

Mark Fairnington — Flora

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GRADUATE
SCHOOL

Mark Fairnington

FLORA

with words from
Adrian Rifkin

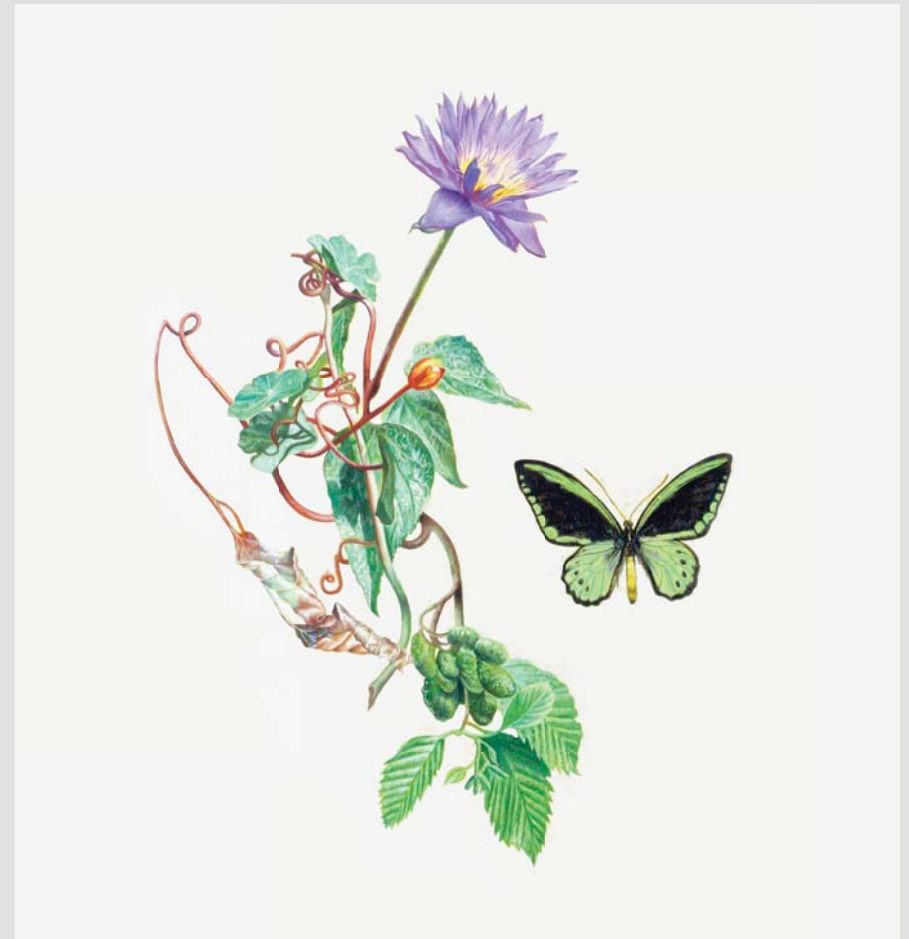
Oliver Sears Gallery

Mark Fairington is probably not a flower painter.

Were we to set his paintings alongside some illustrious predecessors, who definitely did do flowers, from Rachel Ruysch to Joseph Redouté, Claude Monet or, perhaps, to Elizabeth Blackadder, I guess this work might seem to lack legitimacy; morality even. Just a casual glance at these paintings catches me with dismay, as if I had never known how to discern between immorality and the amoral, for the flowers seem to reek of both. These images resist any conventions in the presentation and nomenclature of flowers, of the language of flowers, even of the rudiments of flower arranging

