

Feet of Angels



ANNE HOWESON

*Farewell, green fields and happy grove
Where flocks have took delight
Where lambs have nibbled, silent move
The feet of angels bright*

William Blake, *Night*

Drawing is often overlooked, presented as sketches for finished work, a journey towards the myriad paintings or sculptures that we enjoy. Rarely is it considered in its own right. But artists like William Kentridge have brought fresh insight and appreciation to the fine art of drawing and the different ways in which it can be expressed. Howeson's work is a truly contemporary representation of the medium. Observed with a mind fixed in politics, Anne Howeson reflects on the historical and the contemporary, noting intention and effect. Her desire to balance out fears for the future, or the wrong doings of the past, is manifest in an ethereal dimension that is apparent in her enjoyment of storytelling and imagination.



Burning Books 2020 conte, crayon, digital print 45 x 57 cm

Feet of Angels

ANNE HOWESON

Text by Jenny Blyth

CAREY BLYTH GALLERY

8 Woodstock Road Oxford OX2 6HT

www.jennyblythfineart.co.uk

Facebook & Instagram @careyblythgallery

Enquiries : jennyblythart@gmail.com

Catalogue Design by Text by Jenny Blyth © 2023

Front Cover: *Spade & Broom gouache, conte, digital print 44 x 52 cm*

Feet of Angels is a new body of work responding to the photography of William Henry Fox Talbot. It is accompanied by drawings from recent years that follow through from her last exhibition **Present in the Past** in which she explored the transformation of Kings Cross, her home of twenty years. Working with engravings, Howeson overlaid the bucolic Georgian landscape of occasional villages, through industrialization and the building of major railways from St Pancras to the resources of the North, against a backcloth of modernity. Her 21st Century cityscape, distinguished by iconic landmarks such as the Post Office Tower, The Shard, The Gherkin and even the Twin Towers, reminds us of history in the making. Where previously she used 18th and 19th Century engravings, the new drawings are worked over Talbot photographs from the Bodleian Libraries Collection published in their online Catalogue Raisonné of his work. (<https://talbot.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/>)

A tutor at The Royal College of Art for more than thirty years, Howeson embraces artists from early Renaissance to Contemporary. Her muses are many, from the quiet of Piero della Francesca and the humanity of Giotto, to Samuel Palmer embracing light in the landscape, the particular Englishness and detail of Stanley Spencer, and the living drawings of William Kentridge that critique the politics of apartheid and the challenge of a country in transition. She has always encouraged students to look to the giants of Fine Art, to be informed and inspired by fellow artists whether historical or contemporary, to learn from the best. Her intention is not to appropriate but to inhabit and extract, creating new imaginings that are distinctly her own. William Blake, who considered imagination *'an instrument superior to reason'*, is one of her most treasured muses.

There is a shared sensibility between Howeson's drawings and Talbot's images. Pioneer of early photography, Talbot created the first 'photogenic drawing' in 1835. Developing the process further over five years, he discovered that by exposing light-sensitized paper to bright sunlight briefly, he was able to record faint impressions that developed out into detailed images, or calotypes. Derived from the ancient Greek 'kalos' meaning beautiful, and 'tupos' meaning impression, it is these qualities that connect Anne Howeson's drawings with the early photography that Talbot originated and shared.

Owner of the Lacock Estate in Wiltshire from 1828 until his death fifty years later, Talbot amassed a collection of thousands of photographs, documenting family and workers on the Estate, at task and in repose, as he explored his methodology. From early teens, Howeson has been captivated by the beauty of his photographs, savouring the attention to detail in the characters, their clothes and the objects that he recorded.

Photography is a mainstay tool for so many contemporary artists, particularly painters, freezing that moment in time from which they can work. But there is often a static, surface quality to the new creation which identifies it as anchored in photography. Not so for Howeson. Her work celebrates photography but is infused with narrative and dreams, peopled with characters drawn from plays and poems, perhaps a figure she has encountered momentarily. Her chosen photograph may contain much, or little of note, to anyone other than herself. It is a springboard to other worlds, for transcending time. The stage is first cleared and then set as she prepares to choreograph her dioramas.

