

To Unexplained Day, 2002, (Detail), Ink on paper, 100 x 143 cm

# The SIGNificance of Writing IAN HUNT

'The dream is an intelligence of form that holds, moves, stimulates and shapes us. When I enter the world of dreams I am deconstructed, as I am transformed from the one who holds the internal world in my mind to the one who is experientially inside the dramaturgy of the other. Gathered and processed by the dream events, I live in a place where I seem to have been held before . . .'

**Christopher Bollas,**  
*Being a Character*, 1993, p.13

The drawings by Simon Lewty assembled for this exhibition give viewers a chance to see the consistencies that run through his work over a period of almost five decades.

These include the significance of dreamwork, which has been both a direct source material for the artist

and also a deep formal analogy for his work. These drawings, manuscripts, images, graffiti and narrative fragments are exceptional in the way they convey the unexpected shifts of view in dream experience, and the complex dramaturgy of dreams – where we are held within a narrative that an inaccessible part of our minds is telling. Lewty's long-term commitment is not so much to dream-pictures on the surrealist model, but to complex modes of self-experiencing, of being both in and outside a represented event, story, place or time.

*The Men Who Lie in the Road* (1991, Leamington Spa Art Gallery & Museum) shows this clearly, and is also an example of a period of Lewty's work that remains best known. The peculiar tall format comprises a number of separate panels, and at the bottom right is a view of a field and what seem to be pine trees, traditionally planted as boundary markers. The view of the field is quite different in character to the other images. But we cannot be sure it is the end or conclusion of the story, or whether it comes 'before' or 'after' the other images showing built structures, roads, walls and a mandrake root.

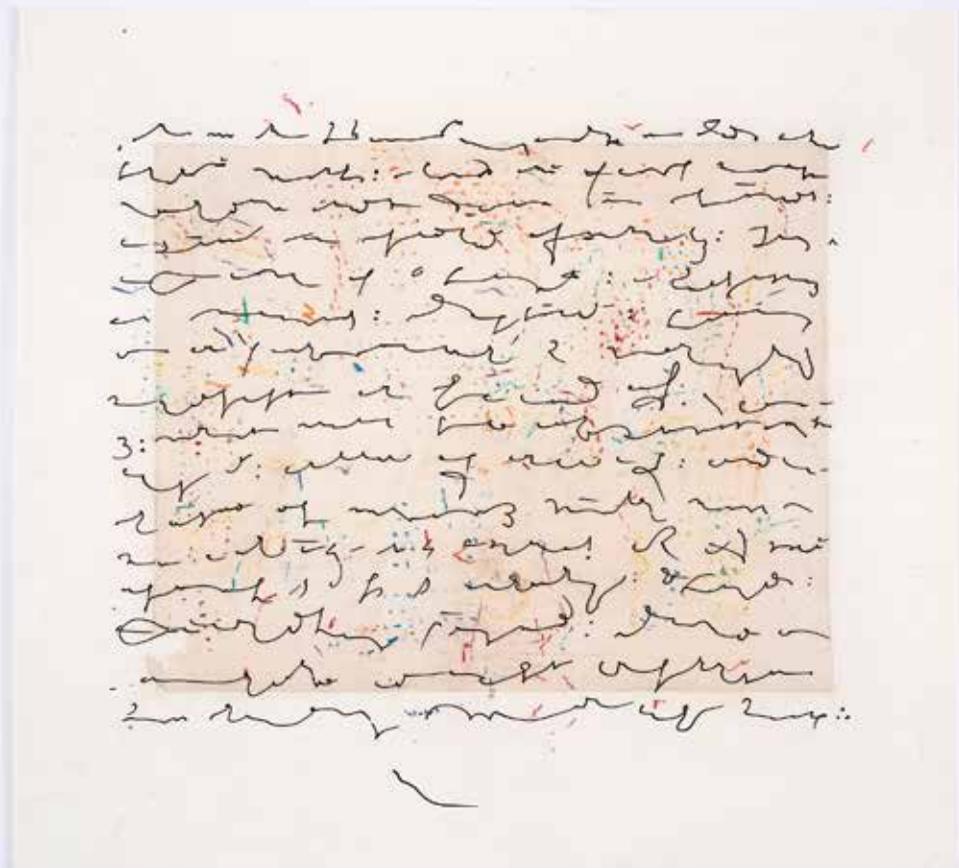
The movement of the eye around the other panels follows the running legs (with no body on top, just a face) in a counter-clockwise movement, up to the horse and rider, a notional beginning point. Graffiti between and over the images adds additional complexities, suggesting that more than one author may be writing the story we still hope to find. Later works, from which image as such is no longer to be found, can work very similar effects simply from coloured script on a surface. The eye follows the strong habit of left to right consecutive reading, but circles back to the beginning, encountering disjunctions and repeated sequences, losing place and finding it again. It is a complex sense of relation to something inside and outside of oneself.

Lewty made an intriguing public statement in 1994, when he introduced a separate publication of his writings from Peter Larkin's Prest Roots Press: *'Cradles of the New* has the feeling of a tale, but the telling has been intruded upon, disrupted and overlaid. The characters echo the *dramatis personae* of my pictures: the mocker and the mocked, the staunch pilgrim, the old man, certain animals, "he" and "she". The



space of encounter. It may resemble a notary's agreement, summons, legal title or claim, written in a language we do not speak or read. It can be bluff and forbidding in its block-like arrangements of script, which our mind, seeking for points of contact, have to break into. It may be coded into historic forms of shorthand or handwriting styles that only palaeographers can read. But look again: Lewty's words can equally open out with almost complete limpidity, and the effect is like looking into a pool. The words frequently tell of everyday experiences, that are being related to us in as straightforward a way as possible. It is precisely in the shifts between obscurity and directness in his work that such unexpected power can be found. The knowing use of a language of VISION has the urgency of John Bunyan and other literature of revelation, but the experiences being processed are secular and familiar enough.

Looking at this work, it becomes apparent just how singular and remarkable Lewty's enterprise as an artist is. We are entitled to ask, what connection does it have to the wider currents of both art and culture in the period in which it has been made? Lewty's education and influences, and the complex ways in which his work was received in the 1980s as part of the figurative revival can only be hinted at here. (The testimonies, conversations and essays that can be found in the retrospective volume *The Self as a Stranger*, Black Dog Publishing, 2010, set out Lewty's development in more detail.) It can be stated, however, that the artist has both ploughed his own furrow and been strongly aware of contemporary developments of diverse kinds, from an



early enthusiasm for Dubuffet and Tàpies to land art and Joseph Beuys, through to discussions of the most innovative contemporary poetry and writing.

In some recent works, Shelton's 17th-century shorthand (or tachygraphy as it was first known – Lewty enjoys the connection here with the word *tache*, mark) is used to record the sound of waves. Can the sound of the sea be magically coded into script? Perhaps there is a hint here of the doctrine of signatures, which survives into our common era as a familiar childhood fantasy: that for each thing or phenomenon, there is, somewhere, a secret name.

When we describe someone as singular it is not always understood as

a term of praise, and it may be a polite way of saying that someone is rather odd. I mean it *strongly* as a term of praise, and suggest that Lewty's way of working and of involving us in his thinking and what we might call his 'world' – it is also ours – is an expert and original way of making us aware of what is unknown in ourselves. The singularity of Lewty's aesthetic thinking is as prominent in the work of the last twenty years, which is rightly emphasized by this selection, as it was in the first works by him that came to be widely exhibited in the 1980s. This is work that is not simply humming to itself but which also, without warning, SINGS.

