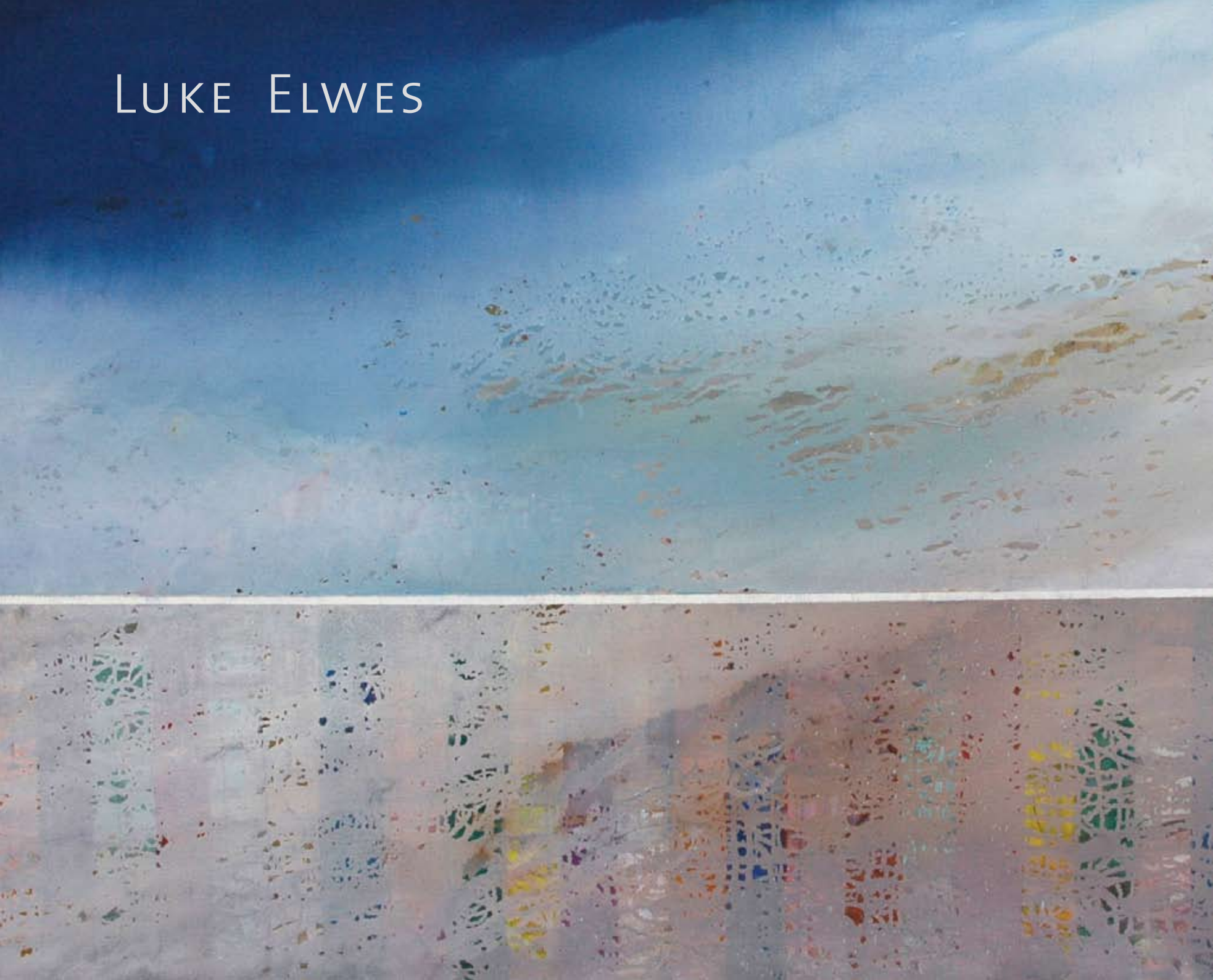


LUKE ELWES



adam gallery

LUKE ELWES

SILENT KINGDOM

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## Luke Elwes: the path, the thread; the water, the depths

