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Worlds collide at Art First in *Silent Thresholds* by Karel Nel and *Lunar Asparagus* by Mimei Thompson

There's so much to see and get your head around in the work of the two very different artists – *Silent Thresholds* by Karel Nel and *Lunar Asparagus* by Mimei Thompson – now featured at Art First that you may find yourself making more than one visit.



Christine Holley 22nd October 2013

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Art First is located in Eastcastle Street in Fitzrovia, a short distance from Oxford Circus. The gallery moved here in September 2010 after fifteen years in Cork Street and its current exhibitions feature the work of two very different and intriguing artists. On the ground floor gallery is South African artist Karel Nel's *Silent Thresholds*, while downstairs is British artist Mimei Thompson's *Lunar Asparagus*.

Original listing details

Silent Thresholds is a series of eleven large-scale drawings on paper exploring the artist's studio as a philosophical space – a place of creativity and visual thinking. This is a complex and sophisticated visual language, highly personalised and rooted in the lives, work and thinking of two 20th-century art giants who are major influences on Nel. These are Marcel Duchamp (who first defined the concept of the readymade/found object) and sculptor Constantin Brancusi. Nel's drawings teem with geometric shapes and images, colliding and defying the quest to decode exactly where structure, space and form begin and end.

Nel was a frequent visitor to Brancusi's state-preserved studio in Paris, and in the drawing *The Bachelors*, he melds elements of Brancusi's workshop, saws and calipers with references to Duchamp's *Large Glass*. These are all intertwined with his own family history of stonemasonry and carpentry, and executed in his characteristic multi-layered and spatial dislocations.

In a uniform, understated palette, the drawings are worked in pastel, ochre, volcanic glass, sand and dust. Nel is a collector of artefacts and exotica, and we learn that the items used on the surface of the drawings also include Baobab bark fibre, Pandanus leaves from Micronesia and giant leaves from the Coco de Mer palms of the Seychelles.

An internationally well-established artist of gravitas and stature, Nel lives and works in Johannesburg and is Associate Professor at the School of Arts, University of Witwatersrand. He has a strong interest in science and a close connection with scientists. Key to our understanding of his work is that earlier this year he lectured the Cosmos astronomical team in Kyoto on "The Shape of Space", theorising on our conception of the nature and shape of the universe and how we have conceptualised the probability of its shape, based on our perceptual tools through history – and our personalised mental perception. This is deep indeed, and so is *Silent Thresholds*.

In *Parinirvana*, we see a reference and homage to Brancusi's death, the drawing alluding to a globe of the world that was the object of the sculptor's last contemplation. *Parinirvana* lauds the expansive nature of Brancusi's thought and his lifelong focus on pure form. There's also a similarity in this work to the metaphysical nature of De Chirico's paintings – that twilight area between the real and the imagined. No surprise that Nel's background training is in sculpture. In all the *Silent Thresholds* drawings is a constant play between the intellectual and poetic, and all are densely populated with symbolic artefacts of a highly personalised nature. A true master of his art and a great technician, Nel's great achievement in this exhibition is his ability to handle his medium and materials to create this illusionary interplay.

Now to cross a final threshold to the downstairs gallery and the latest exhibition in Art First's project to exhibit work by new and emerging artists – this time in the form of *Lunar Asparagus* by Mimei Thompson. Here lurks a totally different visual language from the one you have just been grappling with. Borrowed from the title of a 1935 Max Ernst Surrealist sculpture, the name *Lunar*

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Asparagus sets expectations for Thompson's other-worldly images that seem unfamiliar yet familiar. What is special about her works (all oil on canvas) is the highly stylised and inventive paint marks she has developed: organic in appearance, they morph into beautiful curlicue shapes and visual effects. Her brush strokes become forms in themselves, creating a fascinating pictorial whole.

In *Weeds Forecourt*, delicate violet, pewter and emerald forms spring up, but they look disturbingly as though they've been transported here from another planet. Two of the most arresting images, her *Cave Paintings*, are in ghost-like silver and lavender tones: in these canvases, starting from a central point that is furthest from the viewer's eye, the marks work gradually outwards towards the canvas edge in some beautiful formations. The effect is to draw the eye into this strange metaphorical cave. Thompson clearly revels in the interplay between the ordinary and the extraordinary; the banal and the grandiose.

All in all, these are a stimulating two shows, with contrasting work from two very different artists, one well-established and the other a young newcomer who is building an impressive portfolio.

Date reviewed: Tuesday 15th October 2013

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