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BRIDGET MCCRUM THE CONFERENCE OF THE BIRDS

MESSUMS

Bridget **McCrum**

منطق الطير

Mantıq-uṭ-Ṭayr

*Attar of Nishapur*

Bridget **McCrum**

The Conference of the Birds

MESSUMS WILTSHIRE



I have always enjoyed Bridget's sculpture for the way that her work seems to walk alongside ancient artefacts and keep them in good company. I like that even when a source of inspiration is explicitly revealed, as it is here, there is no sense of a slipping from the sublime to the prosaic, rather the everyday seems to be suddenly given an added texture of time and a natural sense of creative evolution.

It is typical of the person that Bridget is comfortable with her sources; like Henry Moore identifying the Chacmool as a point of reference and inspiration, the movement and shape of birds has been Bridget's guiding star. This exhibition brings together a never seen before collection of drawings that explore movement and the sweeping arc of both bird wing and hand across paper. They complement the sculptures, and we are very much looking forward to installing these at Messums Wiltshire. Directly to the other end of the building is a Studio that belonged to Elisabeth Frink. It was once in Dorset at Woolland and is now reimagined here in our barn.

I suspect that neither would have envisaged their work or studios being exhibited in a thirteenth century barn, but history is about stories and this building, built by a powerful woman in her day, seems to resonate with the presentation of these remarkable works.

Thank you to Bridget, Will Gompertz and the brilliant team at Messums.

*Johnny Messum*



# Bridget McCrum

A little while back, maybe three or four years ago, I was invited to speak at a sculpture exhibition in the west of England. My informal lecture was to be one of many over the course of a weekend celebrating an outdoor show of contemporary British sculptors. I can't recall exactly what I spoke about (nor, I should imagine, can anybody in the audience) but I do vividly remember another talk given shortly after mine. It was by one of the exhibiting artists and was far superior to anything I could, or did, muster.

The speaker was Bridget McCrum, a sculptor whose work I knew, but not intimately. Like most artists, she wasn't exactly champing at the bit to stand up in front of a yurt full of strangers. She didn't have any of the pro-speaker's accoutrements. She was visibly nervous, there was a certain unfamiliarity with her slides ("now, why did I put that one in?"), and the talk was peppered with more "umms" and "ahhs" and "sorrys" than you'd hear at a Ryanair check-in. But you know what? It mattered not a jot. One hour later, we who had packed into the recently erected canvas tent until its seams creaked, were pleading for her to continue for another hour.

That didn't happen. There were other talks planned. So, we mobbed her instead. Selfies, questions, congratulations, more selfies. We gushed, she blushed. For Bridget, it was the satisfactory culmination of a dreaded engagement. For me, it was a revelation.

I had heard a story about a woman who put her ambition to be an artist on hold until she'd raised her children. Who, in mid-life, made her first tentative steps in the art of carving stone, something she had wanted to do since the age of 5: an unusual aspiration for a little girl born blind in one eye. There was, she said, a fortuitous thread connecting her younger self - a war-time evacuee - to the artist she became thirty-five years later. That thread was Elisabeth Frink, the British modernist sculptor with whom McCrum enjoyed a life-long friendship. The two first met at school in Exmouth. Bridget was

six, an exile from the Blitz in London; Lis was ten. They were horse mad, spending evenings drawing equine figures until it was time for bed. They stayed in touch over the following decades, with Frink encouraging her old friend to try her hand at carving. And when Bridget did so, Lis continued to support, not only with words but also with deeds.

Bridget's husband, Bobby, was more confident of his wife's talent than she was herself. While she was away exploring the ancient landscapes of Somalia, he packed up two of her earliest sculptures and entered them for the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition. Bridget would have been horrified. Who was she to be exhibiting at the venerated RA? Bobby knew better. And, so did Elisabeth Frink, who, on seeing Bottom (1984) installed at the RA asked her old friend to carve her a version of the nude lower torso for her own garden. Lis made only one recommendation: make it bigger!