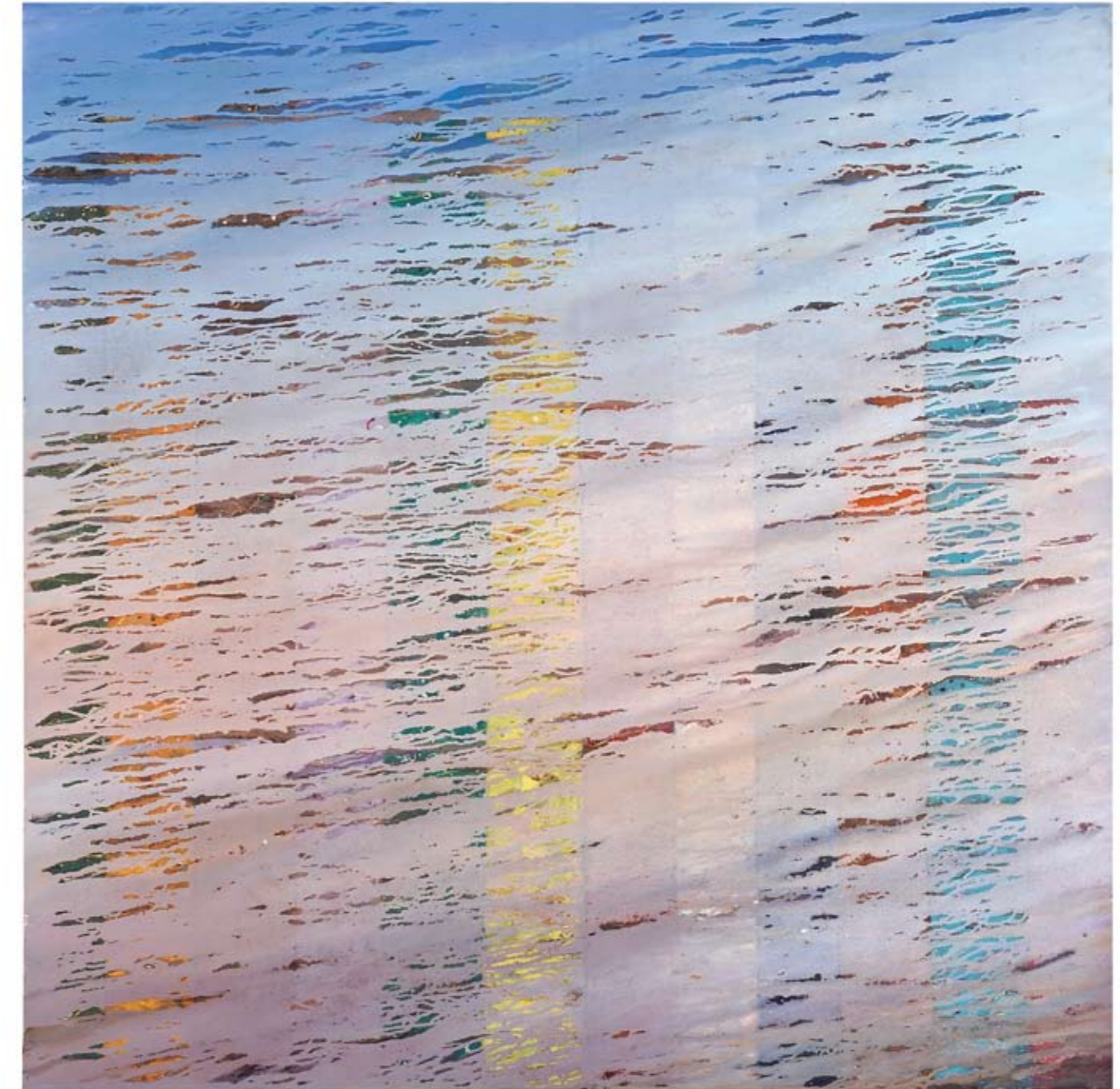
Constable spoke of landscape painting as a branch of natural philosophy, and there is a case for the otherworldly landscapes of Luke Elwes to be seen as a branch of philosophical enquiry. Elwes explores the landscape of memory, the history and spirit of places, but at the same time evokes the journey into self, which is not about the indulgences of autobiography or self-expression, but primarily concerned with the intermingled layering of time and experience. He takes a particular path, chooses to follow certain threads, and spins out his indefinite painterly narratives in imagery of a delicacy that seems to contradict its formal robustness. He works with trace rather than statement, with suggestion rather than description. He aims to capture atmosphere and the ephemeral effect, but also the underlying truths which hold the key to the pattern.