Her methodology remains the same - after scrubbing out selected original figures and features, Howeson introduces her own players, trees and greenery. Working in gouache, conté and crayon, she brings colour to the monochrome, accentuating light and dark. Chiaroscuro adds rigour to her tableaux, and vignettes of narrative unfurl as she introduces both period and contemporary characters to a re-orchestrated landscape. Her work is complex. Whether pastoral and quiet, or politically charged and pithy, it is laced with moments from beyond with which she seeks to soften the grit of reality. The overall effect is unsettling, suggesting an unearthly presence.

Despite the processions of people traipsing across the land with their scant belongings in **Rustic Bench**, there is the frisson of angels moving unseen amongst the autumn leaves that crown above them. The figures clearly relate to people displaced, to the vast numbers of refugees seeking to find a safe place to be. Howeson casts our minds to conflict in Afghanistan, Syria and across Ukraine. The photograph that triggered this work is a Talbot of an empty bench beneath an oak tree. The richness and warmth of Howeson's tree perhaps brings balm to the figures in their plight.

There are notes of William Blake expressed in many of Howeson's drawings. Recalling a childhood vision of a tree filled with angels, their '*bright angelic wings bespangling every bough like stars*', he believed in the afterlife, his poetry and paintings reflecting that belief, unconstrained by dimension. Blake was traditional yet subversive. Vehemently opposed to slavery and child labour, he eschewed the Church for defining and limiting religious belief, and the free expression of love. His Christian faith remained profound, rooted in compassion and nature.

Angels are implicit in Howeson's work, an ethereal nuance watching over and bringing compassion where there is none. Titled simply ***Angel***, Howeson selected a 19th Century engraving of the railway tunnels below Kings Cross. She has added in figures disembarking onto the tracks towards the tunnels beyond, perhaps referring to WWII. Their despair is evidenced in their bowed stance, and the procession is witnessed by Angels with huge wings that flank the scene on both sides. They are unseen in the shadows, silent and protective, and there is light at the end of the tunnels.

Burning Books is Howeson's sister drawing to ***Angel***. It is both extraordinary and perturbing in equal measure, and the first of her drawings based in photography. Extraordinary even epic, it follows through from ***Present in the Past*** reflecting the grandeur of St Pancras expressed in the architecture, at the time of a burgeoning British Empire. The content of this drawing however commands a shift in history and geography, and the manifestation of suppression and persecution. She has drawn figures lined up on the platform on the right awaiting the train, silent and subdued, as they watch their smoking, burning books. The crowd of figures beyond officers in the foreground on the left are fearful and panicky, and through the windows in the rear, we can see smoke tails curling skyward where Howeson suggests the burning of bodies. But she has planted trees onto the platform, and shafts of sunlight stream through the girders that arc over the station. Effectively, she is using nature to try to balance out the unbearable, to bring some measure of comfort.

Rake & Basket is a different creature. Ghosts from the past picnic in the style of Manet's *Dejeuner Sur L'Herbe*. The original Talbot photograph is an unusual choice with simply so little going on. Whatever may have occurred has passed, a lingering flavour where the 'presence of absence' is evidenced by a discarded rake and basket in an unexceptional country setting. The reinvented scene is rich with colour and quietly reassuring. Howeson portrays herself seated on a stone, a contemporary player in the group. She is gazing directly at us. Besides her are two Victorian ladies in hooped dresses with neat collars and bonnets, and in the foreground are the Rake and the Basket. Useful objects that transcend the passage of time, they are drawn with care and attention, as are the beautiful oversized dove and hound seated either side of the artist. There is an almost surreal element to Howeson's compositions. The figures are true each to their time, and the animals and objects such as the bowls and vases, the rake and the basket are real, links to the ghosts of lives passed that cohabit side-by-side with the living.

