

THE PIPER GALLERY



Francis West – *Voyages* (7th September – 5th October 2012)

The Piper Gallery is proud to present *Voyages*, an exhibition of work by Francis West. Born in 1936, West spent his childhood in a remote community on the Moray Firth in Scotland. Some of his earliest visual memories are of tempestuous Scottish seascapes and the exhibition is formed around a series of voyages, centring on the sea cave in West's *Tempestas* (1987/2012) where a turbulent wind swells the waves that carry the viewer out to a waiting ship. This belongs to West's *Palimpsests*, a pivotal series of large-scale paintings dating from the early 1990s in which he deconstructed several of his earlier acclaimed expressionist pieces through frenzied over-working that sought to disrupt a sense of formal coherence. These came to represent West's search for new, creative challenges.

Each voyage reflects the artist's experience of real locations although West frequently employs metaphors of voyaging to explore his practice as an artist. He has described his lifelong commitment to painting and drawing as a challenging and risky quest. Although grounded in reality, West's concepts remain tantalisingly elusive, blurring the boundaries of myth, dream, memory and experience bringing together the flotsam and jetsam of symbolic forms with fragments from poetry and historic painting. West comments on the emergence of figurative beings in this exchange, saying '*sometimes I am surprised that these acts of deconstruction will pause around a formation which is reminiscent of a specific memory*'. His often hybrid human-animal personae, reminiscent of Goya and Bacon, are suspended in a state of transition as West submits them to a process of mutation and erasure where they concurrently materialise and dissolve from the viewer's vision.

This exhibition offers the viewer the opportunity to explore West's voyages through several different series of work – some, as above, provide the adrenalin of fishing on a rough sea while others, of his recent *Méditerranée* series, with their limpid washes of pastel blues and aquamarine, afford the calm of sun-drenched beaches. Imbued with memories of the south of France, these works speak of a heady intoxication and sensuality. Whilst direct and immediate in sensation they also carry inflections from other artists and writers who were captivated by the Mediterranean such as the reveries of Pierre Bonnard and Andre Gide. The beach games and erotic encounters are played out by earth goddesses who shift identity between modern bathing belles in polka dot bikinis and Classical nymphs reminiscent of Picasso's hefty Bathers from his beach scenes in the 1920s.

Other works ensue from trips to the Mojave Desert or, like the *Nocturnes*, emerge from imagined dreamscapes in West's Paris studio. *Nocturnes* are some of his most radical works, representing an internal voyage to the uncharted recesses of the subconscious. They depict an imaginary realm of unexplored forests and caverns which establish fertile womb-like habitats of grotesque flora and fauna.