His paintings can resemble veils, with vertical bands of colour emerging through them, a little like faded banners, the vertical frequently played off against a horizontal element or axis. (The horizon line or division of sky and earth is another principal means of apportioning the picture space.) A marker pole appears in a current of light, of water, of cloud. There might be a suggestion of a window or doorway, a rectangle of darkness, or an opening through a surface – which might be a wall – onto other light, a featureless prospect or perhaps one full of invisible potential, like the future. The laden atmosphere is filled with motes, of dust, of memories. The past helps to shape the present before it metamorphoses once again into the future. Elwes investigates the relationship of parts.

In a very literal sense, it's all about placement, spatial conjunctions, the dispersal and articulation of related elements. In the oils on canvas, the objects painted, such as they are, are often of an architectural nature, and have the appearance of presenting abraded surfaces, weather-worn and aged, witness surely to countless events and histories. But are they actually eroded, these partially-stated surfaces? Are they really losing their detail? Perhaps in fact they are seen only dimly, as through a haze or a clouded lens.

Sometimes the focus pulls away so much that we appear to be off-Earth, viewing the planet from afar. But then the subtly non-spherical shape on the picture plane suggests we are actually looking at a snowy hill resembling the Earth. Certainly we are looking at the edge of something, a rim, a dividing point and threshold. This liminal quality, which is also allied to his fascination for maps, is an abiding theme of Elwes' work.

If the paintings in the main derive from the artist's travels abroad, the works on paper deal with a subject much closer to home: the stretch of land and water at Landermere in Essex. Here Elwes spends time in the marginal territory of rivers and tributaries, marsh-land for the most part, where water is a way of life. The effects of light on water, so easily (and lazily) reduced to an optical dazzle, are carefully analyzed and re-formulated in watercolours of great subtlety and considerable seduction.



1. Pilgrim | Oil on canvas | 152 x 152 cm

The works on paper are decidedly crisper in their distinctions than the oils – their areas of "thing" and "no-thing", the pattern of white which emerges through the delicate skeins of paint, the insistent linearity and the subtle layering of colour. Occasionally the particles are distributed across the picture plane like autumn leaves in an aerial ballet, or fragments of vegetation floating on a placid lake. The patterns gather and writhe into new configurations: the root system of a tree, the crow's-foot spread of a river into a delta, the eddy and swirl of clearly-observed moving water carrying a cargo of flotsam. Occasionally it is as if we are looking through a faded and torn fabric onto some brightly-coloured spectacle beyond, revealed only in tantalizing glimpses.

Other associations reach into the mind: reflections of the winter branches of trees threshing the wind; a landscape seen at dawn or dusk, in moments of swift extremity and flux; shadows breaking up into their constituents of coloured light; weather charts exquisitely detailed with temperature-colour variations. The incidents of colour on a softly modulated ground suggest medal ribbons at a parade or the bright plumage of small birds on an autumn day. One cannot escape the feeling that Elwes portrays this finest of filigrees – his net or mesh in which to catch experiences – so often because, having identified it, he wants to explore the utter permeability of our world, and its state of constant change due to influence. How, in effect, everything influences and affects everything else, touches it, touches us, and whether we like it or not, we are moulded by our environment.

He is also casting a net of connectedness over what he sees, reaffirming his recognition of man's place in the story – which is properly one of co-operation and co-existence rather than dominion. There is a wonderful equality of attention to these paintings, an all-over-ness which helps to account for their surprisingly assured appeal.