Spade and Broom is similarly worked over a Talbot print. It is more monochromatic in tone, and again, very little of the original photograph has remained. Although Howeson's 19th Century figures are lifted from further Talbot images, the third figure on the right, an 18th Century creature in breeches and buckles, recalls the blood thirsty *Flea*, an 'insect beast' of William Blake's dream. The Spade and the Broom command centre stage exuding surety and comfort, whilst hidden in the bushes to the left are two contemporary figures whispering to each other.

Bunker style and makeshift, the buildings in ***A Shed and a House*** are barely habitable. A fire smokes, untended in the foreground. The lie of the land nods to Palmer, but there is something very wrong in the landscape. Howeson's composition has a distinctly dystopian feel. Despite the willowy saplings the tone is unnerving, post-apocalyptic. In the 'house', Howeson has drawn a group of people who are discussing what to do.

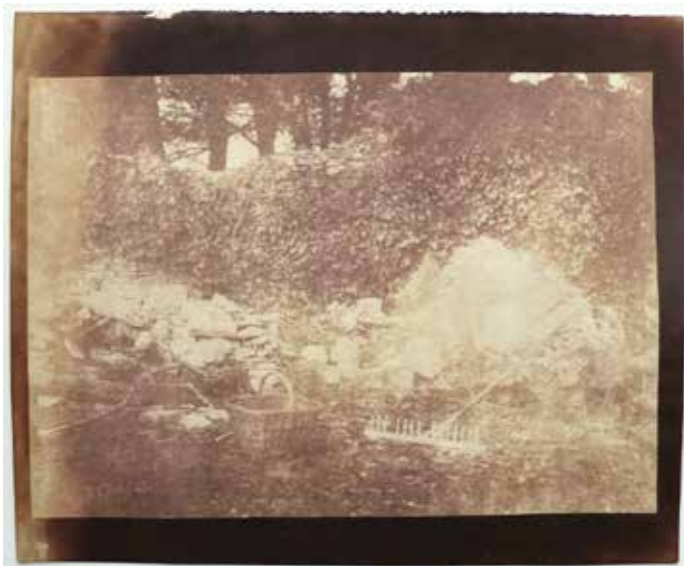
Possibly a Soldier was triggered by a Talbot photograph of a single period figure. A play on *'Possibly a Sailor'* titled by an archivist perhaps, he appears more gondolier than sailor, but intrigued by the character, Howeson has flanked him with two soldiers, one in fatigues, American, possibly from the Vietnam War, and the other distinctly British, from WWII. As ever, it is the occasional figure who seems to get under her skin, to prompt her musings.

The last of the new drawings is *Talbot's Chair* covered over with a dust sheet. Although the drawing room is empty, it is lit up and coloured with the reflection of a fire remembered from Howeson's childhood that raged in the fields beyond her home, threatening to engulf it.

Memories pervade and colour our conscious perception of the world around us. Thus, for each of us the narrative and our view of the world is unique. Whilst highlighting beauty observed, artists are often charged by the politics of the day that underscore our realities and unseat our notions and aspirations for peaceful and meaningful existence. Like artists, we are as much drawn to the darker corners as we are to the light, but where we are so often silent, artists step forward : Van Dyck captured the extravagant opulence of Charles I that precipitated his demise; Winslow Homer witnessed the American Civil War that transformed the slavery of his early years to an unliberated emancipation; Picasso's unparalleled painting of the bombing of Guernica, a reportage of the fascist war crimes of Franco and the far right, banned him from his homeland for life. Where William Kentridge has documented the ravages and chaos of Apartheid in South Africa, Richard Mosse lays bare the devastation of deforestation in the Amazon. Artists, at every level, are the visual journalists of our day. They are our voice and our conscience. Such an artist is Anne Howeson.