Although Bridget has since moved away from human figuration in favour of birds, Bottom (a bronze edition, one of which is in the Messums show) fits into the overarching aesthetics of her practice. There is the simplified form that allows the eye to comprehend the piece as a single coherent whole, like a passage in a Bach Cello Suite. Less is more, no fuss. Balance is all. A sweeping line fades and then reappears as you move around the piece, invoking the optical effects the artist experienced among the dunes of the Arabian deserts. And with this comes a sense of rhythm and dynamism, of an object in motion, as light and shadow and perspective generate a kinetic energy. Such things are in the DNA of a Bridget McCrum sculpture or painting or drawing.

In the years since Bridget gave that talk in a tent, I have come to know her work a great deal better. As with most art of note, the more you look, the more you see; to the point where the invisible becomes visible. It seems to me that whatever medium she is working in, Bridget is as interested in the

negative space as she is in her own interventions in the act of rendering a figure. Study her charcoal drawings of birds in flight and you will notice that the raw surface of the paper is far more than a plane on which to place a picture – it is playing an active part in the illusion: a collaborator in the creation of an image of a bird swooping through space.

The same applies to her sculptures. That they are elegant and graceful and sensual is plain to see, but what of the space around them? It is not a disinterested bystander. It has become part of the art, a contextual protagonist: an altered environment. The relationship between carved stone and landscape makes you 'read' each differently. This is why positioning is so important to Bridget: the surrounding physical space is part of her sculpture.

This, she explained in her talk. She showed us photographs. Some were of her working outside in the grounds of her house, which sits high above the River Dart in Devon, giving the artist a bird's eye view of the birds circling below. Her slides reminded us of the photos of Barbara Hepworth carving stone in her wonderfully terse A Pictorial Autobiography. Clearly, Hepworth has been an influence and inspiration to Bridget as a sculptor and also, perhaps, as a woman working in what has long been considered a man's world. Hepworth's muse was the rolling hills of Yorkshire, McCrum's, the ancient objects of Mesopotamia: both artists finding their voice from bringing together the very old with the contemporary.

The Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi pursued a similar path, albeit from a different starting point. Bridget was trained as a painter at art school, Brancusi was taught wood carving. He left for Paris, she for a life as a Navy officer's wife. They eventually arrived at the same conceptual place, with Brancusi leading the way, leaving a barely trodden path to follow. It was Brancusi who made the direct carving of materials – stone, wood, marble

– fashionable in the eyes of the Parisian Avant-garde at the beginning of the Twentieth Century. It was Brancusi who showed what truths could be revealed when ancient stylised forms were combined with modern abstraction. And it was Brancusi who made the streamlined figure of a bird in space of a subject for contemporary sculpture. But it was Bridget McCrum that set the bird free.

Brancusi's birds tended to be static, Bridget's are in motion: a Merlin on the tip of its wing, a raptor bearing down on its prey. Even when not in flight, her birds harbour a sense of imminent action: an awakening, or nesting, or – in the case of her knife birds – extravagant stretching. Some surfaces are rough, others are smooth. Some have been 'scribbled' upon, others are left untouched. Your senses become enlivened by the constantly changing nature of the material. Energy abounds in her sleek silhouettes.

Bridget ended her talk with images of the inspirational pieces and places she had seen and been on her many travels around the Mediterranean. Archaic knives and age-old axe-heads, giant rocks of salt and endless hills of sand; Egyptian hieroglyphics and Somalian artefacts. They are all there to be discovered in her work, which she continues to make day-in-day-out, even though she is now in her mid-eighties.

I was lucky enough to spend a few minutes with her once the crowds had cleared and the yurt was empty. She still looked a little worried. I was surprised, her lecture had gone so well. I asked what was troubling her. She said she had a lot of work to do for a big show in a colossal new space. Where, I enquired. In Wiltshire she said. Oh, what's it called. Messums, she said.

She pulled it off, of course. And will do again. Welcome back Bridget.

