



**RACHEL FENNER**



*Druidston Beach*

30 x 40.5 cms

Rachel Fenner has had a substantially varied career, a career which has also taken place (in the main) outside London. Her imaginative sculpture for public places, notably in the area around Southampton and Southampton itself, have occupied that creative territory which looks both to representation and abstraction. Suggestive of landscape, fossils, organic forms, geological formations, she has integrated work recognisable as discrete pieces of sculpture with an original approach not only to landscape, but to the notion of the cultivated garden.

At school Rachel Fenner had formally studied both music and the history of architecture, and subsequently divided her four years at Wimbledon School of Art between painting and sculpture. During her time here she spent an intensive six weeks painting landscape in Wales. Then at the Royal College of Art she was a student when Bernard Meadows was the professor, and she developed further, a style for sculpture inimitably her own, full of high spirits expressed in imaginative baroque flourishes.

Throughout her career, whatever the demands imposed within the personal and professional framework within which she has worked, she had drawn. Drawing has always been of importance.

It is easy to say, and I myself plead guilty, that 'good' artists and their art will always surface: yes, perhaps that is so, but there is by implication often for some a period of submersion. Rachel Fenner's own early pioneering work as a town artist is in stimulating contrast to her newly kindled desire to make works which are more private and intimate than were possible in her public career. In the midst of success the occasional difficulties encountered with bureaucrats and clients (any public artist





*Druidston Cliffs*

23.3 x 16 cms

has by the nature of their profession such tales to tell in spite of and sometimes because of goodwill all round), and at least once with a difference of opinions between council and client which affected the work, meant that Rachel Fenner had to be a more sophisticated negotiator in a new field. And the work of town artists and their contemporary public sculpture, environments and installations, which meet the public in open spaces, schools, parks, and so on, is a relatively new situation in Britain. Paradoxically, Rachel Fenner's own public work has meant a lack of exposure to the art world and its specialist public. She has met the larger public, her work has probably been encountered by measurably far more of us than if she had been contained in the gallery circuit; yet she has dropped out of sight in art world terms, however narrow these may be.

Thus the present exhibition is in a real sense a re-discovery, a return to the domestic in the finest sense. But into the domestic the artist brings in her small sculptures a sense of the expansive and the fantastic. These sculptures, partly made of found objects, and of wood turned and shaped to resemble things we might have found — fragments of furniture, fences, frames — wrought into dreamscapes, suggesting an oddly poignant grandeur on a domestic scale. The detail is as intense as her early work, and it is this sense of detail that informed her public work as well, the mosaics, pavings, gates, courtyards, environmental and landscape installations, sometimes covering several acres.

Conversely, now that Rachel Fenner had made the decision to work on a small scale, she translates that sense of the detail informing the whole, and that sense of the whole being even more than the



*Pembrokeshire Landscape*

18 x 22.5 cms

sum of its parts, which are talents and skills emphasised by a decade and more of working on such a large scale.

Indeed, her ambition, wholly justified, is to conceive and realise even larger land art projects. However, for several years she has returned not only to making individual sculptures on a domestic scale, but to very robust yet affecting landscape painting in a variety of media. The nature of her public work, always site-specific, ensured an ever finer honing of her powers of visualisation — and observation. These now inform her landscape paintings, in particular scenes from Pembrokeshire — St Davids and St Brides — areas she visits with unfailing regularity at all seasons. As she has said, “it is the ruggedness and ancient quality” that irresistibly attracts her to the Welsh coast.

That “ancient quality” informed her earliest sculptures of three decades ago: it is an invented archaeology, as though the artist had come across some souvenir of an imagined civilisation of the past, a past that informs the present.

It is the sense of the past informing the present, and both together becoming the future that also gives her quiet landscapes a luminous intensity: old coastlines, an area between sea and land, as the artist herself explores the invented structures of abstraction married to the interpretation of the observed world. Light is omnipresent, and an individual and persuasive presentation of the ceaselessly changing island sky, enough away from city lights to escape distortion. The richness of the landscape, and the imaginative richness of the man-made structure meet in Rachel Fenner’s art.





*Winged Offertory Box*

72 x 54 x 32 cms

# DUNCAN CAMPBELL

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CONTEMPORARY ART

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