

William
McKeown



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The Taste of Cherries¹

Caroline Hancock

What are the common denominators embedded in William McKeown's exquisitely delicate coloured pencil drawings of a primrose, a viola and a violet, a buttercup, a daisy, a tobacco plant, Japanese anemone, poppy and snow-drop? Encapsulating each season of the year, they all stem from the region of County Tyrone where the artist was brought up or, in broader terms, are native to the Northern Hemisphere and its climate. These are favourite garden plants and Irish wildflowers. Common, one might say. Not dissimilar to the birds he often refers to in his work such as starlings and cuckoos. There are no Latin names in sight though undoubtedly each one carries layers of traditional symbolism, local folklore and known medicinal qualities.

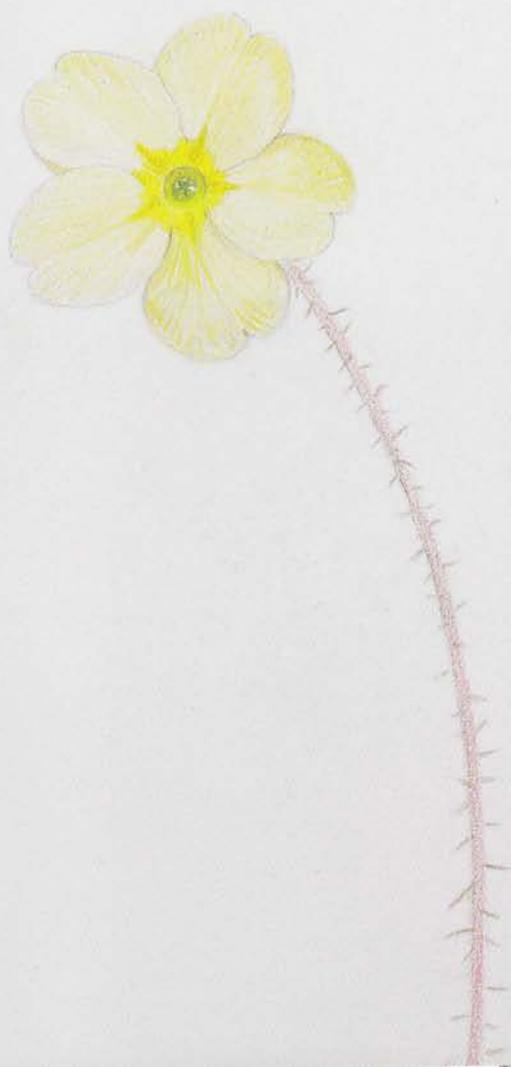
McKeown's flowers are unprepossessing, presented in the plainest possible attire. Science and botany lie abstractly in the background of the bleached-out surround or in the intricate detail of the drawings. Completely complementary with his paintings of sky and air, the dialogue is one of opposites – from macrocosm to microcosm or vice versa. Light exudes in every instance and shines through the translucent petals which have turned to absorb such intensity and warmth.

The lack of grandeur or authority of these still lifes is precisely why this body of work is so fascinating and somehow symptomatic of recent decades. David Hockney was denigrated for his paintings of pots of pansies and flower displays in the early 1990s fuelling discussions regarding the possibility of beauty in current practice. Dorothy Cross's foxglove sculptures spring to mind and Michael Landy who, following the destruction of all his belongings, made intricate drawings of urban weeds. Tacita Dean and her collection of four-leaf clovers suggest the magic of getting down on your knees for loaded discoveries. Indeed William McKeown has titled a project "The Sky Begins At Our Feet" inciting such proximity.

McKeown conveys local meadows, lanes and cornfields and, rather like in *Waiting for the Corncrake*, he points to the fact that they are now endangered ecosystems or species. These drawings appear like notes on the essence of environmental consciousness. No Al Gore-type spectacle – just discreet post-apocalyptic visions of hope, of battling through nothingness and destruction. They are like a faint call for a heightened perception of the small things in life and a reminder of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.² Evocative in the manner of Proust's *madeleine* or the taste of cherries or fields of daffodils, they become a celebration of pleasure in its purest sense.

1. The title of this essay refers to a 'note to self' scribbled on the artist's studio wall which, in turn, remembers Abbas Kiarostami's 1997 film *A Taste of Cherry*.

2. Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 1982.



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21 x 21 cm

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Colouring pencil on paper

38 x 28 cm

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Nest (The Bravery of Birds), installation view of the exhibition *The Nature of Things*, curated by Hugh Mulholland, Northern Ireland Pavilion, 51st Venice Biennale, 2005

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