*Will Gompertz*





# DRAWINGS

1  
**Flight III, 2019**  
Charcoal on paper  
56 x 76cm



2  
**Flight I, 2019**  
Charcoal on paper  
56 x 76cm







3

**Flight II, 2019**

Charcoal on paper

56 x 76cm



4

**Flight V, 2019**

Charcoal on paper

56 x 76cm

5  
**Flight VI, 2019**  
Charcoal on paper  
76 x 56cm





6

**Flight VIII, 2019**

Charcoal on paper

56 x 76cm



7  
**Flight IX, 2018**  
Charcoal on paper  
56 x 76cm





8

**Flight X, 2019**

Charcoal on paper

56 x 76cm



9  
**Flight VI, 2020**  
Charcoal on paper  
101.5 x 76cm







# PAINTINGS



10

**Flight over Clouds 1, 2018**

Acrylic on blackboard paint & gesso

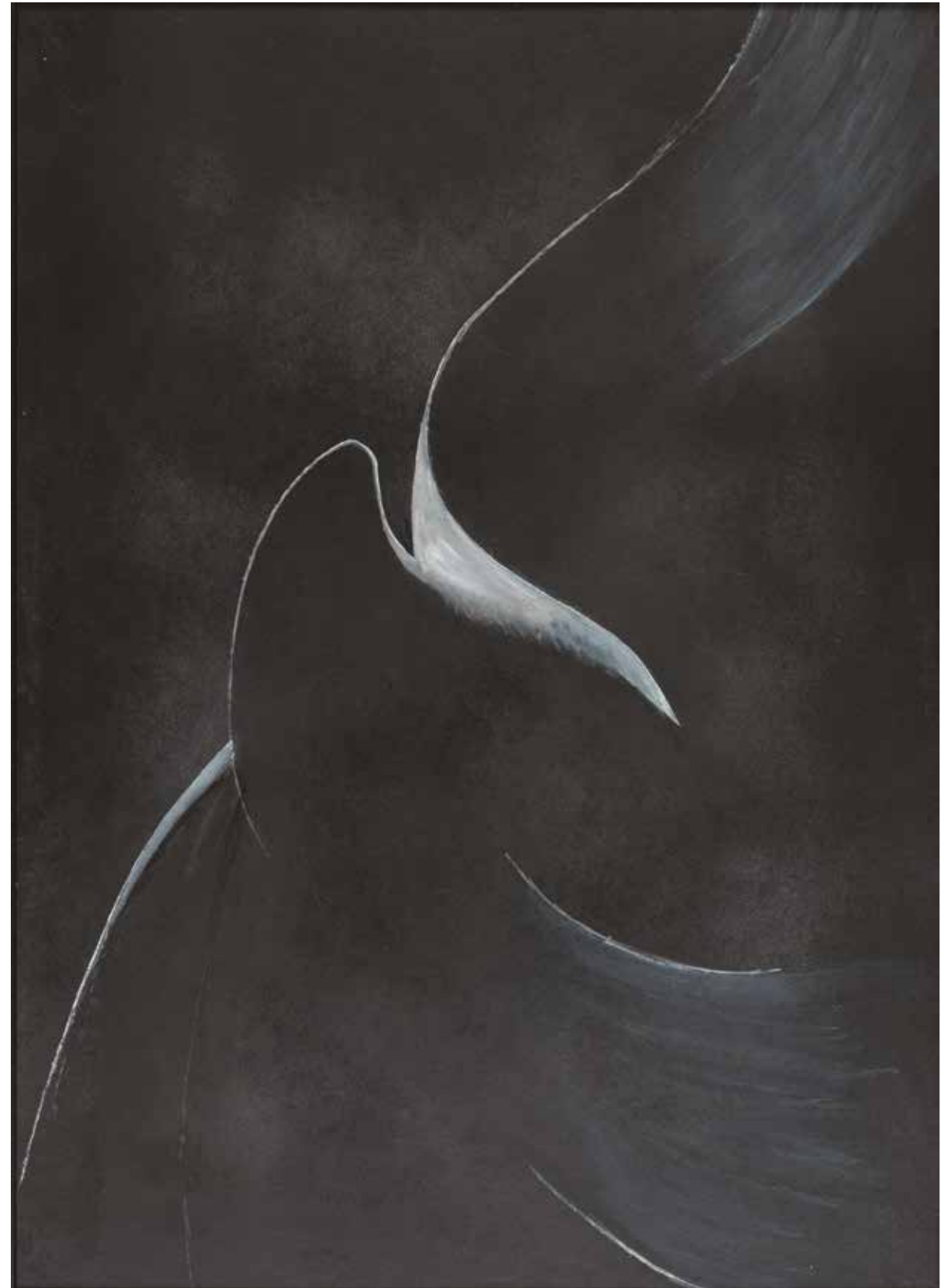
52 x 54cm

11

**Flight over Clouds 2, 2019**

Acrylic on blackboard paint & gesso

79 x 53cm



12

**Flight over Clouds 3, 2019**

Acrylic on blackboard paint & gesso  
49 x 63cm





13

**Flight over Clouds 7, 2019**

Acrylic on blackboard paint & gesso

60 x 79cm





14

**Flight over Clouds 8, 2019**

Acrylic on blackboard paint & gesso

60 x 79cm

15

**Flight over Clouds 9, 2019**

Acrylic on blackboard paint & gesso

60 x 79cm



16  
Temple of Baal, Palmyra, Syria, 2008  
Oil on canvas  
109 x 80cm







17  
**Flight over Gozo, 2008**  
Mixed media on paper  
76 x 56cm

18  
Temple of Baal, Palmyra, Syria, 2010  
Mixed media on paper  
76 x 56cm





19

**Morning Light, Cittadella Gozo, 2010**

Oil on canvas

100 x 140cm





STONE





20

**The Eagles Claw, 2020**

Carrara Marble & Kilkenny limestone

155 x 59 x 32cm







21  
Shell Bird, 2020  
Carrara Marble  
52 x 66 x 12cm





22

**Awakening, 2014**

Carrara Marble

105 x 51 x 23cm



23

**Scroll, 2014**

Carrara Marble & Kilkenny limestone

203 x 64 x 25cm



24  
**Mesopotamia, 2017**  
Carrara Marble & Kilkenny limestone  
61 x 56 x 21cm



25  
**Gharfur I, 2016**  
Kilkenny limestone  
34 x 24 x 20cm







26

