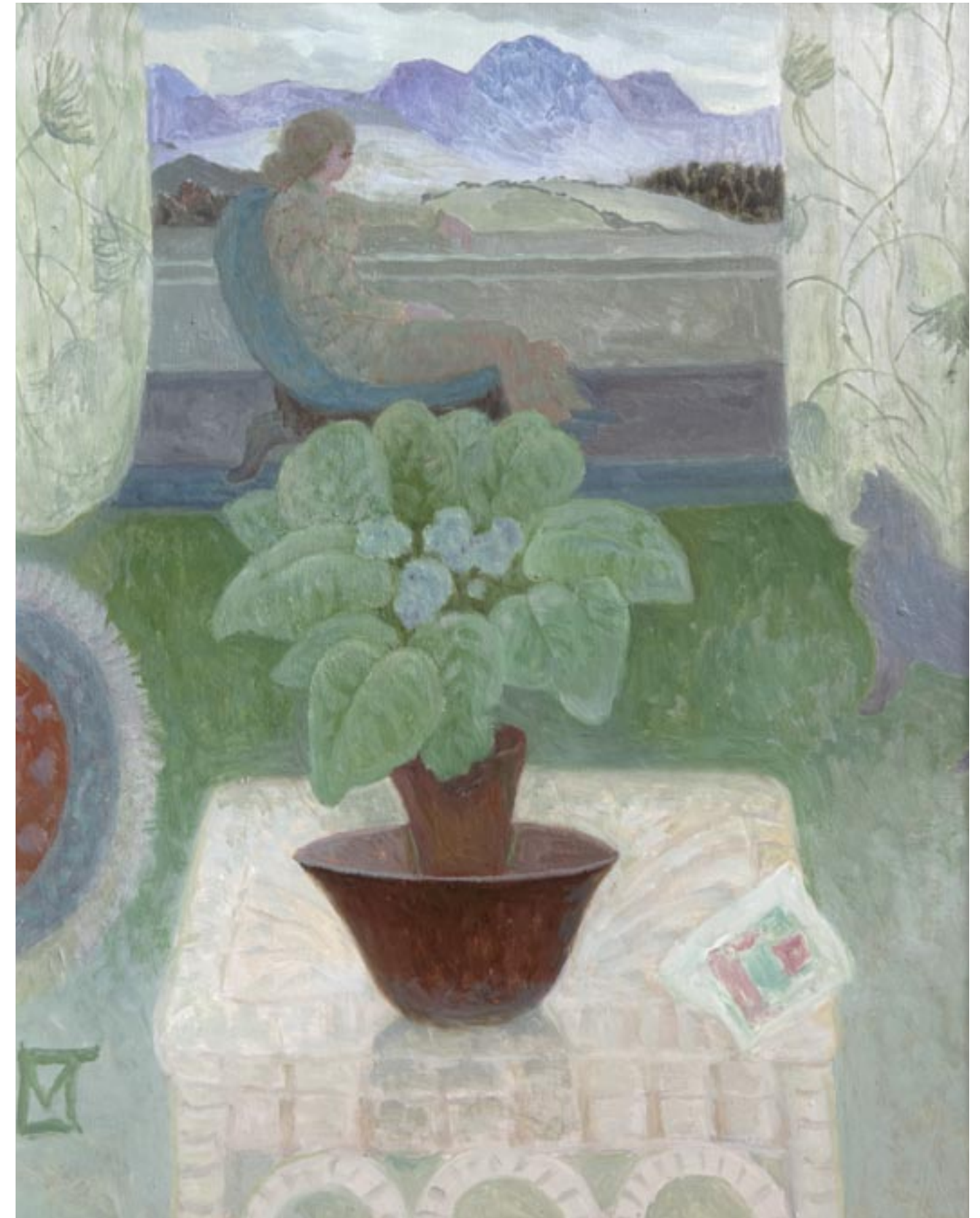
⁶ Evan Anthony, 'Art: Star Crossed', *The Spectator*, Volume 228, Part 1, 1972, p.367

⁷ Quoted in Morwenna Thistlethwaite, Obituary, *The St Ives Times and Echo*, December 29, 2000.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* (W W Norton & Company: 1979) p.35

With thanks to Jennifer FitzGerald, Morwen Thistlethwaite, Felicity Taylor, Gabrielle Moore and Beki Orr.





