

Barry Thompson  
Bleeding for the light

No. 4



Barry Thompson  
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CHARLIE SMITH LONDON

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Tree of knowledge III (doing a big 'e'), 2019 Oil on panel 18x11.5cm

# THE WHAT, HOW AND WHY OF BARRY THOMPSON

by Paul Carey-Kent

Barry Thompson produces small graphite drawings and postcard-sized paintings. We might ask what they depict and how he makes them - but the most interesting question is 'why?'.

Those who've seen Thompson's work before won't be surprised by *what* appears in the past three years of his production. The drawings are of anguished faces, torn-off scraps of written notes, a 1970's nude model and what I took to be Kurt Cobain. The paintings are of nondescript patches of parkland and close-ups of trees incised by graffiti. We're in a world of quotidian detail and historical echoes, not far from the mixture in his last major show at PEER in 2016: birds, landscapes, pages from vintage porn magazines and World War I.

Thompson's *how* is exacting. The paintings are on gesso boards with twenty layers of primer. They are all painted in grisaille first, then moved towards colour as the detail builds up. Sometimes a scratched line reveals the gesso beneath. Suffice it to say, then, that the drawings can take longer than the paintings. They have enough detail and tonal gradation at a tiny scale that even Thompson admits to moments of wondering, looking back, how he did them. That generates an intensity enhanced by their placement in expanses of white paper. These subjects must matter, we deduce, much more than is immediately apparent if their making is worthy of such dedication, if their presentation requires such calibrated focus.

So *why* these subjects? Thompson himself says he is aiming 'to forge a link somehow between psychological disturbances of some description, the supernatural/transcendental and the



*I had to think of something sweet, love's like suicide, 2019 Oil on panel 11.5x18cm*



idea of performance, play, acting and ultimately creativity at some level'. That's all in there, but for me, the answer is in the tone. On the one hand Thompson is setting out his personal mythology, the experiences which made him what he is. The epiphanies of a teenager seeking music, love, knowledge, status. The commonplace elevated by its presentation as the art it has inspired. On the other hand, it all seems a bit over the top. Isn't the Essex landscape a little too commonplace, the sexual attraction too cheap, the words memorialised too hackneyed to justify such treatment? Thompson understands that. He is gently mocking the limited understanding of his adolescent self and his ongoing inadequacies. And yet he retains and empathises with that teenager's point of view. Those things matter at the time, and it's right that they should. And there's a further complicating layer: if that seems a romanticised view, there is also a dark side, a gothic side, a recognition that adolescence is rarely plain sailing. Thompson's own certainly wasn't.

So it's personal, somewhat tongue in cheek, yet dark beneath. Let's look, given that context, a bit more closely. The paintings showing the area near Dagenham – where Thompson grew up – derive from his own photographs, which he feels free to adjust as suits. The titles come from songs he was listening to at the time, ratcheting up the personal identification. He says he's 'attempting to marry the euphoric experience of the music to the experience of the place itself, where the urban meets the pastoral'. The scenes are in a twilight which would look kitsch were the views more conventionally attractive. That – together with the attention paid them – generates an aura of significance. And though we might not share Thompson's roots, we will have our own equivalents.

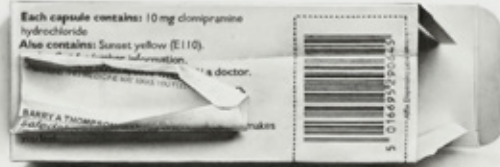




*Tree of knowledge II (the 'g' spot), 2019 Oil on panel 18x11.5cm*

Two paintings zoom in on a tree, and these are more densely constructed. Indeed, I take Thompson to be playing with overloading them in the same spirit as he plays with overegging the significance of place. Take *Tree of knowledge II (the 'g' spot)*. The title summons adolescent nudge-nudge. The text carved into the tree says: 'To love... I fuckin' hate you'. That turns out to be an extract from an angsty poem written by Thompson when faced by rejection. The eponymous 'g' – to reach the full word 'fucking' – is sprayed on separately, as if grammatical correction were a common activity of graffitiists. The pattern of trees makes a cross, which we might see as preposterously exaggerating what Thompson suffered for love. A similar rigmarole applies to *Tree of knowledge II (doing a big 'e')*. This time the reference is to a different experiential awakening – drugs – the crass pun is scatological – 'doing a biggie' – and the 'e' is sprayed on to amend 'mad' (a mental health issue?) to 'made' in 'what the heart is mad of'.