**Gharfur II, 2017**

Kilkenny limestone

83 x 41 x 41cm



27  
Nesting Bird, 2020  
Cararra Marble  
16 x 37.5 x 20cm





B R O N Z E



28  
**Bottom, 1991**  
4/4  
Bronze  
46 x 48 x 70cm





29  
Water Bird, 2002  
5/9  
Bronze  
24 x 24 x 20cm





30  
Java Axe Bird, 2019  
1/9  
Bronze  
66 x 46 x 8cm



**31**  
**Uccillinis, 2019**  
1/9  
Bronze  
33 x 27 x 8cm  
20 x 24 x 8cm



32  
**Spring Bird, 2014**  
6/9  
Bronze  
18 x 43 x 10cm

33  
Longtail Bird, 1997  
6/9  
Bronze  
13 x 14 x 43cm





34  
Colly Birds, 2009  
8/9  
Bronze  
18 x 36 x 38cm



35  
Spirit Bird Maquette I, 2009  
8/9  
Bronze  
31 x 30 x 4cm





36  
Zenobia, 2017  
6/9  
Bronze  
33 x 31 x 18cm







*Merlin* (2011) embodies McCrum's lyrical abstractions of living form to exhibit both the motion and elegance of a falcon in flight. Commissioned by Rolls Royce for the site of its aero-engine factory in Filton, Bristol and named after their prestigious aero-engine, which first ran in 1933 and powered the indomitable Spitfire, *Merlin* is still one of McCrum's most distinguished sculptures.

At the time of its completion, a series of 6 bronze editions were made each 2m high and locating onto a single point. *Merlin* is typical of McCrum's lifelong study of birds in motion, in that its wings appear to effortlessly shear the sky.

37

**Merlin, 2009**

5/9

Bronze

218 x 95 x 22cm



38  
**Duck Weight, 2012**  
3/9  
Bronze  
42 x 48 x 41cm





39  
**Chorus, 2012**  
3/9  
Bronze  
21 x 19 x 8cm



40  
Crescent Birds Maquette, 2015  
7/9  
Bronze  
70 x 70 x 20cm



41  
Crescent Birds, 2016  
3/6  
Bronze  
210 x 210 x 31cm





42

**Solstice, 2016**

1/9

Bronze

280 x 46 x 18cm



43  
**Sleeping Bird, 2010**  
3/9  
Bronze  
90 x 110 x 75cm







44  
Frieze, 2020  
1/6  
Embossed print  
27 x 85cm

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Steve Russell and Stephanie Rennie