Elwes makes a kind of celestial confetti, a serene fusion of light and the motes dancing in it. He might also be painting a million million prayers, written on multi-coloured scraps of paper and scattered to the ends of the earth, falling alike on fallow ground or fertile, but all heard by God. Whatever its cause, there is a quiet joy to his meditations, which chimes well with the understated beauty of his images.

Andrew Lambirth





3. Winter | Mixed media on paper | 114 x 216 cm



4. Spring | Mixed media on paper | 56 x 76 cm



5. Crossing | Oil on canvas | 92 x 183 cm



6. Autumn | Mixed media on paper | 114 x 216 cm



7. Dusk | Mixed media on paper | 56 x 76 cm



8. Passage II | Oil on canvas | 46 x 56 cm



9. Summit | Oil on canvas | 92 x 183 cm



10. Soft Ground | Mixed media on paper | 56 x 76 cm



11. Drift | Oil on canvas | 92 x 152 cm



12. Track | Oil on canvas | 91 x 91 cm



13. Field | Mixed media on paper | 114 x 139 cm



14. Trace | Oil on canvas | 102 x 102 cm



15. Refuge IV | Oil on canvas | 51 x 51 cm



16. Refuge III | Oil on canvas | 40 x 50 cm



17. Dawn | Oil on canvas | 91 x 183 cm



18. Portal | Oil on canvas | 30 x 40 cm



19. Stardust | Oil on canvas | 102 x 102 cm



20. Ripple | Mixed media on paper | 56 x 76 cm



21. Refuge I | Oil on canvas | 102 x 102 cm



22. Traverse | Oil on canvas | 140 x 140 cm



23. Refuge II | Oil on canvas | 30 x 30 cm

In May 2008, I went on an expedition to the 'Hidden Kingdom' of Mustang; part trek and part pilgrimage, it followed the trail of an old salt route that runs up a remote Himalayan valley and onto the Tibetan plateau. A three week journey on foot began with a trek along the dry bed of the Kali Gandaki river, over an arid surface of fossilised forms that were once part of an ancient sea floor, then rising through an ancient network of mountain trails still used by nomadic traders and pilgrims, before eventually emerging onto a high undulating plateau known as the 'Plain of Aspiration', a bleached and luminous terrain shaped and scarred by savage winds.

This route, continually traversed by pilgrims en route to the annual holy festival staged in the high red-walled citadel of Lo Mantang, is punctuated along the way by the enigmatic marks of sacred belief, the visible remnants of mythic journeys and stories (of gods and holy men who battled evil spirits), inscribed and painted on walls and rock surfaces. Through the drifting air and dust there are signs of other lives and times as well, in the shredded prayer flags, the columns of delicately inscribed stones, the fragile structures of sheltering doorways and silent hermitages. But perhaps the most striking visual accompaniment are the continuously painted wall surfaces, rhythmically striped with symbolic colours (representing air, water, sun and earth) that are themselves drawn from the minerals and richly coloured ochres in the ground beneath and the rock around them. There is a sense both of recurrence (in the repeated lines, like silent incantations, that stretch away into the distance) and of return, as the surface patina is slowly eroded by the elements and reduced to dust once more.

It is something that Ryszard Kapuscinski captures in his last book, 'Travels with Herodotus': the repetition of past history in present time and the urgent insistence that its recollection in the words and stories of travellers might prevent the traces of human events from being erased by time. 'History', for Kapuscinski, 'is merely an uninterrupted progression of presents' and the attempt to picture it (that is, imprint it on memory, on paper, by hand) is 'yet another expression of man's struggle against time, against the fragility of memory, its ephemerality, its perpetual tendency to erase itself and disappear'.