That reference to mental health may seem to have come out of nothing, but Thompson – like many – has experienced anxiety and depression, and that dark aspect carries over into the drawings. Three are of Mary Millington, one of the first Britons to achieve pornographic prominence, and the subject of Thompson's earliest sexual fantasies. By that time Millington (1945-79) was – unknown to the twelve-year-old in 1986 – already dead. She'd combined vodka with an overdose of clomipramine – the same drug that Thompson took. Which explains why he's drawn a packet of it, partly obscured by a pocket-scrunched prescription form that serves to emphasise the wording left visible: 'Also contains: Sunset yellow (E110)' – circling us back to crepuscular landscapes.





*Girlfriend he can't have when his happy looks insane, 2019 Oil on panel 11.5x18cm*

That darkness feeds into portraits of shell-shocked victims: mental suffering again, rather than the more often-depicted physical injuries. These drawings are named after birds, another youthful enthusiasm of Thompson's. A curious distance develops between title and image, but we are also pulled into speculation. Might a small soldier have been nicknamed 'Sparrow'? Can it be coincidence that *The Song Thrush* shows a soldier either screaming or singing, depending whether he is terrified or his mind is out of kilter? Love's disappointments also recur: two drawings are *trompe-l'œil* versions of Thompson's own 'shit lines', as he self-deprecatingly terms his verses, making it clear that he sees them as therapy rather than art. Except now they are art. Music has its refrain in the form of Kurt Cobain. Or not: Thompson points out that a true Nirvana fan would notice that he has the wrong brand of guitar and the wrong physique. *Orpheus* is the aspiring Thompson's self-portrait in a Cobain wig.

So those are the particularities of Thompson's *why*. We might pan out further. Whatever our achievements in the world – individually or as nations or civilisations – the earth is just a temporary and insignificant speck on the space-time continuum. But we must live as if it were otherwise, and the way to do that is to invest significance in the local and the personal. The question might be: can we do so, even as we acknowledge the truth for what it is? Can we, if you like, maintain the fervour of Thompson's adolescent awakening even as we recognise our distance from it? And will that be enough to keep the darkness at bay?





*Your innocence is treasure, your innocence is death*, 2019 Oil on panel 11.5x18cm





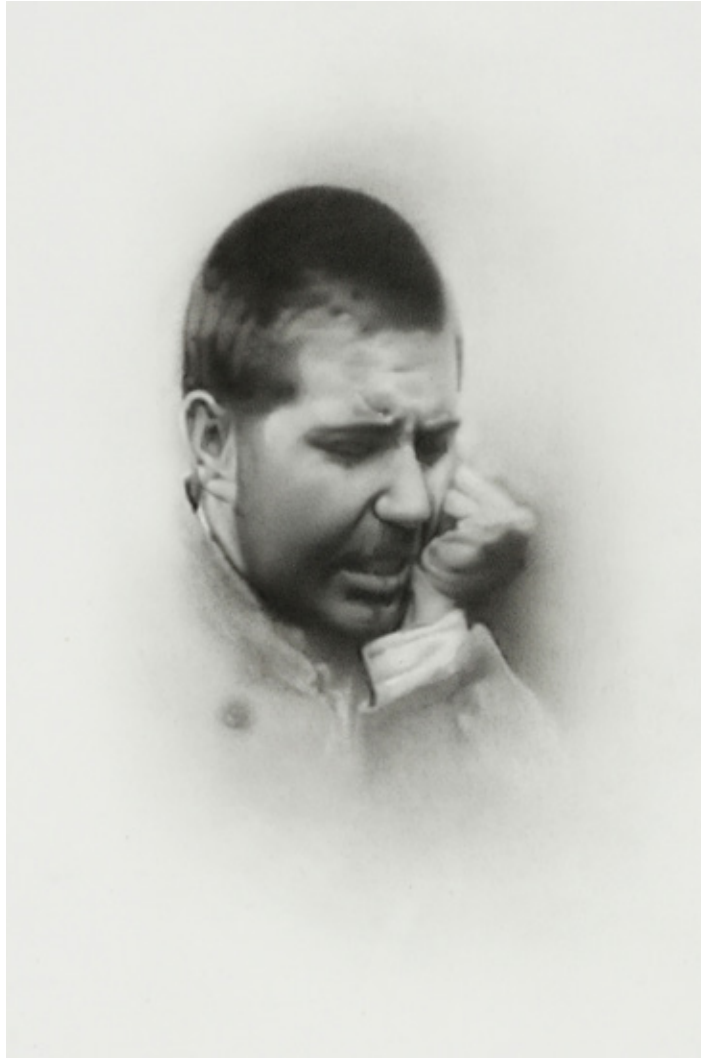


*No escape from the mass mind rape, 2019 Oil on panel 11.5x18cm*

This thought,  
~~Hard to contain~~, Barely able to contain  
Huge and insane,  
Built to the size of a cathedral,  
It ~~seems to grow~~ ~~under~~ its scaling the face  
Of that mind,  
Brought to light now  
I find I cannot sleep.