Water Lily

1



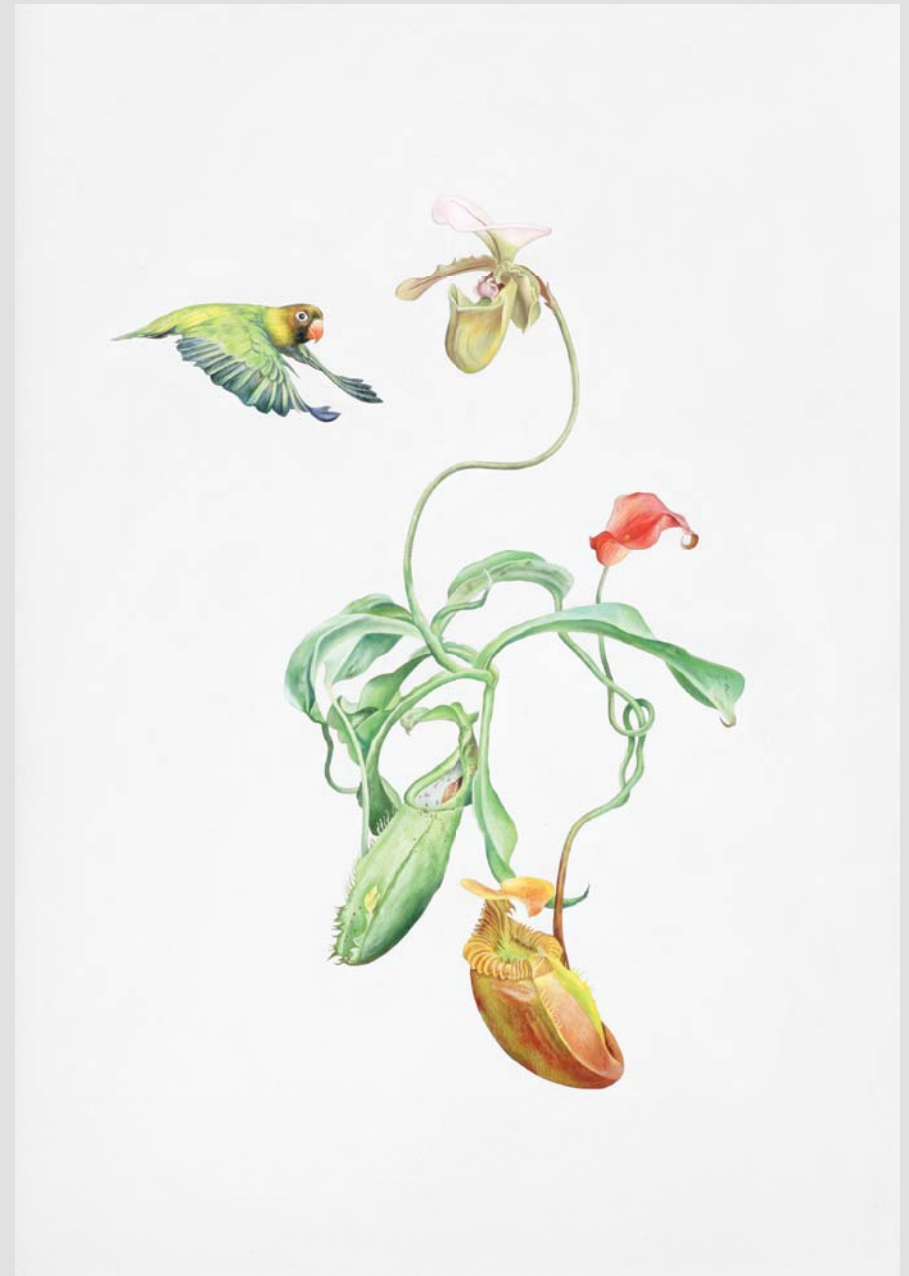


as it might be taught in an evening class. The water lily jars in its profusion of mistaken foliage, the moth set alongside as if for some an undeterminable comparison, of colour or of size, or some other order of signs, in the abstracted, waterless world that suffocates any memory we might hold of the Nymphéas of Giverny, at the Orangerie in Paris, in their all too watery obviousness and story-telling sentiment. Syncretic too the *Deaths Head Hawkmoth*, dry beside sticky orifices that gape and glisten, without for all that offering a sexual relation, unless the attachment of the cricket to a tendril, or a couple of butterflies, holds the key to how we might hold to all of this

and know that, with these flowers, or leaves which, unlike the lilies of the field, in the Gospel of Saint Matthew, passionately 'care then for raiment', utterly and without shame golden, how they look can never be as insignificant as a gift of nature, of a design more intelligent than that of the human hand forming the tendrils that connect the desire of daydream to the unconscious as a phantasm the visible. So death and love, in their old conjunction of the Flowers of Evil now slip into simple contiguity, death-moth, love-bird, each no more than elements of a sentence that might never be finished, any more than these grounds of pale and black mean anything more than that the brush must touch some surface to make things visible.

