



Green Woodpecker III (suspended) with Still Life on reverse

Isabel Rawsthorne

Not on display

Title/Description: Green Woodpecker III (suspended) with Still Life on reverse

Artist/Maker: Isabel Rawsthorne

Born: 1946 c. - 1947 c.

Object Type: Painting

Measurements: 520 mm x 750/720 mm (framed h. 650 x w. 830 mm)

Accession Number: 50697

Production Place: France

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Green Woodpecker III (suspended) with Still Life on reverse features two works from amongst the earliest surviving paintings of Isabel Rawsthorne (1912-1992). *Still Life* is similar in style and subject matter to another work in the Sainsbury Collection which has a study of a green woodpecker on its reverse (50698). [1] Unlike that study, however, *Green Woodpecker III* is a finished work.

The bird is suspended by a foot to hang upside down in the centre of a white sheet. It was completed in gouache, so the paint surface is smooth and flat, yet the brushstrokes remain painterly and defined, with the backing sheet executed in rough layers of white and cream. The bird's wings, splayed out in an upside-down crucifixion pose, are built up with hundreds of brushstrokes in browns, yellows and greens. The feathered texture of the body is conveyed with layers of small marks in pale greens and yellows, and the red and blue details of the plumage are painted with striking accuracy.

Rawsthorne frequently painted animal skeletons or corpses from life, and the detail of this painting suggests this was the case on this occasion. Carol Jacobi, who has written extensively on Rawsthorne, argues that this painting was the artist's first masterpiece. [2] She draws attention to the fact that the painting was created during a time of great personal uncertainty for Rawsthorne. Various images of birds and harpies were often understood as stand-ins for Rawsthorne herself so the defeated animal, strung up on an empty sheet reflects the uncertainty of her future. At the same time, however, the painting can also reflect issues beyond the biography of its maker. Completed in a particularly cold winter, amidst the threat of nuclear war, the work seems to symbolise the danger and uncertainty of the age. The local population of green woodpeckers, Jacobi notes, had been recently decimated by the freezing temperatures so it may seem that this bird is the symbol of a greater loss: just one victim of a world that had recently torn itself apart in global conflict and was on the verge of doing so again. [3]

The fact that the other work in the collection (50698) depicts a woodpecker in flight may limit the extent to which this interpretation could be extended to other works of similar subject matter. Clearly Rawsthorne was working in an imaginative mode as well as working from life. The different approaches in these two woodpecker paintings does, however, suggest that these works were made during a period of creative experimentation in which Rawsthorne was developing her artistic voice. Rawsthorne would continue to paint birds throughout her career and her depictions of this subject would go on to become more skeletal, and often more conceptual, as her meditations on the difference between the living and the lifeless became more sophisticated. As much as this work epitomises Rawsthorne's early preoccupations and brims with poetic subtlety, it can also be viewed as the first work in career-long meditation on mortality.

Georgia Kelly, February 2023

[1] For further discussion of Rawsthorne's work in the genre of still life, please see the catalogue entry for *Still Life with Wine Glass with Green Woodpecker IV (in flight) on reverse* (1946-7).

[2] Carol Jacobi, *Out of the Cage: the Art of Isabel Rawsthorne* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2021) p. 179.

[3] Jacobi, *Out of the Cage*, pp. 179-181.

Further Reading

Suzanne Doyle, Isabel Rawsthorne 1912-1992: Paintings, Drawings and Designs (Harrogate: Mercer Art Gallery, 1997).

Carol Jacobi, *Out of the Cage: the Art of Isabel Rawsthorne* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2021).

Carol Jacobi, 'A Kind of Cold War Feeling' in *British Art, 1945-52* in *British Art in the Nuclear Age*, ed. by Caroline Jolivet (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 19-50.

Calvin Winner, 'Alberto Giacometti in Britain' in *Alberto Giacometti: A Line through Time* ed. by Claudia Milburn and Calvin Winner (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp.54-81.
