

AWAY spirited

Sensitive, spiritual and sexual – curator **KRISTIN HJELLEGJERDE** explains the mysterious works of ArtEco Gallery's latest exhibition, ARCANa

Imagine a room filled with colour: vivid photographs, vibrant canvases and shiny, copper sculpture. And then, amongst this sea of visual stimulation, there is stillness – pastel and cream working their way in, as arresting as their neighbours for their sheer contrast.

This is ARCANa, my latest exhibition at ArtEco Gallery which brings together the works of three female artists: Gemma Nelson, Martine Poppe and Amy Stephens. Running until 16th March, the exhibition also draws on the mystic origins of the word 'arcana' as a celebration of secrets and mysteries, and a reflection upon positive spiritual sensitivity. While different in style, medium and execution, the works are brought together by this unifying sense of spirituality, as well as the notion of the revealed and concealed, of portals and the mystical.

For Gemma Nelson, the creation of illusory spaces through intricately constructed and highly detailed paintings has become her hallmark. Working in Indian ink and mixed media, she weaves together fairytales and female sexuality combining the aesthetics of patterning and totemic tattoos. In ARCANa, we are presented with new works for which Nelson has drawn on ancient cults and rituals in order to create a new mythology through references to sun worship, mimesis of nature, phallic and fertility symbols and intricate patterns. Her works draw on quirky socio-historical practices and stories – *Pibloktoq*, for example, refers



GEMMA NELSON, PIBLOKTOQ

to the psychological phenomenon of the same name that, most famously, affects Arctic women in the winter months. During an episode a sufferer will scream and flail, tearing off her clothes off and running naked in sub-freezing temperatures, before collapsing in exhaustion. A supposed spiritual condition, it provides fertile inspiration for Nelson's exploration of patterns, pareidolia and apophenia.

Meanwhile for Martine Poppe, ARCANa has given her the opportunity to explore subjects that are new to her. Distinguishing her from her two contemporaries, at least on an aesthetic level, is Poppe's sparing use of colour; her muted canvases express milky hues and delicate brush strokes, creating a luminous, floating effect. Working from photographs which she refers to as 'serendipitous rather than staged', Poppe's paintings have a sense of immediacy to their making, and within them, information and sources are both revealed and concealed, creating a



GEMMA NELSON, THE LAND OF THE ROCKING HORSE PEOPLE

distance between the original subject and finished work through a process she refers to as 'analogical change'. This process plays with the idea of 'orthographic satiation', a phenomenon that works by disconnecting from the original source while preserving the meaning. This concept is best explained by the idea of looking at Chinese or Japanese characters for a length of time; the lines become disconnected, the image disintegrates, yet the original idea, the concept, remains. 'When I look at paintings, I always think that what they lead to is themselves,' she says. 'A painting need not be a portal to something beyond the painting itself.'



AMY STEPHENS, BALLOON RACE



GEMMA NELSON, BUSHDA CULT

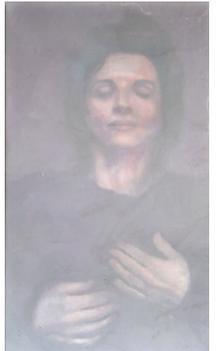
Finally, Amy Stephens presents all new works that have been inspired by a recent residency in the Sultanate of Oman in late 2013. Working in abstraction, Stephens often creates minimalist line drawings and sculptures that invade and interact with the architectural space in which they are installed. Responding to Nelson's ideas of mythology and Poppe's play on perspective, Stephens's images

in ARCANa are inspired by Aldous Huxley's assertion that 'there are things known and there are things unknown, and in between are the doors of perception'. We see an abandoned fair ground and a multi-coloured painted locked mountain door from the remote village of Misfat Al-Abreyeen – images that highlight an open and closed doorway respectively. Using a range of fabrics and forms, she invites viewers to question this barrier as a mundane object and instead ask what is actually behind the door.

Together, these three female artists create their own arcana, mingling different media – from sculpture and painting to photography and mixed media – just as they blend together mysteries, secrets and visual stimuli. The works, though different, call to each other through their shared reference of cultural idiosyncrasies and mythologies – a rich link that binds them all together, yet allows each to float, separate, a portal for both transporting and bringing the viewer back to the present.

ARCANa is running until 16th March at ArtEco Gallery, 533 Old York Road, SW18, 020 8875 0110; artecogallery.com

Stephen's images in Arcana are inspired by Aldous Huxley's assertion that 'there are things known and there are things unknown, and in between are the doors of perception'



MARTINE POPPE, PRIVATE DRAMA #1



GEMMA NELSON, YUPUTKA