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### **Eileen Schaer's Intuitive Revelations**

An ordinary chair, perhaps, from a neat kitchen. Every day people sit on it, walk around it and push it here and there unthinkingly. It is just there. A useful object, that is all. But what if we attend to the fabric of its existence? What place might it assume in world of experience, as realities weave in and out of its steady presence? We find something of an answer to these questions in the work of Eileen Schaer. One image, in particular, has the chair seemingly built up, totem-like, of animals. No longer merely chair, it is dog at its base, cat in the middle and bird on top. Yet it also bird as thin in itself. Somehow a stream of perception has been internalised, transposed and represented through Schaer's hand as a new living, breathing amalgam of all. The overall feeling is that of the perching, watching, bird, whilst all other life threads between and around. Through literally fusing with the objects of its interactions the proper place of the chair in the world is revealed.

In Eileen Schaer's pictorial universe, domestic ordinariness fuses delectably with more esoteric realms. It is not so much that the commonplace is magically transformed as the rich depths of the character of the commonplace are more fully revealed. This is achieved through a working practice that exchanges the reflection of purely visual impressions for representation wrought out of the creative consciousness. In this less differentiated, intuitive region it seems to be possible to apprehend the world of objects at a more profound level, and out of this tantalizing images emerge. Not surprisingly, the transposition of this kind of experience demands a certain level of automatism in her technique; a certain relinquishing of conscious control of the mechanics of picture making. As she herself says, "I never consciously set out with a preconceived idea. I usually start off with a mark which can develop into either a chair, face, bird, chapel or animal. It is as if the images or forms reveal themselves through the process of drawing". Such bypassing or workaday perception is by no means a state of consciousness in which Schaer is uniquely locked. "I have to be in the right frame of mind" she says, but is in no doubt that this animate, other realm exists: "I think there is a universal consciousness that we can tap into. But please don't ask me what that means. There are some things we are not meant to know".

Schaer has lived on the Isle of Man since 1975 - a place with strong Celtic and Viking links and fiercely independent of mainland control. 'Living on the island is,' she says, 'quite special. It is so cut off from metropolis with own pace of life.' Yet she was born and grew up in Liverpool, early enough to experience the rise of that city as one of the popular culture capitals of the world. Her parents ran a pub situated near the famous Cavern club and their clientele included the Beatles in the early days and their manager Brian Epstein's parents. 'It was,' she remembers, 'a very creative and optimistic time.' She met her future husband there - at that time he was an art student - and later moved with him to London. And whilst she is quite happy in what she describes as 'my exile', metropolitan life was formative and colours her attitudes. It is quite possible that the ineluctable tensions in her imagery are born of the dynamic interaction of island nature mysticism and no nonsense urban wit.

Though she is entirely self-taught, art has always been around her and seemingly is in her blood. Her paternal grandfather, from Bern Switzerland was a chef at Liverpool's grand Adelphi hotel, and her great uncle was responsible for the stained glass windows in Nydegg Church opposite the bear pit in Bern. Closer to home, her husband is a trained artist and teacher. Yet, her evolution as a creator of visual images has been independent of any direct influence or training. At first this was because she was worried that she 'wasn't good enough' to go to Art College, and later because of her commitment to intuitive methods; 'I like to be surprised by what I do. Otherwise it would be boring. The initial image is conceived through the 'act' of drawing in pencil. However, it is not completely automatic. I do correct the drawing, rubbing out where necessary. I then outline in pen. I don't usually develop the drawing right away. A kind of maturing is necessary to see if it lasts.'

Schaer's imagery finds its outlet in a number of media. There are the drawings in her 'doodle books'. From which all else stems, and more public paintings, in watercolour and acrylic, linocuts, and papier-mache objects. The same iconography crops up in each case, often with variations on a single composition being explored in each medium. Besides the stock of human characters, her work is characteristically inhabited by a bestiary of cats, dogs, hares, snakes and birds. And with a leaning to the kind of grotesquerie common in mediaeval book illumination or Celtic and Viking decoration, there are appearances by homunculi and other assorted hybrids. These denizens of the unconscious include, in one large watercolour, a tiny hat-wearing man driving a box car with a long tail and feet instead of wheels. Two one-eyed creatures, each of which is made up of a human foot with bird's feet, are pulling it. At times the 'feet' of a large figure transform themselves into human heads with feet of their own. At others, a 'figure' might be made up of a head on top of a thorax which is another head, attached to lower body and legs consisting of a wooden stool. In another strikingly simple image a pile of four almond-shaped eyes is topped and tailed by a rook. The black-birds', as Schaer refers to them have clearly assumed immense importance in her imagination. They appear, at times as shamanic guardians. At others they are the pictorial manifestation of mind or spirit, mingling with a person's head. They can teeter on the edge of vaudeville, as in the painting 'A Chorus Line', or they can assume the role of gods – either creating or consuming – as in the iconic rook whose beak is filled with a stone chapel. The black birds presumably emanate from the ever-present rooks that inhabit the great rookery surrounding nearby Laxey Church. The dog in recent paintings derives from the artist's crossbred Labrador, Orry (named for King Orry, who is buried in Laxey).

In spite of its apparent narrative richness, Schaer resists the temptation to over-analyse her work. While she regards the characters that appear in her sketchbooks as being 'from an ongoing story that imaginatively unwinds mysterious dramas', and that her pictures 'can reveal things that perhaps I was not aware of at the time of painting', there is nothing preconceived in the development of her iconography. 'It is not until later that I recognise or become aware of a particular theme or thread of an idea developing. In fact I still 'don't know' what most of the work is specifically saying. But on hindsight, sometimes I can read into the images, particularly if there has been something traumatic or significant happening in my life'. Her catholic upbringing, for example, has left a lasting impression on her imagination, even though she no longer practices: 'The chapels, religious paintings, confession, the sound of the nuns' robes 'swooshing' past you, the smell of the linen, the wicked nuns! First

Holy Communion in the Carmelite convent, the retreats, the guilt, the saints, their lives and the picture cards of the saints I used to collect, the altars, the misericords, the music, mortal sins, venial sins and having to draw them from my imagination at the age of six'. Similarly, there is her affinity with the islands past – ancient remains are all around. Less obvious though is the importance of the very feel of the place and she is pleased to acknowledge that her maternal grandfather came from Bergen.

The work of Eileen Schaer bespeaks an entirely animate universe, in which the ordinary business of living one's life is revealed as anything but mundane. If it reminds me of anything, it is of some of the exuberant contemporary Nigerian painting that mixes new techniques and old shamanic narratives. This is, perhaps, what island life has brought, coupled with a natural tendency to be a lone. But she is not a type to be disengaged. On the contrary, the painting mother, with its large central, blue-frosted figure around whom are connected three smaller, dependent figures – a daughter, a son and a husband – attests to one of the other huge responsibilities which goes with that of being a painter.