18 Cows Grazing, oil on board, 47 x 31.5 cm



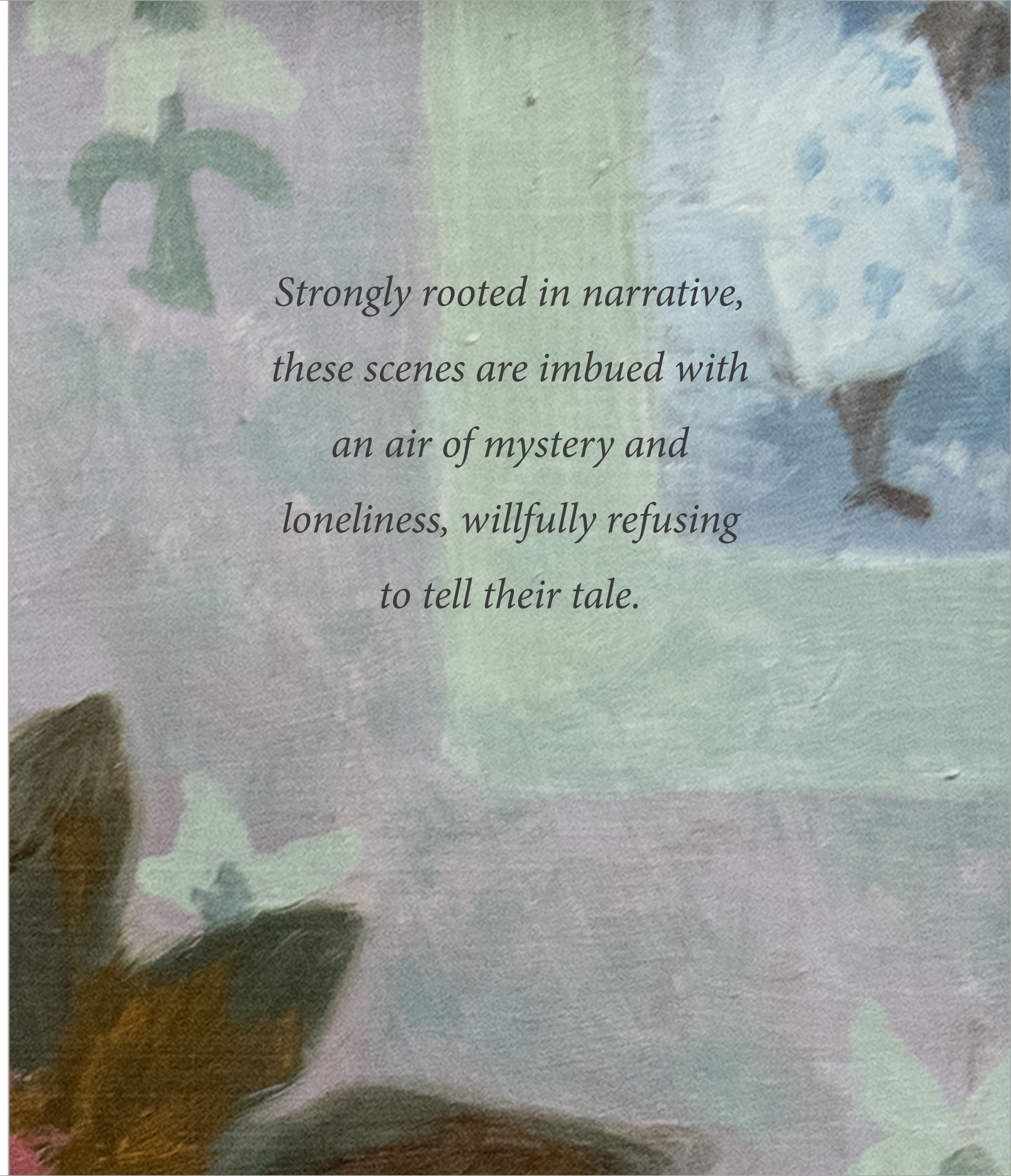
Plant in a Black Pot, gouache, 20.7 x 15.5 cm



Flowers in a Black Pot, gouache, 17 x 12.2 cm



*Strongly rooted in narrative,
these scenes are imbued with
an air of mystery and
loneliness, willfully refusing
to tell their tale.*









Fruit in a Glass Bowl, gouache, 16 x 14 cm



Cat on the Windowsill, watercolour, 21.3 x 18.5 cm



28 Still Life, Bottles, gouache & watercolour, 22 x 16 cm



Still Life, Jug with House Plant, watercolour, 23 x 17.5 cm



Still Life, Black, White and Red, gouache, 13.5 x 11.3 cm

















44 The Table, oil on board, 28.5 x 30 cm



The Graveyard, watercolour & gouache, 28.3 x 23.7 cm



opposite: Mother and Child, oil on board, 60.7 x 45 cm

Mother and Child by the Window, gouache, 20.5 x 18.5 cm





*Gifted and original,
Morwenna, like so many
female artists, has languished
in obscurity for too long.*













opposite: The Path Through the Park, oil on board, 56 x 38 cm

Park Bench, gouache & watercolour, 25.3 x 21.5 cm



The paintings have bespoke hand-coloured Obeche frames in a range of complementary matt tones, finished with antique wax. All have painted waxed slips, and watercolours and gouaches are behind glass. They are conservation mounted onto acid-free backing board.

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Goldmark Gallery
Orange Street, Uppingham
Rutland, LE15 9SQ
01572 821424
www.goldmarkart.com

above: Horses Grazing, watercolour, 17 x 21 cm
cover: Sunday at the Park, oil on board, 56 x 69 cm