Rustic Bench 2022 gouache, conte, crayon, digital print 58 x 48 cm



*Master record for Schaaf no. 2561
Ruined stone wall with basket
Attributed to: William Henry Fox Talbot
Salted Paper Print 23 February 1841
Owner: The British Library
Talbot Collection*



Rake and Basket 2022 gouache, conte, crayon, digital print 42 x 48 cm



*Master record for Schaaf no. 1040
Interior of South Gallery, Lacock Abbey
Attributed to: William Henry Fox Talbot
Salted Paper Print
Owner: The British Library
Talbot Collection*



Talbot's Chair 2022 gouache, conte, crayon, digital print 45 x 52 cm



Master record for Schaaf no. 1703
A broom, spade and shrubbery, probably at Lacock Abbey
Attributed to: William Henry Fox Talbot 23 Feb 1841
Salted Paper Print
Owner: National Science and Media Museum
Science Museum Collection



Spade and Broom 2022 gouache, conte, digital print 44 x 52 cm



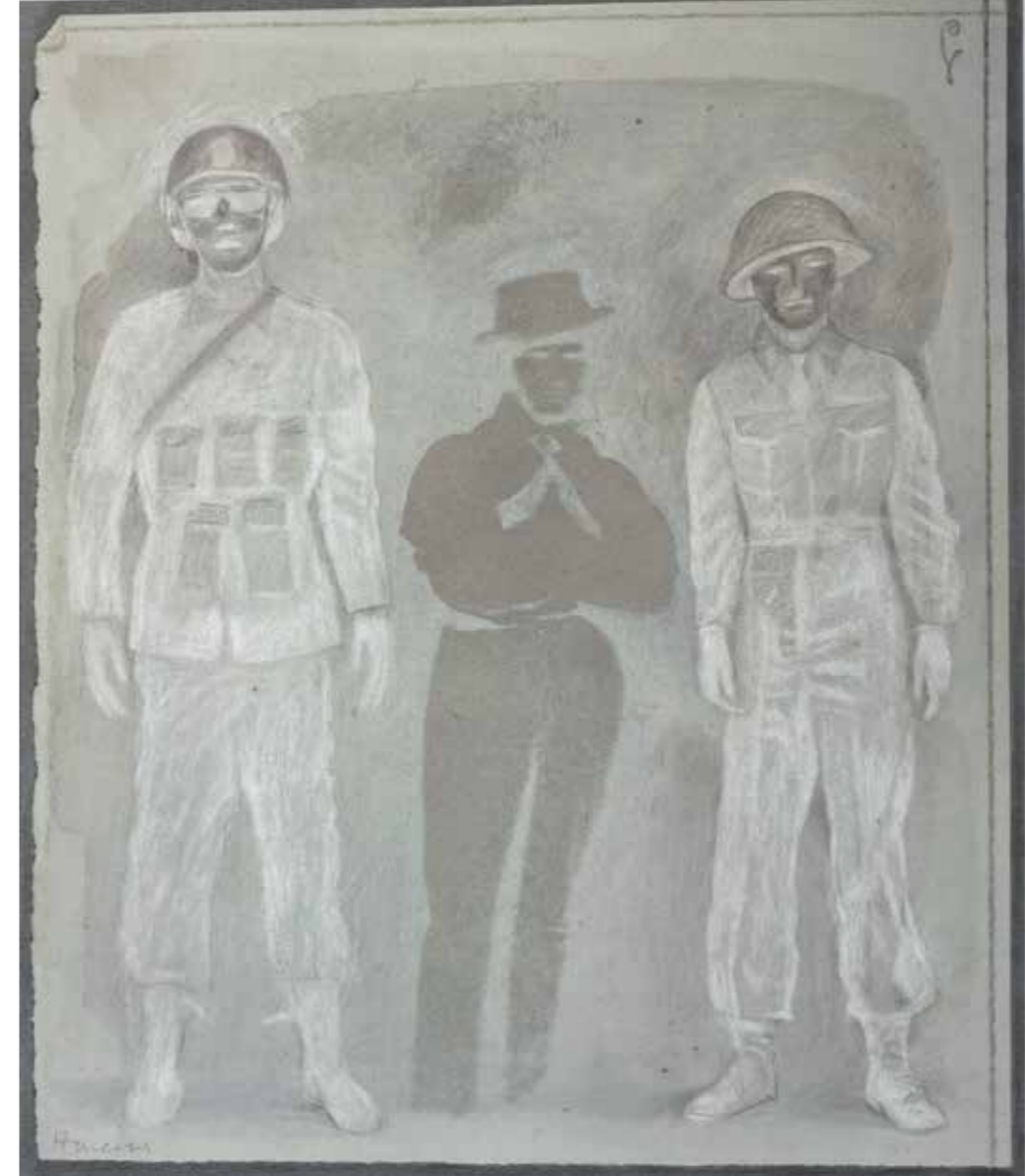
*Master record for Schaaf no. 1665
A Shed and a House
Attributed to: William Henry Fox Talbot
Paper Negative-Camera
Owner: Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas
Gernsheim Collection*