The Love Bird

3





Here black and then again black; these surfaces, from black through to whites, with some broken tones, are puzzling; puzzling because they are at once background and foreground; they sustain and, we suspect, they efface; there is something hidden beneath them, perhaps just absent. They accomplish this duplicity this without any obvious gesture of painterly expression or expressiveness, without any evident demand on an emotion, such as the fear of loss; black, then black, nothing more; leaves, insects, figures from some little known thesaurus of nature – that could not be drawn together were their integument not out of sight. Sense is forced before it's made, its hybridity takes time and process, something hinted at

in this title; though not what kind of a tree this is. For what we see are symptoms for a tree, a tree without a proper name, with no location in the annals of botanical science. Biology is not destiny here, nor botany, nor entomology; just invisibility. Nor, despite the unusually intense relation of the title and the image, this exacerbated, arbitrary, deluded and self-consoling precision, can we envisage the link between the figures as analogous to that of the words. Flowers, leaves and moth don't adhere in the same way that do the three words, just as the split between the improbably different ways of painting the golden leaves and their two kinds of flower undermines the fact-like thing of their being there together in the first place, for

The Invisible Tree

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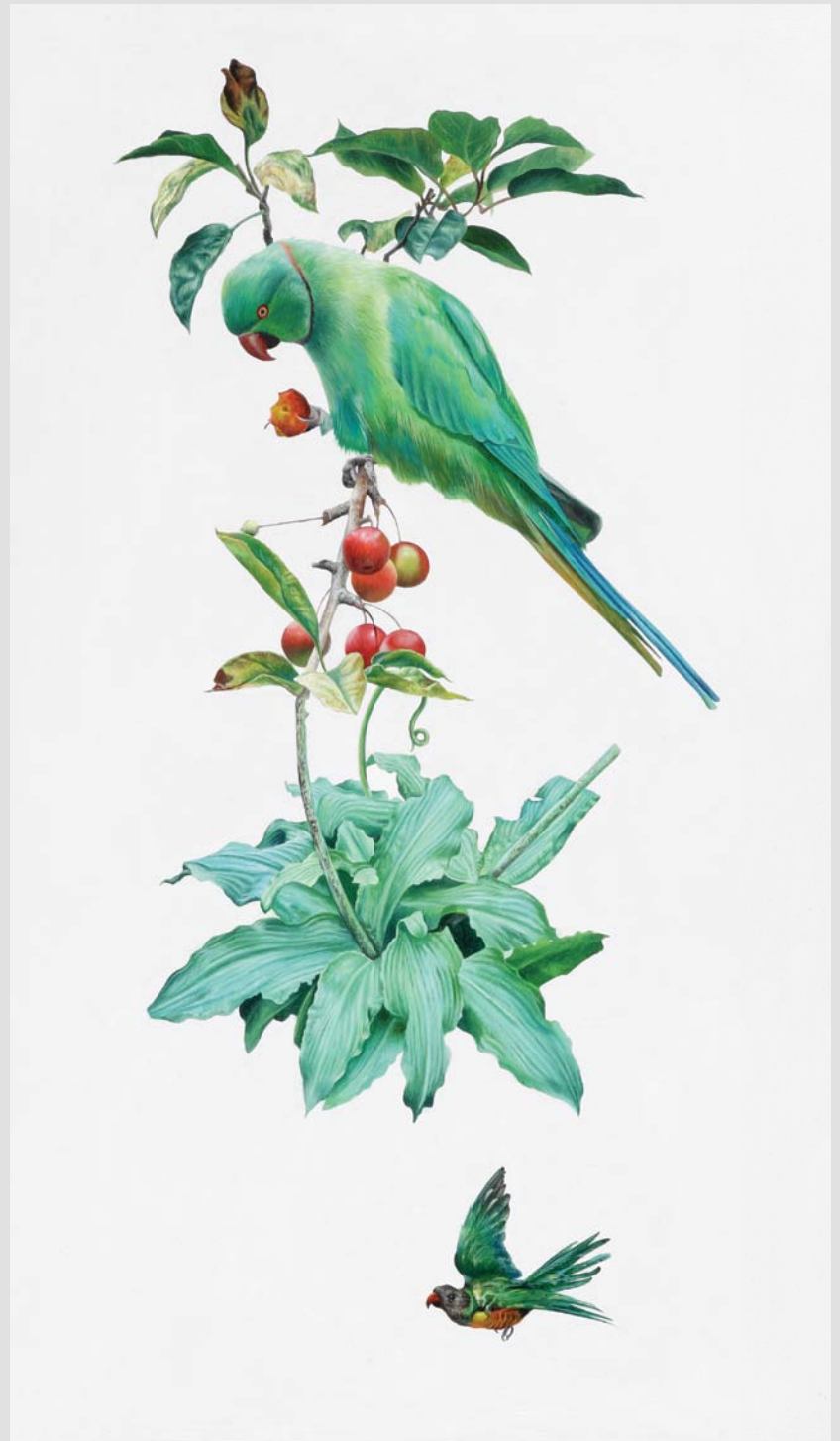


