



Death of a Gull II

Isabel Rawsthorne

Not on display

Title/Description: Death of a Gull II

Artist/Maker: Isabel Rawsthorne

Born: 1979

Object Type: Painting

Measurements: 760 mm x 1130/1040 mm (framed h. 830 x w. 1140 mm)

Accession Number: 50696

Production Place: Britain, England

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Death of a Gull is a late work by Isabel Rawsthorne (1912-92). The background is formed of washes of white and grey-brown paint, with thin, dark brushstrokes outlining the objects in the composition: hemlock plants, a seashell and a large seagull, lying upside down. The gull's wings are spread as if in flight but its legs are in the air, betraying the fact that it is, in fact, no longer alive and its wings have been crushed into an unnatural angle.

In some ways, the work returns to themes Rawsthorne explored in her earliest paintings. Carol Jacobi notes that this work has much in common with one of the other works in the Sainsbury Collection: *Green Woodpecker III (suspended)* (1946). [1] Like that work, the painting is on board and features the subject matter of a dead bird. In both cases, the bird's wings are spread as if caught in flight, alluding to the living movement of the animal, so as to draw attention to the absence of this living quality in the subject. [2] Rawsthorne also frequently painted shells during this period of her life, as we can see from another work in the Sainsbury collection, *Still Life with Wine Glass* (1946). Shells were frequently used by Rawsthorne to refer to the gap between life and death as they act as a semiotic sign for a living animal while being, themselves, lifeless.

There were also similarities in Rawsthorne's personal circumstances in 1946 and 1972. In 1946, Rawsthorne was recently divorced and living alone in rural France; in 1972, she was recently widowed and living alone in rural Essex. On both occasions it had been several years since her last exhibition and, in painting still life objects and animal corpses, she found a way for her to both explore the artistic themes in which she was interested in the absence of a model.

We can, however, see Rawsthorne's evolution since her 1946 works. Compared to the early works, in which each feather of the woodpecker is individually painted, Rawsthorne has mastered the ability to paint her subjects with a few quick lines, focusing on the key details. No longer interested in painting exactly what she saw, *Death of a Gull* combines elements of landscape, still life and the more abstract and conceptual work she had explored in her *Migrations* series. [3] Jacobi also stresses the importance of Rawsthorne's concern for the environment. Rawsthorne campaigned on local agricultural issues, publishing an article in favour of regulating the use of pesticides which would often kill local wildlife, including seagulls. [4] In addition, the hemlock, with its connotations of the death of Socrates, references the classical world, a subject which fascinated Rawsthorne throughout her life. [5] This work, therefore, may be considered a synthesis of themes Rawsthorne explored over a varied artistic career.

Georgia Kelly, April 2023

[1] Carol Jacobi, *Out of the Cage: The Art of Isabel Rawsthorne* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2021), p. 384.

[2] Carol Jacobi notes this feature of Rawsthorne's 1946 *Green Woodpecker III (suspended)* in *Out of the Cage: The Art of Isabel Rawsthorne* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2021), p. 181.

[3] For more information on the *Migrations* series, see Carol Jacobi, *Isabel Lambert 1912-1992: Migrations Paintings and Drawings* (Harrogate: The Mercer Gallery, 2010).

[4] Jacobi, *Out of the Cage*, pp. 368-384.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 385.

Further Reading

Suzanne Doyle and Karen Southworth, *Isabel Rawsthorne 1912-1992: Paintings, Drawings and Designs* (Harrogate: The Mercer Art Gallery, 1997). Exhibition Catalogue.

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

Carol Jacobi, *Isabel Lambert 1912-1992: Migrations Paintings and Drawings* (Harrogate: The Mercer Gallery, 2010). Exhibition Catalogue.