A Shed and A House 2022 conte, crayon, digital print 49 x 54 cm



*Master record for Schaaf no. 1648
Possibly a sailor with arms folded
Attributed to: William Henry Fox Talbot
Paper Negative-Camera
Owner: National Science and Media Museum
Science Museum Collection*



Possibly a Soldier 2022 conte, crayon, digital print 54 x 47 cm

An extract from a conversation between Richard Ovenden OBE, Bodleian Librarian at the University of Oxford, and Anne Howeson about her use of photography and archives in the drawing series, **Feet of Angels**.

Richard: How much of the King's Cross work was, for you, inspired by a photographic image as a starting point?

Anne: **Burning Books** was one of the first photographs I used. What always surprises me are the stories I tell without consciously planning them. I'm interested in the pre-World War II period and had not expected **Angel**, from the previous series, drawn on an engraving rather than a photograph, to refer to Auschwitz. It's set in the tunnels under King's Cross but actually shows people coming off or being loaded onto trains. In the background, standing quietly, not very visible I hope, are two angels.

I wanted to work with the idea of angels, which is deeply unfashionable, even sentimental, not to research images of angels in the archives, but to put them into drawings. The drawing **Rustic Bench**, from Talbot's Rustic Bench under an Oak Tree, is about Ukraine and refugees, and I see the tree as being full of angels - in the Blakeian sense - certainly not people with wings. In our lives I believe, there is something which is grace watching over us. Obviously, I can't talk about that in any logical way.

Richard: It is a spiritual thing.

Anne: Exactly. This is what interests me - the spiritual side of life which is not given enough space in contemporary art.

Richard: The scientific imperative has either excluded it from any sort of discussion or debate, or it has been rendered into a box which says 'don't go there'.

Anne: Garry Fabian Miller's work is all about this.

Richard: It very much is.

Richard: Talbot's manifesto for photography, his extraordinary book called the 'Pencil of Nature', was intended to show photography as being truthful, as having this idea that it is generated by nature, not by the artist's hand, so there has been no intervention of a human which is, of course, completely erroneous and false in the actuality of creating photography, even at the time when Talbot was working, because that mixture of chemistry, optics and the almost infinite variety of manipulation that could happen, and was necessary for photography to develop or to take place, made that a false statement, really, but it was a great selling point for photography, and there was a kind of truth in that. He inserted a slip in the first issue of the 'Pencil of Nature' Issue in the summer of 1844 that stated that:

The plates of the present work are impressed by the agency of Light alone, without any aid whatever from the artist's pencil. They are the sun-pictures themselves, and not, as some persons have imagined, engravings in imitation.

Anne: Talbot was interested in the science and technique of photography, but I was drawn to his photographs because of the element of poetry in them, and wanted to use his photographs as a creative trigger.