in any reasonable and reasoned scheme for the classification of natural phenomena, these plants and creatures can only come together at the design of a painter who has renounced nature, utterly, decisively; and who, in a kind of indecision, so as to speak, between some colours, invites these apparently natural forms and bodies to act as a surface and



share something I am calling a destiny, which is to be at the disposal of an unusual range of very fine brushes; for there seems here to be no destiny for nature other than other than of adapting to the shape and the size of a brush, the colours it deposits, a work of finish that is as conclusive in its invitation to penetrate the surface as it is in its subsequent, hermetic refusal of the gaze. At the same time these grounds of dark and light, be they behind or before the figures, before or after them,

The Parrot Plant





stand in for light, or for some notion that the painter has of how or why light is needed to see what he has done without resorting to an idea either of source or some other convention, such as the lightlessness of scientific illustration, to the light of the sun slanted in an imaginary space, or the light of the sun or an electric light falling on the receptors of a digital camera, or an invented light painted to explore an epistemology of cut flowers as with Rachel Ruysch, or a truthfully blank and neutral background; all of which would only refer us back to objective nature, *natura naturans*.

This is one of the ways in which a painting, or another way of making art, can elide or sidestep philosophy. Were I pushed to make some kind of decision about what we see in these works, is it nature being itself, or nature completed – an expression of its maker's name, I would say that it is neither, that it slips between these and restores to us a certain capacity to think and feel what it is that regards us. But



there is no principle at play here, no rule at all. The combinations of different forms of life are unlimited in their burgeoning activity as in their decay and



The Tiger Swallowtail Plant

I know about the collage and its disappearance, and I suppose that this knowledge should not be allowed to determine or to skew our seeing of an image. For that these strange conjunctions are the leftovers of a photographic composition, a collage that means nothing more than the contiguity of its plants or birds or insects, and also a montage that generates newly nameable flowers with their birds and moths and butterflies, is really neither here nor there. The here and there is rather the matter of something we guess,

Morpho Menelaus Plant





a hidden asymmetry. In the early 90's Mark Fairington painted over Flemish Madonnas, so that excised from their own visibility and devotional grounding, they became another ground for the eventual emergence of the work as a one-day empty surface, the model of an oxymoron for which these paintings almost sustain the promise.

I had thought, before this, that the white and the black, or next an acid yellow, was a slight matter, just a way to tilt the our seeing in favour of the withered, the golden and of what is fading out; to give death a chance, so as to speak, on an imagined border of an abject presence or remainder, which is what we see, and its vanished origin, what has been covered over or just left out.



Dead Leaf Plant



There is some troubling evidence for this in the way that the birds are suspended before their flowers without quite reaching them, not in a suspended movement, but in the suspension of movement itself, specimens removed from a glass case or an illustrated history of nature; insects clinging repetitively to a nonsensical stem of incompatible blooms not in the crazed genetic mutations of a science fiction, but in the lower, more reasonable key of an unsettling but appealing truth.



