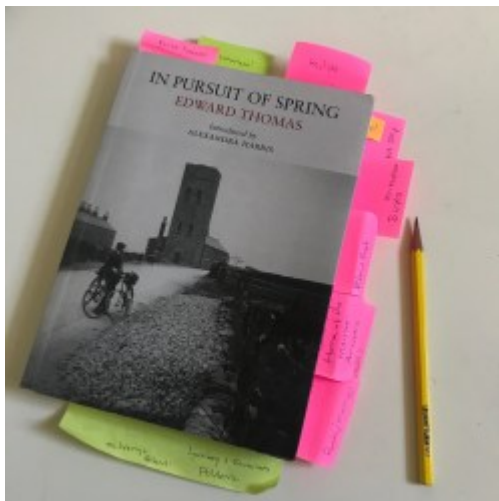


In Pursuit of Spring – an exhibition by Black Swan Arts in conjunction with Somerset Art Works (SAW)

Fifty works by SAW Members featured in an exhibition at Black Swan Arts in Frome, celebrating the book of the same name by Edward Thomas. The exhibition ran from March until the end of June and fortunately was able to benefit from some of the lifting of lockdown restrictions.

The launch of the exhibition was timed to coincide with the weekend on which Thomas finished his journey to find spring, on 28 March 1913, with an online catalogue also available featuring artwork, artists' statements and quotes from the book, creating a rich and diverse response by Somerset artists to the themes expressed as well as the places on the Somerset leg of his journey. The exhibition not only explored ideas around hope, renewal and reflection, but also revealed some of the preoccupations of Somerset Art Works members as they made work over a difficult winter, looking for signs of change and a collective reassurance as we all emerged from the third national lockdown.



Welcome area and small exhibition

For those unfamiliar with the book, Edward Thomas sets out from his parents' home in Balham, by bicycle and heads west, entering the county near Tellisford and tracing a route through Radstock, Shepton Mallet, Wells, Glastonbury, the Polden Hills, Bridgwater and Kilve to meet Spring, and Winter's Grave, on Cothelstone Hill in the Quantocks. It's a unique account, delicately observed in places, of a rural roadtrip with World War I just less than eighteen months away, but the writing also produces some poignant observations which are ripe for artistic interpretation.

The plans for the show were seeded in an idea for a Somerset Art Works Member's winter exhibition at Black Swan Arts, for a themed exhibition responding to Thomas Hardy's poem 'The Darkling Thrush'. As with everything in 2020, this had to be parked but the idea of a Somerset Art Works members' exhibition, responding to a literary theme or prompt persisted. In Pursuit of Spring provides many happy coincidences of timing and theming with Thomas' book; a journey with an undetermined end point, emergence from difficulty and a moment where things are turning.

The exhibition had unique benefits for those involved. Artists had the opportunity to have their work seen online, with that specially-created online catalogue (still accessible – see link at end of article) as well as online shop and the promise of a physical exhibition, as restrictions hopefully lift. The timing was apt as it was a show which had only been planned from the turn of the year so the idea of re-emergence felt fresh and vital. Better digital resources meant that the work was more accessible, and more sustainable as people can experience the work without the need to travel. Having said that, many were also craving a return to seeing the work up close so the flexibility to provide an exhibition which could work online but also ‘live’ when the time allowed was really welcome.

The exhibition was an ambitious-yet-cautious, absorbing and thoroughly engaging return for Black Swan Art’s exhibition programme as they planned their route out of lockdown and the challenges of the pandemic. Exploratory conversations and subsequent planning discussions were facilitated by Zoom meetings- frequent catchups were held throughout January and February, with efficient agendas and clear actions speeding up the process and ensuring swift decision making! A callout was planned, with artists asked to respond to the book and submit work within a five-week period. The results were impressive; diverse and personal responses to the timeframe of Thomas’ journey mirrored by a contemporary response to our own unique and challenging experience.



An example of how Thomas' words inspired the art

In terms of the physical exhibition, artwork occupied two spaces at Black Swan Arts- the former shop and downstairs gallery, and the Round Tower, a beautiful space which is a former wool-drying store. As with the online catalogue, the display of work was punctuated with quotes from Thomas’ book. The figure of a traveller looms throughout the show. Sally Muir’s work consists of an interesting composite monoprint and drypoint work, responding to a couple of Thomas’ own photographs that feature in the Little Toller edition of the book, which has been used to plan and research the exhibition. Although David Brayne’s cyclist is clearly shown, he encounters a ‘pale mist at an uncertain distance’ and as David says, Thomas seemed to enjoy the fleeting and often skewed impressions he experienced. This is a journey full of particular incidents and observations, but with a fluid sense of steady movement and a moment passing.

Some of the takes are personal and moving; Jenny Mellings and Benedict Mackay have both previously undertaken Thomas’ journey, also by bike, with Benedict producing a series of walks along the route. Hans Borgonjon and Pauline Lerry talk about their families’ accounts

of World War I. Much of the work is a direct response to now, with some artists creating new work made under lockdown such as Jenny Graham and Matilda Morton who both used mud and local materials in their work.

There were a good variety of mediums represented too with stained glass, collage, poetry, photography, printmaking, ceramics and sculpture as well as abstract and figurative responses. A display of contributing artists' sketchbooks provided an insight into how some of the work was conceived.

Although Thomas passed through towns including Radstock, Shepton Mallet, Wells, Street, Glastonbury and Bridgwater, the built environment hardly featured in artists' responses although Thomas' own photos do record places clearly identifiable as well as those unknown. They provide a fascinating insight into his visual and poetic eye and a record of the county just over a century ago.

Splashes of colour provide highlights amongst the restrained palette of much of the work, moods shift as artwork captures the hope which dares after the subdued winter we've just passed through. Contours are mapped and puddles splashed in work that acknowledges a darker than normal winter and all that this spring might now offer.



Bicycle appropriately resting just outside the exhibition at the time of the visit by Fellowship Chair Jeremy Mitchell and his wife Deirdre

The exhibition closed on 27 June and if you were unable to visit it, the online catalogue is still available by following the link below.

<https://somerstartworks.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/InPursuitofSpringCat.15MB.pdf>

With thanks to Black Swan Arts, Somerset Art Works, Little Toller Books and the artist and curator Paul Newman

Words and images by Paul Newman

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