

CANDIDA STEVENS GALLERY

Press Release

IRENE LEES
BELOW THE SURFACE
Candida Stevens Gallery
13 April – 11 May 2019
Private View: Saturday 13 April, 2-4pm



Below The Surface is a long-awaited solo exhibition of drawings by British artist Irene Lees. Produced between 2011-2019 the show brings together two new bodies of work, inspired by both Pablo Picasso and Sylvia Plath, alongside selected drawings from the past decade.

Irene Lees' ever-questioning mind, her curiosity for human psychology, social history and injustice, is the driving force behind her work. Contained in these tightly conceived and intricately constructed drawings, is a strongly felt human emotion and spirit that filters through.



Through meticulous skill, research and application, she creates what she describes as her 'artwork essays'; Hand-drawn rhythmic loops or layers of text, in an almost digital like rendering, which tell the stories of her chosen subjects. Writer and critic, Laura Gascoigne, introduces the catalogue for Below The Surface, writing; "Where [Lees] senses social injustice, she will pick up a thread and follow it to the source of the trouble, like Theseus tracking the Minotaur through the maze. Her drawings are a record of these journeys, charged with the emotions felt en route. In contemporary conceptual art research can easily be uncoupled from visual imagination, but Lees' work is a perfect fusion of the two as she literally weaves the research into the image. Her work is conceptual in the true sense of the word: 'Every time I'm doing something, it has to have a meaning.'"

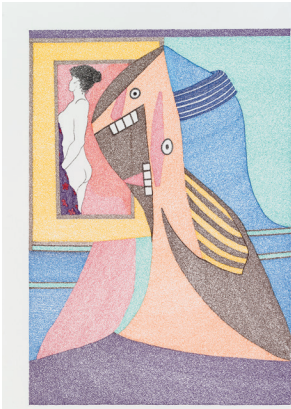
Injustices borne by women are a constant concern for this female artist, which we see in four of the five series; the Picasso series, the Boko Haram series, the History of Body Packaging and the Votes for women. Here we demonstrate in more detail the motivation behind the two new series.

PICASSO, HIS MUSES, MODELS AND MISTRESSES;

In this series, Irene Lees directs her considerable mastery with a pen towards exploring the social and cultural imbalances between the sexes. Through her method of creating hand drawn rhythmic loops or layers of text, brought about through meticulous skill in research and application, she examines the many tumultuous relationships of one of arts most renowned womanisers, Pablo Picasso. It is said that the artist changed his female companions as often as he changed his painting styles, yet so few of these women made it out of his orbit unscathed. Lees' addition to the original compositions include realistic depictions of each of these women, raising questions about why, despite the fact that most of these mistresses, models and muses were fundamentally inspirational in their own lives, they are obscured almost beyond recognition. A fact Lees uses to highlight what some consider to be an 'unpalatable truth' about the much-loved Spanish artist.

Having previously thought of the painter of Guernica as "a good socialist", Lees' eyes were opened by the discovery of his remark to Françoise Gilot: "For me there are only two kinds of women, goddesses and doormats". The more she read about the artist's models and mistresses, the more astonished she was at how he treated them "as one would any other commodity, like paint, crayons, an easel, food or clothing", rendering them unrecognisable in images that merely screamed 'Picasso'. In her new series of drawings in the master's style, she sets out to avenge them.





Picasso left later biographers to tell the stories of his women; by writing their stories into her images, Lees allows them to speak for themselves. She is not out to rewrite patriarchal history. "People say, take the monuments down. I say no: keep the monuments, but tell the story." Even so, she marvels at how for more than four decades Picasso "just replaced one mistress with another. In a way, it was like Russian dolls, popping them one inside the other."

SILVIA PLATH, THE BELL JAR

The origins of her new Bell Jar series lie further back, in a visit to the grave of Sylvia Plath in Heptonstall in the 1970s, when Lees, then a mother of four young children, struggled to fathom how a woman could kill herself and leave her children behind. In one drawing, a nude Plath stands suffocating under a glass bell jar; in another, a split fig evokes her vision of sitting in the crotch of a fig tree starving to death, unable to choose which fruit to pluck lest it close off all other female career options.



WOMEN AND THE VOTE & THE HISTORY OF BODY PACKAGING

Featured in this exhibition are the exquisite burkas and bodices from the series, "The History of body packaging" started in 2011. This collection looks at the common myths and misunderstanding behind this notorious garment and its changing significance over the centuries. Irene carefully selects and weaves together texts on the history of underwear and questions why constricting and quasi-barbaric items such as chastity belts and basques appear as erotic to today's liberated woman. Her work hopes to explore social history, as well as analysing a seemingly 'female' obsession with surface appearance.



NOTES TO EDITORS

Irene Lees (born 1943) spent most of her adult life as a wife and then mother, at 60 Irene embarked upon a BA in Drawing and Applied Arts at the University of the West of England and now, in her mid 70s, her work has won over 20 awards including the SWA Fine Art Prize, the Frank Herring Easel Award and Cliff Moss Memorial Prize and is regularly featured in the Jerwood Drawing Prize and the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition.



Candida Stevens Gallery is a curation led gallery established in 2014. The gallery produces exhibitions that explore important themes through the responses of new or relevant work by some of the finest emerging and established figurative and abstract artists working in Britain today. With an energetic, curatorial curiosity the gallery seeks to work with artists who are influential in their field and we have the privilege to represent the work of some of Britain's genuine artistic pioneers, including textile artist Alice Kettle, painter Stephen Farthing RA and technically ground-breaking politically engaged artist Nicola Green.

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IMAGES: From top of first page
'PICASSO'S FEMALE ICARUS' JACQUELINE ROQUE , 2019
'ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM' NUSCH ELUARD , 2018
NEVER HAVE SO MANY, OWED SO MUCH, TO SO FEW, 2018
HOW YOU SEE ME, 2018
'REVERED TO REVILED' OLGA KHOKHOLOVA , 2019
MY SILENT SCREAM, 2017
A WHALEBONE TO SEE THROUGH, 2009
THE FIG TREE, 2019