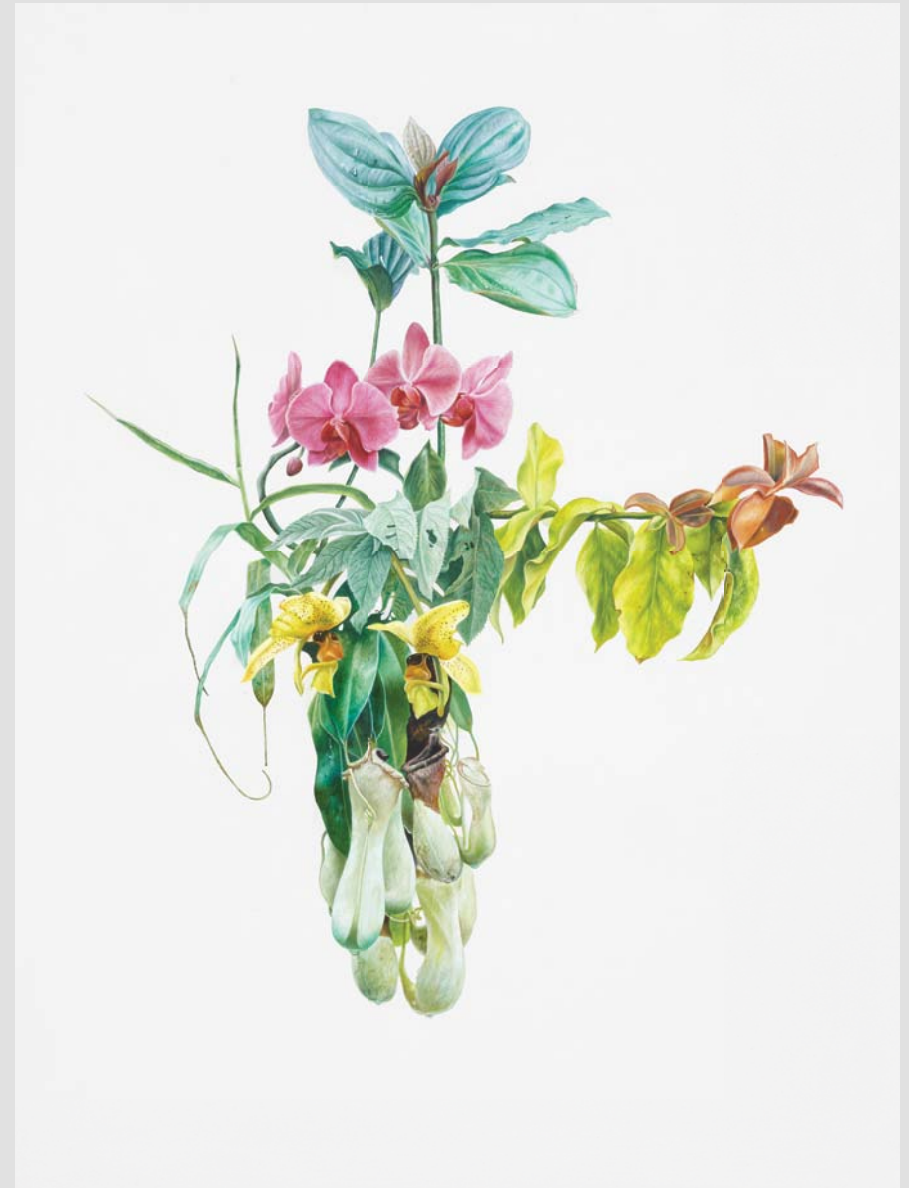
Now I see more clearly why Freud wrote that the *heimliche* and the *unheimliche*, the homely and the uncanny, are the same kind of thing and are co-dependent. I recall a display in the Paris Museum of Natural History that was queerly more like these paintings than the archives of the South Kensington Museum, from which Mark Fairnington has drawn so much material. It was a vertical, screen-like case; it contained small specimens that were only a fragment of DNA the one from another, and two of the closest were a feathery stem of grass and a spider.

Glossy Starling Plant

Once the dust is shaken once off these samples of the inexistent, then the colours glow, as they had never done, like the colours of a Titian that has been over-restored and so brought (back) to a new life. And,

Cuckoo Moth

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as here, another borderline is smudged, between energy and entropy, in a gesture that invokes neither the ecology of a life cycle nor allegory, although there is another, or many another painting that resembles these,

such as a still life of about 1600 by Juan Sanchez Cotan, which shows a quince and a melon, suspended at different heights on strings against a dark background, in a shallow stone alcove, while on the shelf below them and above a signature, lie a two thirds open cantaloupe melon, with a step of a half slice cut into it and a whole slice beside it, slightly over the edge, flesh severed from skin towards the point of the slice and, beside it to the right, a whole gherkin, its tip casting a pointed shadow below the edge, as the whole ensemble of vegetable, fruit and stone is