Richard: I think there has always been that sort of element to photography throughout its history, if you think of the Victorian habit - you'll see it in Geoff Batchen's show across the road, 'A New Power' - in the power of painting onto the surface of photographs. At first, this was to add colour, when colour photography didn't really exist, and then actually overlaying them, becoming something different but with a photographic image as a base layer. And then you find photographers manipulating the surfaces either of negative or positive prints by hand painting on them, layering over photographs to make an image that does not exist in reality, from two images which exist in reality, but by combination they change. Like Gustave Le Gray from France in the middle of the C19 - because black and white photography doesn't register blue in the tonal range, it just comes through as white essentially - so with Gustave Le Gray taking photographs of seascapes on a nice clear day you would just have a nice white sky which renders the image flat. He then would take a photograph of a cloudy sky and superimpose it onto his white image which then creates a resultant picture that looks fabulous because there is a beautiful cloudscape on top of this beautiful seascape.

Anne: I made **Burning Books** when I was working with engravings. It is a kind of transitional picture from the last show, which was about King's Cross. The drawings at the Carey Blyth Gallery use Talbot's photographs as a starting point for new narratives.

Richard: You find this in the pictorialist photographers using, merging printmaking techniques and working with printmakers. So James Craig Annan, the Scottish photographer, very close friends with David Young Cameron, the etcher and artist, would go on trips together to northern Europe.

Anne: And Camille Corot?

Richard: Yes, a number of that era of photographers and printmakers and artists exchanged techniques and approaches, often using the same scene but with that manipulation of the base layer, and particularly that's true when photography begins to be reproduced in ink, as opposed to chemicals, as opposed to silver, that the transfer of the photographic image to a printing plate allows that opportunity for hand manipulation.

Anne: The drawing **Ruin** is set in King's Cross Station while being built. I found the original photograph in the London Metropolitan Archive. It's a continuation of the theme of ghosts, memory and time. I'm doing more work of this kind, using Talbot's and other photographers' imagery. **Tourists**, also about the idea of then and now, shows exactly the same view inside King's Cross, soon after it was built.

Richard: That is one of the things which I think photography does have, a particular power over memory, which is unique, where it allows you to connect to a place or a person who has gone, but in a way that is so present. I stumbled by chance on a photograph that was being sold online by a

dealer of an ancestor of mine, and it was my great, great something or other grandmother who was photographed in the 1850s, in her 83rd year.

Anne: Why was she was being photographed?

Richard: Because she was an old person, and somebody photographed her. The extraordinary thing about it is that it's an ambrotype, so it is unmanipulable and you can look into her eyes and see my mother's eyes, and she was born in the reign of George II.

Anne: Amazing.

Richard: It is extraordinary.

Anne: Roland Barthes, in his book Camera Lucida, talked about 'punctum', a detail, where somebody might have a gap in their teeth or an undone shoelace. it's moving to look at photographs and notice these incidental details which aren't really the subject but somehow express people's humanity. The ordinary is something I find inspiring, for example the everyday objects in the photographs Spade and Broom and Rake and Basket.

Richard: There is a very prosaic analysis of Talbot's use of those sorts of items which is that they stay still.

Anne: And the ladders.

Richard: They are easier to photograph, they cast a shadow, important in photography, to render three dimensionality, and that they provide scale.

Anne: Exactly.

Richard: But there is another reading of that which is partly a symbolic one, partly it is almost trying to re-capture the subconscious of Talbot when he is laying these things out.

Anne: It is the everyday which is a powerful focus as far as I'm concerned.

