

Eleri Mills An Artistic Journey : A Celebration at 70



In her landscapes, **Eleri Mills** leads us on a journey: paths entice us deeper into the scene, rivers meander around hills and mountains, and vast oceans hint at distant worlds. For Mills, these pathways and waterways are like veins – or conduits of life – that animate her distinctly Welsh landscapes. In them, the forms of nature are tightly bound with a deep sense of history and culture, while aspects inspired by real topography are combined with elements from her imagination.

This exhibition, marking her 70th birthday, traces Mills' own artistic journey over the past 25 years. This has been a time of intense exploration, which has seen her pursue new artistic interests both close to home and further afield. On the one hand, she has deepened her relationship with her immediate environment – the lush, unspoilt landscape of mid-Wales, where she was born and bred – and on the other, she has found artistic stimulus elsewhere, in London, New York and Delhi. Back in her studio in Montgomeryshire, she has channelled these wide-ranging influences into works that look both inwards and outwards.

As an artist, Mills always conveys a deep spirit of place, inspired by the topography of Powys but adapted and reshaped to evoke a more mythical landscape. This is a place of the heart, replete with both personal significance and cultural or historical import, which she hints at in her titles. The quadriptych *Tirlun i Dywysogion (Landscape for Princes)* was conceived following a visit to Sycharth, home of Owain Glyndŵr, the last native Prince of Wales. The rotund form at the top recalls the motte and bailey castle that once stood on the site; its repetition in all four works conveys constancy over the passage of time, represented by the shifting paths, waterways and trees. Alongside historical references, Mills also engages with Wales's bardic tradition. *Y Dref Wen (Borderland)*, for example, refers to the fair or beloved town mentioned in early Welsh poetry (*Canu Heledd*, preserved in the *Red Book of Hergest*), believed to be a reference to the early kingdom of Powys, partly subsumed into England, which is reflected in the English title *Borderland*.

In these works, nature is presented as orderly and idealised, evoking a lost golden age. This idyll recalls the 'pleasant place' (*locus amoenus*) of classical literature, where humans live in harmony with nature – a view of nature central to the European landscape painting tradition, from Giorgione to Richard Wilson and beyond. The latter, along with Samuel Palmer, J.D. Innes and David Hockney are all artists admired by Mills. Like her predecessors, she uses colours that soothe and enliven, while her compositions draw us in and frame the view like an embrace.

In recent years, Mills has swapped her vibrant colours for a more monotone palette. Using ink and pastel, she builds her images with rhythmic linear marks, recalling the stitched details characteristic of her earlier career. She has a dynamic creative process, standing to work and constantly moving around the studio, building up several compositions simultaneously. The change in palette also ushers in change in tone. In her most recent works, *Llefydd Gwylt y Gallon (Wild Places of the Heart)*, nature is presented as grander, wilder and more awesome, the rounded hills of earlier works replaced by higher, more jagged and pointed peaks. Their scale dwarfs the tiny human figures depicted, which introduce a narrative to the scene but also invite us to join them on their journey through the landscape. These works show Mills engaging with the Romantic tradition, which shaped the history of Welsh landscape painting in the 18th century. *Y Bwlch (The Pass)*, for example, places us high among the mountains, the dramatic rockfaces descending as steeply as the road ahead.

A sense of calm and serenity persists in many works, however. *Yn yr Ardd o Gariad I (In the Garden I)*, created during the time of Covid, presents a nurturing, magical garden, where a family group gathers joyfully under the protective shade of trees. The small-scale *Pastoral (Pastoral)* likewise shows nature as a nurturing environment, with the sheep grazing in a pasture paying homage to old farming traditions which are gradually disappearing. Having grown up in a farming family herself, Mills is

eager to address the impact that fast-changing practices are having on the landscape. *Yn y Dyffryn (In the Valley)* belongs to a group of works that celebrates the natural beauty of the Banwy Valley, where she grew up and continues to live – an environment that she fears is under threat.

Mills has lived and breathed this landscape since birth and has channelled it into her art for decades. Through her closely bound personal and artistic relationship with it, her works invite us to pause and reflect – on the past, present and future – and offer a moment of stillness in a world of change.

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