



Raddled ewes back to pasture, Kate Lynch RWA



Ewes going into the milking parlour, Kate Lynch RWA

Carolyn Stubbs describes a touring art and multi-media exhibition by Kate Lynch RWA with sound by Alastair Goolden.

Kate Lynch's latest exhibition 'Sheep - From Lamb to Loom' portrays the relatively unknown world of sheep farming, its people and related industries. It is a story, in pictures, words and sound of age-old traditions and practices that have survived and continue into the twenty-first century; as Kate's previous Willow Project demonstrated so clearly.

Kate has visited shepherds, shearers, spinners and weavers, livestock auctions and even an abattoir, to produce a series of oil paintings and charcoal drawings that are accompanied by atmospheric sound recordings by Alastair Goolden. Living in the heart of the Somerset Levels with sheep and cattle grazing on the surrounding meadows, it's perhaps not surprising that Kate embarked upon this project. It follows three years of travel, extensive fieldwork and research in the West Country - the Somerset Levels, Exmoor, the Mendips and just over the border into Devon.

From the raddling of the ewes (staining the ram's chest at mating time to forecast lambing dates) through to sheepdog training, butchering, cheese-making, wool grading and other

related crafts, Kate went to great lengths to capture many of these rarely seen practices. Entering the twilight world of milking sheds for example, meant setting out in the pitch black of night to locate a farm in the rural village of North Wootton, to observe milking at 4.30 a.m. The oil painting of the ewes going into the Milking Parlour is the result. The fresh ewes' milk is taken into the milking parlour - where it sets as curd and matures into cheese. Each visit was carefully documented and the paintings are the result of sketches and conversations with the people involved.

In a recorded conversation where the fresh ewes milk curd is being ladled, Hannah says "I slice the curd into columns, it releases the whey, then I'll ladle it into the moulds. You have to get used to the feel of it, get the balance between science and intuition, judge how it's sinking and top up the moulds."

The narrative unfolds in a series of images; soft muted colours in oil and the monotone hues of her charcoal drawings perfectly capture the mood and atmosphere of each subject. Revealed is a 'behind the scenes' glimpse of the people and the animals, a way of life that is not often fully understood in today's fast moving technological world.

Despite being an unpalatable subject for some, a visit to an abattoir was to Kate an integral part of the sheep farming project. For three hours Kate stood shoulder to shoulder with Simon and his fellow slaughter-men "to witness this old hidden knowledge".

What impressed her, she commented, was the professionalism of those involved and the way in which the animals were cared for so compassionately before slaughter in one of the last few family-run abattoirs in the country. One of her paintings depicts carcasses of sheep being hooked up on to steel racks to hang in the cold store. The resulting image is sensitively portrayed. "It is very much a story about the people," she insisted "the paintings are a tribute to them and the work they do and I hope they feel comfortable with the image."

To discover the intricacies of fleece grading, Kate visited Brian, a fleece grader now nearing retirement. The grading by hand of one of Britain's oldest natural resources is a process, as one might imagine, that requires years of experience but is now a diminishing trade. Brian who has been grading by hand for the whole of his working life said. "There are more than a hundred and fifty different grades for all the breeds and qualities. I'm grading four to five hundred fleeces an hour, more than fifteen thousand a week."

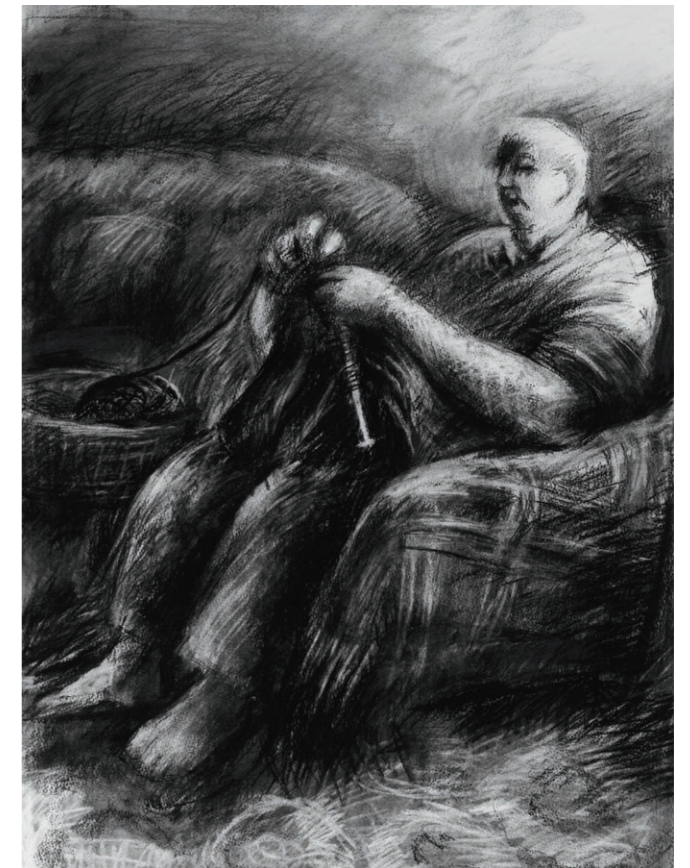
From grading fleeces to turning yarn into colourful woollen clothes to sell, Christine the knitter portrayed in Kate's painting stays up all night to knit. "I do a lot of my knitting at night, I think I came from a long line of night-watchmen, I tend to sleep when the dawn chorus starts."

Summing up the nature of sheep farming, Rob Walrond, one of the farmers portrayed in the project, says, "A lot of shepherding is down to observation, knowing the signals, when a ewe's about to start giving birth, there are lots of signs, like lying down and the head going up in the air, and sort of baring their teeth, when the top lip comes back, and nibbling at imaginary things, all sorts of subtle signs."

An extraordinary and delightful mix of characters combine to make the Sheep - from Lamb to Loom touring exhibition one that faithfully represents a living heritage of sheep farming. Kate Lynch's atmospheric paintings and drawings take us on a journey so real, that you actually feel that you have been there yourself.

A full-colour book 'Sheep - From Lamb to Loom' by Kate Lynch will accompany the exhibition and be available in bookshops and through Kate's website: www.katelynch.co.uk ❀

Below: Kate Lynch in her studio. Photograph Carolyn Stubbs



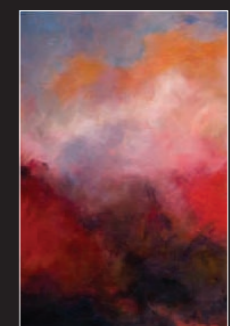
Christine knitting with hand-spun wool, detail, Kate Lynch RWA

The exhibition will tour the following venues in 2009

The Brewhouse Gallery, Taunton, Somerset 14th March-25th April
www.thebrewhouse.net T: 01823 283244
New Brewery Arts, Cirencester, Gloucestershire 9th May-21st June
www.newbreweryarts.org.uk T: 01285 657181
Museum of North Craven Life, The Folly, Settle, Yorkshire 27th June-4th August
www.ncbpt.org.uk/folly T: 015242 51388
Black Swan Arts, Frome, Somerset 22nd August-3rd October
www.blackswan.org.uk T: 01373 473980
Guildhall Heritage & Arts Centre, Dulverton, Exmoor, Somerset 5th-17th Oct
www.exmoorevents.co.uk T: 01398 323818

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