Richard: Talbot was a landowner and the archive that we have some of, which is drawn into the two exhibitions, documents a human being's life in the round. We think of Talbot today as a photographer, the inventor of photography, or at least the inventor of the process of photography that became dominant for the majority of its history until now. Actually, in his time he was not thought of as a photographer. He was a landowner, a member of parliament, a parent. He was a translator. He was one of the team that translated the Syrian tablets that Austen Henry Layard had dug up in Nineveh in what we now call Central Iraq. Trying to decipher uniform script. He was one of the founders of the Royal Horticultural Society. So, he was a man, a multi-faceted individual. It just happens that through one of his passions, a concentration of intellectual energy, he discovered, invented photography and for not quite 20 years took a lot of photographs and taught a lot of other people how to do it, and got bored with it. He changed the way we look on the world.

Anne: I loved the Catalogue Raisonné because I could trawl through and ask instinctively 'could I work with that image'? Penelope Fitzgerald wrote a biography on Burne-Jones where she said 'the secret life of artists is accessed through their work' and that's what happened in my conversations with Talbot. How do you feel about somebody like me using the archives as a springboard to other ideas?

Richard: That is perfectly valid. I think that is one of the wonderful things about archives, and there is a tendency by librarians and archivists to presuppose what people use, how people use them, what they will be interested in. And there are implications in that for what is selected for permanent preservation. So libraries and archives are an institution that preserve knowledge, and in that process there is the idea of selection, an element of curation, and that selection, if you take someone's archive, you can't keep everything in the world so you have to choose, and part of that choice is thinking long into the future about what people in the future will find useful or interesting. That is a very subjective thing in 2023 - to be making a decision about what people in 2123 may want to use in that archive.

Anne: That Catalogue Raisonné is quite something.

Richard: The labour that went into creating that was enormous. I had to raise almost a million pounds. It was the idea of a scholar called Larry Schaaf, and Larry and I sat in a restaurant about 100 yards from here and conjured up the idea of creating the online version of it which Larry had always had in his mind. It took Larry 40 years to track every single image.

The process of selection which we make today has to be made to enable people like you, in the future, to be able to interrogate the archive in ways which we can't understand but work for you.

Anne: I don't know how the Bodleian feels about me taking imagery from the Catalogue Raisonné but I'd like to do more of it.

Richard: That is what it is there for.

Thank you, Richard. It has been a pleasure working with the Talbot archive.



Angel 2021 gouache, conte, crayon, digital print 23.5 x 44.8 cm

Great Northern Waiting Room 2020
gouache, conte, digital print 43.5 x 57 cm





Great Northern Waiting Room 2020
gouache, conte, digital print 43.5 x 57 cm

ANNE HOWESON

Biography

Anne Howeson lives between London, Cornwall UK and Fontecchio, Italy.
She completed her MA at the Royal College of Art in London where she was a tutor between 1985-2022, promoting drawing as process, outcome and way of thinking.

Solo Exhibitions

Feet of Angels, Jenny Blyth Fine Art at Carey Blyth Gallery, Oxford (2023)
Present in the Past, Collyer Bristow, London (2015)
Imagining King's Cross, Cross Street Gallery, London (2015)
Remember Me, The Guardian News and Media, London (2009)

Group exhibitions

ING Discerning Eye, London (2020, 2016, 2011)
Motive/Motif V&A East, London (2019)
Bunka Gakuen University, Tokyo (2019)
Buckingham Palace, London (2018)
Ruskin Prize, Millennium Gallery, Sheffield (2017)

Work in Public Collections

The Museum of London
The Guardian News and Media
St George's Hospital London
Imperial College London

Anne Howeson is a **Jerwood Drawing Prize** winner.

Thank you to the Bodleian Libraries, with particular thanks to Richard Ovenden, OBE
and to Larry Schaaf for the William Henry Fox Talbot Catalogue Raisonee.

Thank you for all your support Simon.

CAREY BLYTH GALLERY

8 Woodstock Road Oxford OX2 6HT

www.jennyblythfineart.co.uk

Facebook & Instagram @careyblythgallery

Enquiries : jennyblythart@gmail.com

Catalogue Design & Text by Jenny Blyth © 2023