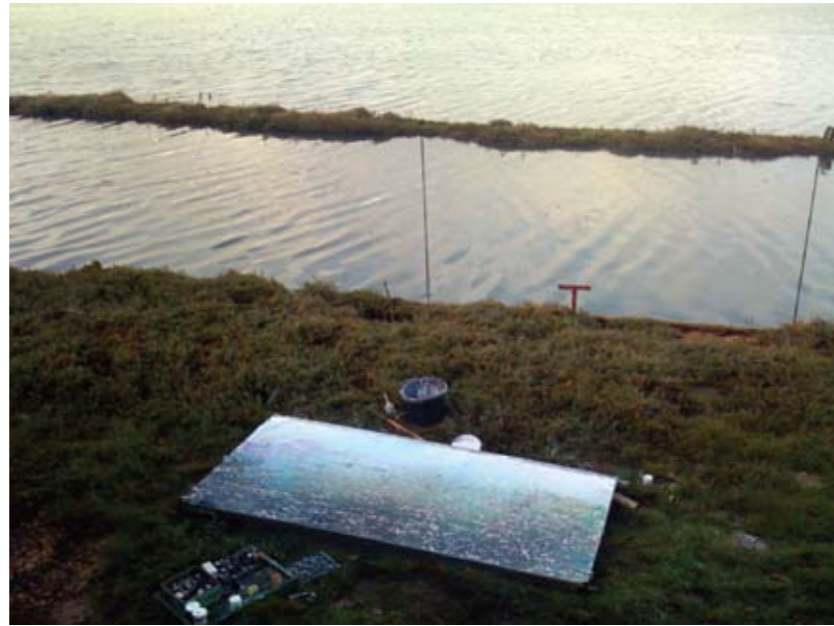
Luke Elwes



24. Rest | Oil on canvas | 30 x 30 cm

## LUKE ELWES

1961	Born in London
1963-68	Lived in Tehran
1980-85	Bristol University, Camberwell School of Art
1985-87	Christies, London
1988-89	Travels in Australian desert & North West India
1991	Artist member on 'Lord of the Isles' expedition, Hebridean Islands.
1992-93	Desert travels: East Africa & South West America
1996	Bayer Earth Art Prize
1997	Artist member on expedition to Mount Kailash, Tibet
2000	Study trip to Asia Minor, walking through Cappadocia.
2000-06	Lives part of the year on Osea Island, off the Essex coast
2004	Painting trip to Atlas Mountains and Djebel Sarhro.
2005	'Cultural Excavations', Oman (supported by British Council),
2006-08	Postgraduate research in Art History, University of London (Birkbeck)
2008	Expedition to Kingdom of Mustang in the Himalayas



### Selected shows

2011	Silent Kingdom, Adam Gallery, London & Bath
2010	Another Country, The Estorick Collection, London
2009	Luke Elwes: Peintures Recente,, Galerie Marceau Bastille, Paris Secret Water, works on paper, Broadbent London L'Isle Joyeuse, Falle Fine Art, St.Helier, Jersey, 5 London Painters, Artco Leeds.,
2008	Genius Loci, Galleria Ceribelli, Bergamo, Italy
2007	Refugia, Art First, Cork Street, London Mapping, Bury Art Gallery, Manchester Gli Amici Pittori Di Londra, Galleria Ceribelli, Bergamo, & Galleria Ghelfi, Vicenza, Italy.
2006	Celeste Art prize, London
2005	Flowing Ground, works on paper, Broadbent, London
2004	Compass, Art First, Cork Street, London Slow Art, Broadbent Gallery, London

2002	The Osea Paintings, Art First, Cork Street, London Luke Elwes, Art First New York
2000	Five British Artists, Galerie Vieille du Temple, Paris Sanctuary, Art First, Cork Street, London
1998	Pilgrim, Art First, Cork Street, London
1997	14th Annual Open, Royal Overseas League, London & Edinburgh
1996	Endangered Spaces, Council for the Protection of Rural England, Bayer Earth Art Prize, Highly Commended.
1995	Centenary, Contemporary British Art, Christie's, London. Royal Academy Summer Exhibition (as invited artist)
1993	Luke Elwes, Galerie Vieille du Temple, Paris
1992	Spring, Barbican, London (chosen by The Spectator)
1991	Il Sud Del Mondo, L'Altra Arte Contemporanea, Marsala, Sicily, and Milan, Italy. Earthscape, Hastings & Southampton City Art Gallery. Songlines, Barbican, London.
1990	The Broad Horizon, Agnews, London



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