

“Only Half with The Visible”

Fern Thomas' *Spirit Mirror*

Amy Hale

Published on the occasion of the exhibition

Fern Thomas
Spirit Mirror

8 January– 20 March 2022

Originated by the Glynn Vivian Art Gallery

Images: All images courtesy the Artist and Glynn Vivian Art Gallery.
Page 8: William Blake (1757-1827) *Europe, A Prophecy* and *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, 1794, Glynn Vivian Art Gallery Collection

© 2022 Amy Hale, Fern Thomas and Glynn Vivian Art Gallery.
Photo: Polly Thomas

Glynn Vivian Art Gallery, Alexandra Road, Swansea SA15DZ
glynnvivian.co.uk

Glynn Vivian Art Gallery is part of the Swansea Council and supported by a grant from the Arts Council of Wales

Fern Thomas

Born in Neath, South Wales, in 1983, Fern Thomas' practice is rooted in the processes and principles of Social Sculpture. Recently Thomas has been developing a fictional set of islands, *Springtides Archipelago*, which is a polychronic research space in which all of her work can unfold. Recent projects and commissions include *The Hidden Noise: Tinnitus and Art* at OVADA Gallery, Oxford, g39 Fellowship with g39 gallery, Cardiff, as part of the Freelands Foundation Arts Programme; and CoDi, the Tŷ Cerdd Experimental Sound Programme in Cardiff. She is currently artist in residence for *Ancient Connections*, an arts and heritage project based in Pembrokeshire.

Amy Hale

Dr. Amy Hale is an anthropologist and folklorist writing about esoteric history, art, and women and culture. Her biography of *Ithell Colquhoun, Genius of the Fern Loved Gully*, is available from Strange Attractor Press, and she is also the editor of *Essays on Women in Western Esotericism: Beyond Seeresses and Sea Priestesses* (Palgrave Macmillan). Other writings can be found at her Medium site <https://medium.com/@amyhale93> and her website www.amyhale.me.

“Only Half with The Visible”: Fern Thomas’ *Spirit Mirror*

Amy Hale

Today’s ubiquity of mirrors has caused us to forget how they were once rare, prized and magical. They were difficult to make, precious, and also somewhat mysterious. In legend they allow for potent ways of seeing with magical consequences, believed to aid in producing visions, and determining the future. Mirrors are portals and containers that can trap spirits. They can serve as a vehicle for transportation to other dimensions both for us and also for the entities waiting to contact us on the other side. If you are well trained in the magical arts, you can send your own etheric body through a mirror into unseen realms, but you run the risk of getting lost forever.

Fern Thomas’ haunting installation, *Spirit Mirror*, was commissioned as a complementary work to accompany the *Not Without My Ghosts-The Artist as Medium* exhibition, focused on drawings created with the help of or in some way indebted to spirits. Thomas has created a beautiful piece, exquisite in its recursion and complexity, inspired by her fascination with the Welsh nationalist, arts philanthropist, spiritualist and mother, Winifred Coombe Tennant. At its heart, this is an exhibition about how we survive death.

Winifred Coombe Tennant was truly a force of nature. A tireless activist in a number of spheres, she often campaigned for those without a voice. Known by her bardic name “Mam o’ Nedd”, “Mother of Neath”, she was passionate about the distinctive artistic legacy of Wales and she was a generous patron of the visual arts, which she championed through her work with the Eisteddfod and also in shaping the collection of the Glynn Vivian Art Gallery. She was a suffragist, prison reformer, a magistrate, Liberal candidate, and representative to the League of Nations. She was also a mother who lost a daughter and a son, and it is this loss that becomes the emotional centre of Thomas’ complex and often poignant work.








Activism was not the only way in which Coombe Tennant provided a voice for the voiceless. She was also a spiritualist inspired to mediumship by the death of her beloved daughter, Daphne. Daphne lived only 17 months, and her death plunged Coombe Tennant into deep grief. She practiced as a medium somewhat clandestinely, known as “Mrs. Willett”, and became involved in the emerging science of spiritualism, eventually joining the board of the Society for Psychical Research. In *Spirit Mirror*, Thomas the artist is also the medium, calling the spirit of Coombe Tennant forward to be present among us.

This installation comprises several discrete yet thickly thematically entwined sections, referencing love, motherhood, family, landscape, place and the numinous. Thomas and Coombe Tennant share a history in Neath, where Thomas has encountered Coombe Tennant’s spectral energy in the landscape and buildings there. The project was also inspired in part by Thomas’ reading of Coombe Tennant’s diaries, where she was deeply affected by her personal and tender descriptions of nature and motherhood. In *Spirit Mirror* we see Thomas expressing a profound emotional engagement with this woman’s life, emerging from an intuitive processing and a comingling of artefact and spirit. Thomas frequently works with archives and her wider corpus reimagines and reconfigures the relationships between art and the ethnographic gaze of anthropology and folklore, normally mediated for an audience by the authority of display and “objective” description. Thomas weaves reality and fiction deftly into a parallel universe of alternative folk expressions, so the audience cannot tell where lived tradition ends, and a shadow reality begins.


The primary visual introduction to the exhibition is an informal portrait of Coombe Tennant by Swansea artist Evan Walters, showing her at play with two of her sons. Daphne’s absence from the painting presages her gentle unearthly presence which infuses the installation. The walls surrounding much of *Spirit Mirror* are lined with small prints and pen and inks selected from the permanent collection, including some gems by William Blake and Victor Hugo. These sweet images of moody, otherworldly landscapes, help to transport the viewer between




PROPHECY



The deep of winter came,
What time the secret child,
Descended thro' the orient gates of the eternal day;
War ceased, & all the troops like shadows fled
to their abodes.