*Kill me again with love*, 2019 Oil on panel 11.5x18cm







# THE PRESENT CONTINUOUS

by Ingrid Swenson

*There is a place out East where you'll find my childhood wandering.*

This line of text appears as a *trompe-l'œil* drawing of a handwritten note by Barry Thompson in 2010. The work is part of an ongoing series of drawings titled either *Confession* or *Shit Lines* where the artist creates images of what he has described as 'failed poetry'. Full of honesty and tenderness, they speak of unrequited love or unattainable happiness, where the artist also intends there to be an element of self-mocking melodramatic humour. But what is also striking about this sentence is that it signals a central theme that runs through all of Thompson's work – the suggestion that time and place can coalesce. At a specific location it is possible to visit the artist's adolescent past.

Pinned to Barry Thompson's studio wall is a map of a small area of land, perhaps just a couple of square miles, which is near his childhood home between Romford and Dagenham. The map is from the early 20th century and indicates roads, tracks, clusters of houses, a cemetery, but is primarily characterised by the lines of what would probably have been lush hedgerows that demarcate the field boundaries. Thompson points to various locations on the map to identify areas that are now dense housing, built in the 30s and 40s for Ford factory workers; which areas had been used for training First World War soldiers; and those parts that still remain as fields or countryside today. This map indicates the terrain that Thompson has continued to explore and mine for his key source material for well over a decade. The topography of this place is by definition descriptive and dispassionate, but germinating from it, Thompson has created series of intensely observed paintings and drawings –

Because the dream fades so early,  
(And reality has come home to roost)  
The birds have not way to ease your pain  
So ~~birds~~ ~~your~~ ~~pain~~ they sing for what  
can do is listen, then all we can do is listen.





*And mutha fucka's lost their minds, 2019 Oil on panel 11.5x18cm*

ranging from landscapes to figures – which are divergent in their subject, yet intimately connected.

Described by Thompson as ‘establishing shots’, the landscape paintings are postcard-sized, intricately and exquisitely painted views of unpopulated suburban parkland, where the youthful artist hung out with friends playing war games, experimenting with recreational drugs and looking at soft porn. The titles are taken from 90s grunge or heavy metal band song lyrics, such as *No one sings like you anymore* (2019) (Soundgarden (1994)), or *And mutha fucka’s lost their minds* (2019) (Rage Against the Machine (1992)). Thompson says that he is ‘attempting to marry the euphoric experience of the music to the experience of the place itself’, and in a sense he provides an internal soundtrack to the otherwise silent *mise-en-scène*.

Two paintings of graffitied trees take us closer still into Thompson’s world where we can see adolescent abuse scrawled and scratched onto the bark. In their own small but significant way, these are juvenile crimes against nature and a kind of externalised delinquent behaviour that becomes internalised in the groups of drawings.

Whereas the paintings occupy the whole of the small panels with intense saturated colour, Thompson’s pencil-drawn subjects inhabit just a small area in the centre of the paper and appear to float on the picture plane. Heads are disembodied (*The Peewit* (2019)); ghostly figures seem to fuse into the blank page (*Mary of the Swallow* (2019)). Perhaps these works can be thought of as different registers of enquiry into his creative consciousness.



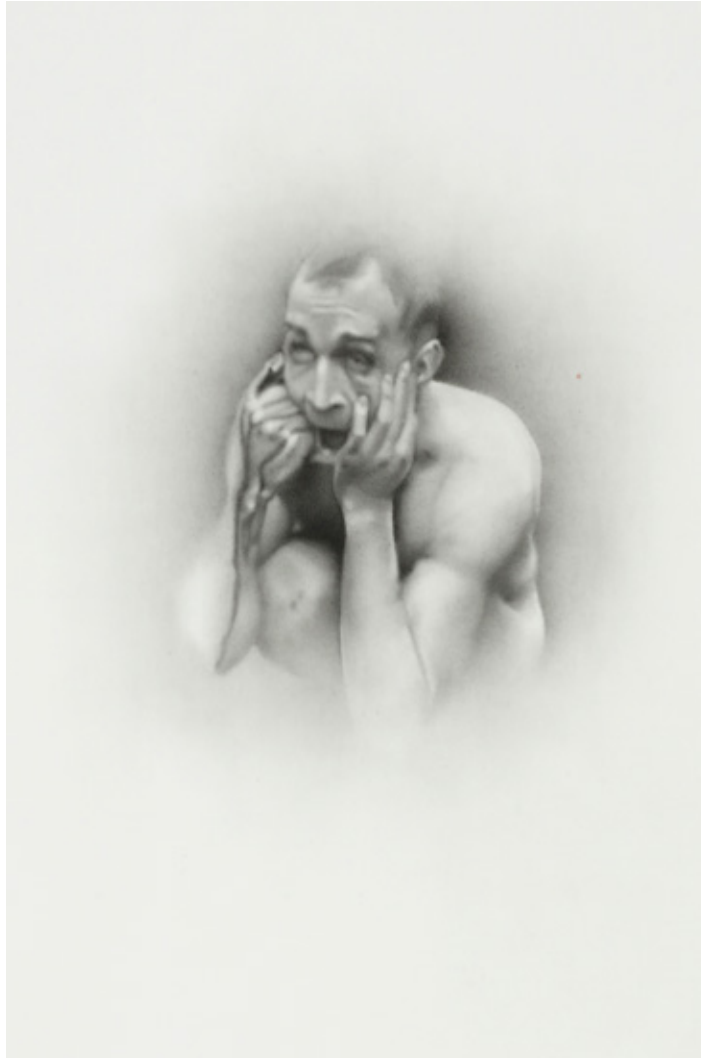
*No one sings like you anymore*, 2019 Oil on panel 11.5x18cm