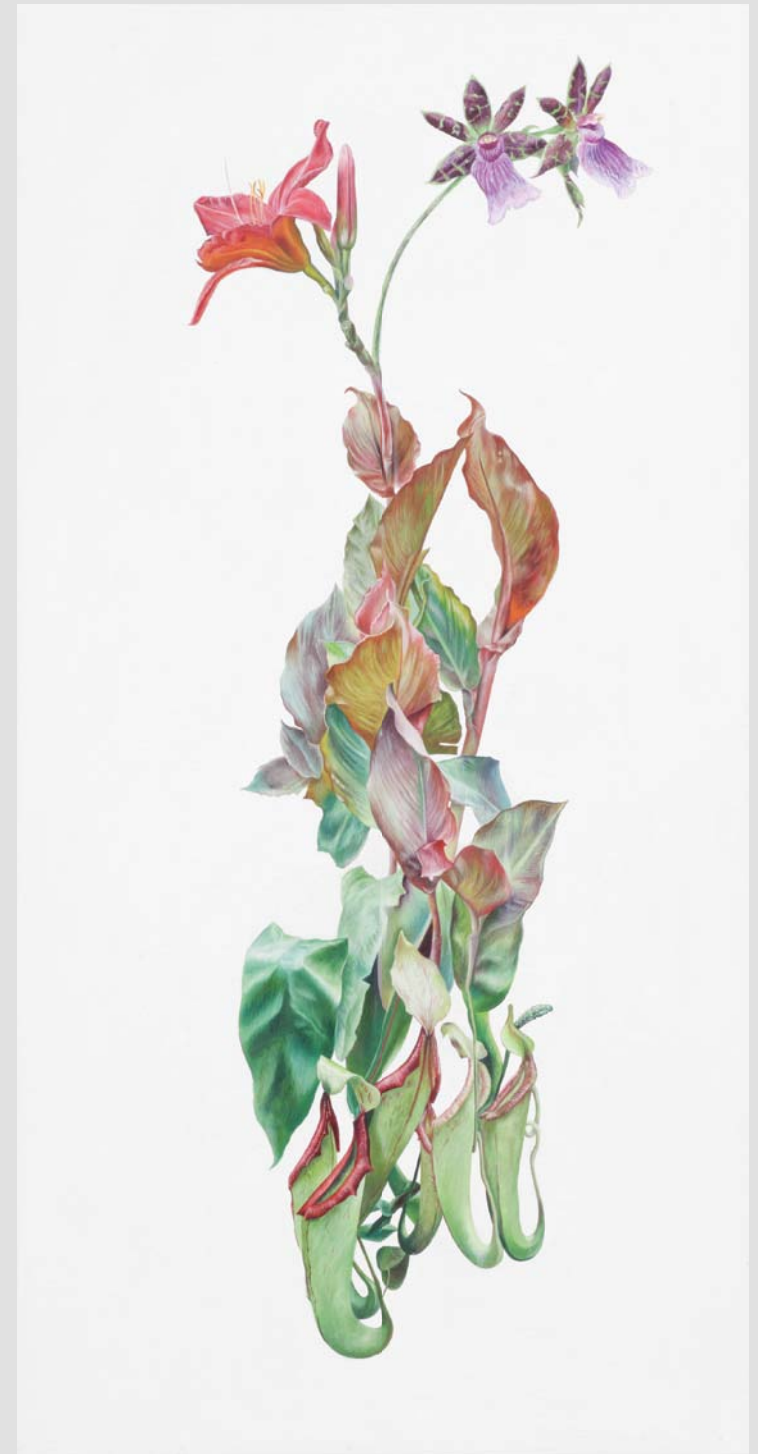




bathed in a sharp light cutting the image, making the image, at an angle of about 45° from top left, while in another work these elements are joined by a gourd at bottom left, and four dead birds hanging by their beaks in ascending order of size from left to right so that the last, an immense duck, part obscures the gherkin, all cut by the same harsh brightness. Are they an allegory of indifference, of painting's indifference to its subject, do they symbolise the aridity of easy plenitude? That they

seem to proceed by accretion at first seems to differentiate them from Mark Fairnington, who leads us to believe that he, on the contrary, has subtracted something from the scene, and that, maybe, this is the mise-en-scène itself. Once, in modern art, the transparency of collage and montage was the sign of a certain ethical and political value, called reflexivity, self-reflection; and Mark Fairnington, in taking it from the image that started out from it, turns this virtue over into the realm of the uncanny. The circle of vision and reflection spirals out of control and puzzles reflexivity; between Mark Fairnington and Cotan integument and undoing turn around one another without a resolution.