Then Enetharman saw her sons & daughters rise around,
Like pearly clouds they meet together in the crystal house;
And Lios' palselor of the moon, joyd in the peaceful night;
Thus speaking while his numerous sons shook their bright fiery wings



Again the night is come
That strong Urthona takes his rest,
And Urizen unloosed from chains
Glowes like a meteor in the distant north
Stretch forth your hands and strike the elemental strings
Awake the thunders of the deep,

the worlds, lightly holding the space for this liminal experience. As an artist and writer, Blake was beloved by Coombe Tennant, and the gallery holds a number of mythic Blake prints related to his prophecies that have never previously been shown. This display also helps form an energetic bridge to the *Not Without My Ghosts* exhibition which also features work from Blake.

Motherhood is a recurring theme throughout the work. The installation and assemblage serve as an invocation of both Coombe Tennant and at times her daughter, reflected through Thomas' own experience of motherhood. One section features a display of two modest wooden shelves containing relics of the echo of Daphne. It is not quite an altar, yet it is definitely a sacred space an energetic node, a conjuring. Coombe Tennant compiled a list of things she associated with Daphne and some of them are assembled here, movingly commemorating and calling out to the spirit of the absent child. Yet each item here is not merely an isolated signpost as each refers to many other stories and objects, leading the viewer into a symbolic web of correspondences, a linked train of memories. In Greek mythology, Daphne, a nymph of great beauty was turned into a laurel tree to protect her virtue from the advances of Apollo, God of light, and we see a small woodcut depicting this scene as part of the display. This altar that is not an altar contains a laurel leaf and a statue of Apollo from the gallery's collection. There is an image of the seeress Pythia, the oracle of Delphi in the Temple of Apollo, a reference not only to the pursuing god but to the power of the medium. And Pythia, according to legend, used laurel to induce prophecy through ingestion or inhalation.

Thomas occasionally weaves her own imprint into the display, highlighting the continuity and living memory of the historical mother and daughter pair through the shared experience of place and motherhood. One shelf contains an image of the Temple at Delphi adjacent to an old photo of the stone circle erected in 1925 for the Gorsedd in Singleton Park, each stony sacred space mirroring the other. This site at Singleton Park was shared by Coombe Tennant and Thomas decades apart, with the artist taking her children there most days during the pandemic. Thomas describes feeling the energy





of Coombe Tennant in the circle, perhaps the ghost of her, held in the stones like an etheric recording. Higher up on the display, a drawing of Thomas' breasts by her own daughter extends the relational element between subject and artist, woven together through time by motherhood. This image is also tied to the portraits that Coombe Tennant commissioned of herself breastfeeding, images which are intensely personal and which also speak to the universal and also mythic aspect of this mother-child bond.

Continuing around to the back of the room, there are simple, almost austere wooden tables displaying bolts of wool under bell jars. These bolts, owned by Coombe Tennant, were used to create the Welsh costumes that she was so committed to wearing daily. For Thomas they provided a "vibrational point" for summoning her spirit, an artefact she had touched and loved, serving as an intradimensional beacon for both the woman and in some ways the spirit of Wales. That these fabrics were also from Neath provided literal fibres of connection between the artist and the subject. The backdrop to the tables is a tapestry printed with rough, nearly primitive bridge like icons, which are repeating visual motifs throughout the exhibition, signifying points of transitions between the worlds.

The centrepiece of the exhibition is a veiled space marked by a printed angel's wing, reproduced from one of the Blake prints in the exhibition, indicating a place of communication between dimensions, concealing private contemplations of the inner mysteries. As the veil is parted, the viewer sees two tables joined by a text. On each table is a mirror, one of glass and another made of wax in the style of the obsidian scrying mirror used by the Renaissance scientist and magician John Dee and his medium Edward Kelley. This wax mirror is imbued with the imprint of spirit, optimised for sensing rather than seeing, as nothing can be easily viewed on its face. The text that joins the mirrors is a piece of automatic writing characterising an encounter between two clouds getting to know each other, bridging dimensional boundaries to form a collaboration, perhaps reminding us that when we reach out to the other side, there are entities there perhaps just as eager to make contact.

Above the viewer an owl-like creature, a sort of Spirit Owl is perched on a small tower, observing, and waiting. The tower itself has divinatory significance, for it suggests the ability to take a long view.

Throughout the exhibition are visual references to the channels between the worlds, and the tools used to communicate with spirits. Beeswax items provide a connective substance for the exhibition's component parts. Here we see the owl, the mirror, the small bridge like objects symbolising the movement between the seen and the unseen, and an enigmatic wax figure in Daphne's space that is part pupae, part angel, like the infant girl, always held in a state of potential and becoming. The relationship between beeswax and the spirit world has a long history. In times past it was a substance of great value, sticky and pliable, believed to have the ability to trap etheric essences. Wax also formed the disc that John Dee's medium Edward Kelley would use while scrying, carved with the *Sigillum Dei Aemeth*, a unifying symbol incorporating the names of God and his angels, causing visions which would then emerge in the obsidian scrying mirror or a shew stone. Of course, bees themselves are thought to facilitate communication with the dead, passing gossip and information between the living and the world of shades.

Spirit Mirror is not intended to teach you about Winifred Coombe Tennant, although you may well learn much about her. Instead, Fern Thomas invites you into a different way of knowing, spirit to spirit, just as she has done, coaxing her entity to this earthly plane with the things she loved most: art, Wales, her children, eliciting a beautiful tangle of remembering. Coombe Tennant was certain that she would carry on after death, and if the old stories of the Welsh otherworld are to be believed, she is very likely quite present, only just beyond reach, extending her hand to meet yours.





