

The work of Mark Gibbs exists in a space of connections and contradictions, where the layered aspects of his themes and techniques combine and dialogue.

There is irony in addressing complex socio-geo-political topics, seriousness in referencing environmental issues, and thoughtfulness in considering gender roles. All of this might escape the viewer at first, when they are confronted with three-dimensional animals or bi-dimensional trees, but it's the subtlety of the commentary Gibbs offers on our world that makes his artistic production so intriguing, engaging and rewarding to explore.

Both the subjects represented and the themes explored are varied, but at the same time linked by overarching elements. One of Gibbs' latest series, the Nightjar project, is a good example of the artist's language. First, the series is made of drawings, paintings and sculptures, all manifesting different sides of the topic. Then, there is indeed a topic, or more than one, about which the little, beautiful birds wish to be a commentary. And third, the materials used are vital in carrying the message of the artworks, particularly in the case of the three-dimensional sculptures. Made with banknotes or newspapers from specific parts of the world, such as the Middle East and Africa, the migratory birds stand as impossible symbols of freedom, while referencing and condemning many obstacles to real freedom still existing in our world. The chain of trade that links the West to developing countries, and the subsequent conflicts connected to access to valuable resources, are hinted at in the use of banknotes and their countries of origin, carefully chosen – a literal, and symbolic, reference to money and its power over freedom. The birds display the most magnificent plumage, carefully crafted by the artist's technical skills – a plumage that is studied in the current development of camouflage patterns for armies. Yet again, armed conflict underpins and overarches Gibbs' preoccupations. The natural world and its extraordinary manifestations, on the one hand, and highly contemporary materials treated with advanced artistry, on the other, both serve to express concern about, address and reveal complex and dramatic systems of power – and indeed, sometimes, the pieces are an opportunity to educate the viewers.

Looking at the rest of the artistic production against the example of the Nightjars, it is evident how some characteristics remain constant, or how some of them can consistently be found: political, social, environmental issues always find a place in the thought process of the artist, either as historical references or as sources of inspiration to generate reflection. Why does the latest mounting figure on a horse made of wire look so different from the other ones? Because she is a young civil woman, rather than a male soldier, and perhaps can show us an alternative way of establishing a relationship with nature. What is the relevance of the forest paintings? More often than not, they are depicted from a low viewpoint, immersing the viewer in the majestic and sometimes slightly threatening or unsettling spaces. The images seem to be more than just representations of a forest, conjuring the atmosphere of the environment. Colour is masterfully used as a unifying and contrasting tool at the same time, perhaps hinting at the complexities and conflicts existing in natural habitats, and between humans and nature.

Media are always meaningful, and they contribute to convey the message. Found items, discarded objects, random materials that don't necessarily belong to the tradition of artistic media, all are skilfully transformed, in a process that, as the artist states, is akin to shamanic practices, wishing to bring to life what gets represented. The subjects represented are more than symbols of nature, they hold a presence, manifesting nature.

Gibbs embraces and makes the most of the possibilities offered by contemporary art. He has the freedom of using any media that suit the messages he wishes to present, and to utilise many recycled materials in doing so – which ends up being, in itself, a thought-provoking reference to the sustainability of artistic practices. He approaches sculpture-making from a perspective that opposes classical grandeur, and seems to visually borrow

from taxidermy, model-making, commemorative shrines, breaking and surpassing the limitations of what can be considered as “fine” art. The artworks carry the multi-layered nature of Gibbs’ concepts and research, his strong political underpinning and striking skills and visual effects.

One of the aspects in which Gibbs is most interested is the idea of obsolete powers: systems, structures, enforcements of power that are outdated, not relevant anymore, anachronistic. Perhaps, the choice of addressing these forces through objects that in some cases visually reference antique practices is part of the irony – an additional, tongue-in-cheek layer to Gibbs’ work.

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