The Insect Eating Plant



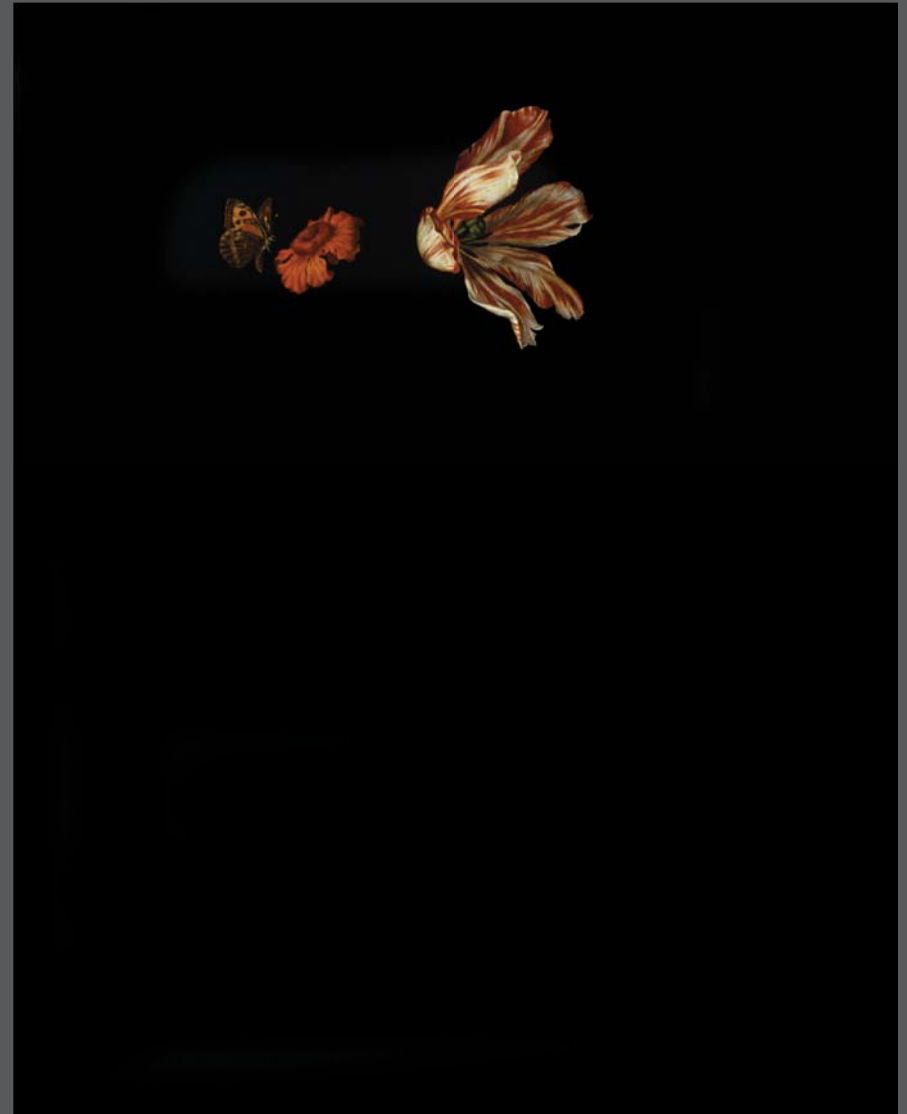
As in *Dead Leaves* and then *Flirt*, indeed; the dead leaves, like so much of the foliage or the wings and feathers in this work, other than where they are schematised and flattened, flirt with the space of a light that has been reduced to a necessity; curling in and out of nothing, each foreshortened fragment becomes improbable.



As does this last tulip brought out of the beginning of the Dutch eighteenth century, where its unfathomable gradations of luminescence and form once articulated the complex procedures of combination, of plant with plant, of plant with fruit with insect life or reptiles, with subtle transformations of the dark and darker still tones of background, of glazes that play microscopic games with the source, direction and emergence of light. This tulip, with its almost obscene companions, reminds us of what it now hides us from, in a suspended and unending satisfaction of what we can never have, have back.

Wherefore if god so clothe the grass, which is today in the field, and tomorrow shall be cast into the furnace: shall he not much more do the same unto you, o ye of little faith?

Flirt (tortoiseshell)



Mark Fairington

ONE PERSON EXHIBITIONS

- 2011 *Flora*, Oliver Sears Gallery, Dublin
2010 *Bull Market*, Bury St Edmunds Art Gallery, Suffolk
2009 *Private Collection*, Galerie Peter Zimmermann, Mannheim
2008 Galerie Peter Zimmermann, Mannheim
2007 *Dynasty*, Art Agents, Hamburg
2006 *The Raft*, Fred (London)
2004 Galerie Peter Zimmermann, Mannheim
Wunderkammer II, Wunderkammer I, Kunsthalle Mannheim
Artlab, Imperial College, London
2003 *The Hummingbird Tree*, Mobile Home Gallery, London
2002 *Dead or Alive*, Oxford University Museum of Natural History
Dead or Alive, Harewood House, Leeds
2001 *Staying Alive*, Mobile Home, London
2000 *Specimen*, Gallery Axel Thieme, Darmstadt
Mantidae, Oxford University Museum
Ace Gallery, Los Angeles
1999 *Peepshow*, Mobile Home, London
1998 Gallery Axel Thieme, Darmstadt
Heavier Than Air, Imperial War Museum, London
1997 Todd Gallery, London

