

## **Across the Equinox – Mandy Haggith**

**An exhibition of poetry and sculpture by Michael Longley and Helen Denerley  
at Rhue Gallery until 29 August 2018**

'Collaboration', says Michael Longley, the Irish poet, 'is the opposite of loneliness.' He sits with his back to the window, on the sill of which a metal trout, with pennies for scales, swims beneath a fragment of a poem stencilled on the glass:

'I am the trout that vanishes  
Between the stepping stones.'

On the white walls of this airy upstairs space in Rhue Gallery, shadows are cast by a graceful throng of scrap metal animals and birds, all made by sculptor Helen Denerley, accompanied by and embodying Michael Longley's words. He says, 'this is one of the nicest things that has ever happened to me'.

The exhibition title comes from an early poem, 'Persephone', in which: 'The weasel and ferret, the stoat and fox / Move hand in glove across the equinox.' In this exhibition the words and sculptures seem 'hand in glove', in conversation with each other. Both poet and sculptor clearly share a similar aesthetic of joy, of clarity, of uncluttered truthfulness. In both of their work there is a sharpness and boldness but without any bombast or ego. They give the animals and birds space simply to be.

The real wonder of this exhibition is the circularity of Helen's joyful renditions of Michael's words, and his delighted revelling in her sculptural process, whether it's through the relish with which he binds a 'sprocket' or a 'swingle tree' into a line of poetry or points out that 'amalgamated' is precisely the right word to use for what they have done together. He reads to each of the sculptures in turn the poem or fragment that inspired them, to ensure that they all 'feel welcome'. Highlighted by his words, his voice, they come even more to life, so that it doesn't seem to be remotely over the top when he starts to use language like 'divine creatures' or 'visitations of spirits'. They are indeed more, far more, than the animals they represent: the dipper, 'wild and melodious' or the stoat 'that dances /Around the erratic boulder' are not just present, but bring with them a sense of time cycling, of friendships and inspirations and a sense of how we are all embedded in nature. These animals are our kin.

Michael Longley calls Helen Denerley a genius and pays tribute to three 'soul epiphanies' in her work. Firstly, there are the animals themselves, brought so vividly to life. 'When has a wren looked so much like a wren?' he asks, and it is true. You can imagine you can hear the little metal bird singing with its huge, unlikely voice. Secondly, there are the workers and labourers who made and toiled with the machines that form the raw materials for this work, all of which is constructed from bits of scrap metal: former tractors, ploughs, mowers and motorbikes. Then thirdly there is Helen's own soul, somehow, without getting in the way, present in each piece. Whether it's the big giraffes at the top of Leith walk in Edinburgh, the stoat about to nibble the ear of the audience member sitting next to it, or the donkey waiting quietly for us outside the door, these animals are all living manifestations of Helen herself, utterly distinctive and recognisably hers, shining with her friendly alchemy.

Michael Longley is one of those rare poets who is always easy to understand. He writes with simplicity and clarity, which is a kind of generosity. We don't have to work hard to piece together meaning or navigate among obscure references. So we can just read, or listen, and enjoy, and afterwards something profound seems to have happened; a breeze has blown through the room, through our minds, and swept away the cobwebs. It's like drinking clear water from a mountain stream, seeing 'a rainbow mirrored where a heron stands'. Helen Denerley is one rainbow and the other is Michael Longley. Get yourself to Rhue gallery and enjoy the view.