Using the cinematic reference again, if the paintings set the scene for the action to take place, then the drawings could be thought of as conduits into the world of the adolescent imagination, like a dream sequence or flashback in a film.

The drawings' subjects can be categorised into two, ostensibly unrelated groups – shell-shocked or traumatised soldiers from World War I and from Kubrick's film *Full Metal Jacket* (1987); and Mary Millington, a model and pornographic actress who suffered with depression and addiction, and committed suicide in 1979. The relationship between these subjects is, for Thompson, intentionally 'jarring', or 'downright bizarre', but they are inextricably linked. In his youth, both war games and soft-core porn played significant roles in the formation of his creative imagination. As an adult, he is re-visiting these fascinations/passions with a deeper and more self-aware understanding of mental illness and profound emotion and, crucially, how this fundamentally relates to the pain and the pleasure of being alive. When TS Eliot wrote that 'Humankind cannot bear very much reality' (*Burnt Norton* (1935)) he was reminding us that the experience of something truly authentic is not easily attained, or perhaps not attainable at all. In a similar vein, Thompson has suggested, 'It seems that to suffer is a sign of authenticity?'

The image in each painting or drawing hangs in the balance, they are poised at a moment of transition, at a threshold between one thing and another; yet Thompson's compulsion to experience and so also to depict that which is authentic, is at the very heart of his work. The soldiers are shown in the throes of anguish and torment having witnessed unspeakable horrors of



*The Spotted Flycatcher*, 2019 Pencil on paper 50x40cm (detail)



war. A character from *Full Metal Jacket* is at the moment of death in *The Skylark*, 2019. The toilet on which the man sits and where he had shot himself has been edited out, and he is drawn as if levitating in a spiritual reverie. By using his own hands and feet as models for the subject, Thompson acknowledges the role that performance can play in his work, and how this connects to his 'acting out' as soldiers in his youth. In another drawing, we see the back of a figure dragging a guitar, unmistakably Kurt Cobain because of his large matt of blond hair, but it is in fact based on a staged photograph of Thompson himself. Autobiography as much as fantasy meets wider history and direct lived experience.

Three other works sit outside the two predominant groups of subjects; two *Shit Lines* drawings and one of the artist's prescription medication. These works are more immediately autobiographical, as indicated by the artist's handwriting, and his name that appears on the peeling packaging label. Here, again, past and present come together. The drugs that Thompson watched his friends illicitly indulge in as 'downers' are now, in adulthood, taken to suppress compulsive behaviour and anxiety.

Freedom of thought and authentic feeling must be subdued in order to tolerate reality. The ingredient of Sunset Yellow (a food colouring that is often used in pharmaceuticals) is the artist's knowing and playful poetic reference back to the landscape of his childhood.

Working through these memories from childhood and adolescence in which play had moulded reality, Thompson is now creating a topography of profound emotion, from ecstatic passion at one







*No one will come to save you*, 2019 Oil on panel 11.5x18cm

extreme, and utter despair at the other. By prolonged and forensic graphic description of his subject, which begins with the physical landscape and then penetrates into a highly personal psychic landscape – he is finding a way to comprehend the human condition – to know it, and thereby know himself.



*The Peewit*, 2019 Pencil on paper 50x40cm (detail)



*She's been diagnosed by some stupid fuck*, 2019 Oil on panel 11.5x18cm

## Zavier Ellis

Paul Carey-Kent, Ingrid Swenson

Pritpal Ajimal

Aleks Wojcik

Roy Thompson

336 Old St, 2nd Floor, London EC1V 9DR, United Kingdom

+44 (0)20 7739 4055  
direct@charliesmithlondon.com  
charliesmithlondon.com  
@CHARLIESMITHldn

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