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2010 *Blood Tears Faith Doubt*, Courtauld Gallery, The Courtauld Institute of Art including Andrea Mantegna, Polidoro da Caravaggio, Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo, Adam Chodzko, Siobhan Hapaska, Grayson Perry
Profusion, Calke Abbey Derbyshire, including Johanna Billing, Karla Black, Marcel Broodthaers, Lucy Clout, Clem Crosby, Jimmie Durham, Jack Strange, Martino Gamper, Roger Hiorns, John Plowman, Daniel Silver, Robert Smithson
2009 *The Artist's Studio*, Compton Verney, including Art & Language, John Bratby, Eduard Burne-Jones, Albrecht Durer, Andrew Grassie, Eric Racilius, Paula Rego, Rembrandt van Rijn, Joseph Mallord William Turner. Touring to the Sainsbury Centre, Norwich
A Duck for Mr Darwin, Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, including Tania Kovats, Dorothy Cross, Mark Dion, Charles Avery, Marcus Coates and Conrad Shawcross. Touring to the Mead Gallery, Warwick Arts Centre, University of Warwick
2008 *War and Medicine*, Wellcome Trust London, touring to The Museum of Hygiene, Dresden
Darwin's Canopy, Natural History Museum, including Christine Borland, Dorothy Cross, Tanya Kovats, Alison Turnbull, United Visual Artists, Mark Wallinger, Richard Wentworth, Rachel Whiteread and Richard Woods
2007 *Bird Watching* curated by Tanya Rumpff including Lothar Baumgarten, Mark Dion, Kiki Smith

- Bloedmoo*, The Historic Museum Rotterdam, including Thomas Grünfeld, William Wegman, Wim Delvoye
Bloody Beautiful, Gallery Ron Mandos, Rotterdam
2005 *Blumenstück. Künstlers Glück*, Museum Morsbroich, Leverkusen
A history of flower painting including James Ensor, Claude Monet, Marc Quinn, Fiona Rae, Gerhard Richter
Infallible in Search of the Real George Eliot, Hatton Gallery, Newcastle including Jordan Baseman, Le Ecole de Burrows et Bob Smith, Cullinan + Richards Artlab, Volker Eichelmann/Roland Rust, Ian Kiaer, Eve Sussman, Roxy Walsh
2004 *John Moores 23*, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool
Fabulous Beasts, The Natural History Museum, London with Giles Revell
The Goat, Medieval Modern, with Olivier Richon

BOOKS AND EDITIONS

- 2009 *The Artist's Studio*, Edited by Giles Waterfield, Hogarth Arts and Compton Verney, ISBN 978-0-9554063-3-1
A Duck for Mr Darwin, Evolutionary Thinking and the Struggle to Exist, Baltic, ISBN 0-00-867530-9
2008 *Arkive City*, University of Ulster, Belfast, ISBN 978-1-899377-30-5
Bloedmooi/Bloody Beautiful, Historical Museum Rotterdam, 6/40 1000.2718786
2006 *Experience and Experiment*, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, ISBN 1-903080-05-03
2005 *Mark Fairington*, Galerie Peter Zimmermann, ISBN 3-980835-25-1
Insect Poetics, edited by Eric Brown, University of Minnesota
Art and Science, Sian Ede, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation
Blumenstück Künstlers Glück, Museum Morsbroich, Leverkusen,
Infallible, In Search of the Real George Eliot, ARTicle Press, ISBN 1-873352-83-2
2004 *John Moores 23*, Walker Art Gallery, ISBN 1-902700-28-7
2003 *Transmission Portfolio*, Sheffield Hallam University
Transmission: Speaking and Listening Volume 2, Sheffield Hallam University/ Site Gallery, ISBN 1-8999-2626-7
Experiment: conversations in art and science, The Wellcome Trust, ISBN 1-84129-043-2
2002 *Dead or Alive*, Black Dog Publishing, ISBN 0-901033-63-5
The Human Zoo, Hatton Gallery, ISBN 0-7017-0157-9
Like gold dust, Angel Row Gallery, ISBN 0-905634-578
2000 *Realism in 20th Century Painting*, Brendan Prendeville, Thames & Hudson, ISBN 0-500-20336-9
1998 *Postcards on Photography – photorealism and the reproduction*, Cambridge Darkroom Gallery, ISBN 0-94-75-32-250
Heavier than Air, Imperial War Museum, text by Simon Morely ISBN 1-901623-09-2

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