

above: *Dyfod ac yna ffarwello* (Arrivals and departures), gesso, paint, ink and threads on paper, 196 x 493cm, 2012  
 below: *Afon y galon* (River of the heart), ink on acetate, 200 x 450cm, 2011



cover: *Y winllan I* (Ancestral landscape I), gesso, paint, ink and thread on fabric, 48 x 76cm, 2014



**Ruthin Craft Centre, The Centre for the Applied Arts**  
 Park Road, Ruthin, Denbighshire LL15 1BB  
 Tel: +44 (0)1824 704774 [www.ruthincraftcentre.org.uk](http://www.ruthincraftcentre.org.uk)  
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# Eleri Mills

## Egni: a decade of creativity

Eleri Mills is one of Wales' most successful artists. During her forty-year plus career there have been many highpoints. Her 1995 solo exhibition opened at the Museu Tèxtil i d'Indumentària in Barcelona before touring the UK. She has exhibited internationally showing significant works in cities as far afield as Chicago, Kyoto, Łódź, Madrid, Tokyo and New York. Major institutions, including National Museums of Scotland, The Whitworth Art Gallery and The National Library of Wales, have purchased her work for their permanent collections. She won the Gold Medal at the 1987 National Eisteddfod and has completed many prestigious commissions. Eleri has exhibited with Ruthin Craft Centre at Collect, the international art fair organised by the Crafts Council, firstly from 2004 to 2008 at the Victoria and Albert Museum and most recently in 2017 and 2018 at London's Saatchi Gallery.

However it is during the last ten years that life has enabled Eleri to concentrate solely on her work exploring many avenues of creativity, unbounded and with total autonomy. This exhibition surveys that decade and reflects on Eleri's creative journey.

When talking about her work Eleri always begins with the land, as she states it '*has always been there*'. A farmer's daughter from the very heart of Wales, Eleri is rooted and absolutely connected to, but never constrained by, the land; it is indeed there, but there are many lands in Eleri's personal landscape, real and imagined.

In 2009 the offer of a solo exhibition at the Senedd brought together a group of works under the title 'Landscape for Princes', it was introduced by the then Presiding Officer Dafydd Elis-Thomas and resonated with the rich history of Wales' inspirational past. He wrote "*Landscape is always in the making... Then there is the making of the artwork itself, in various ways but always painstaking, the painting, drawing, stitching, printmaking which are the different ways in which Eleri Mills works at her art.*" A quartet of pieces from this exhibition begins our journey.

In 2011 her fifth solo show at the Thackeray Gallery London showcased the work that would lead to her Creative Wales Ambassadorship. The Arts Council of Wales' 'Creative Wales Ambassador' is a major award. It began with a residency at Ruthin Craft Centre followed by three months in Manhattan, at New York's Columbia University in spring 2012. It continued with an exhibition at Macy Art Gallery, New York, followed by a showing at SOFA NYC (the international art fair for Sculpture, Objects and Functional Art) at Park Avenue Armory.

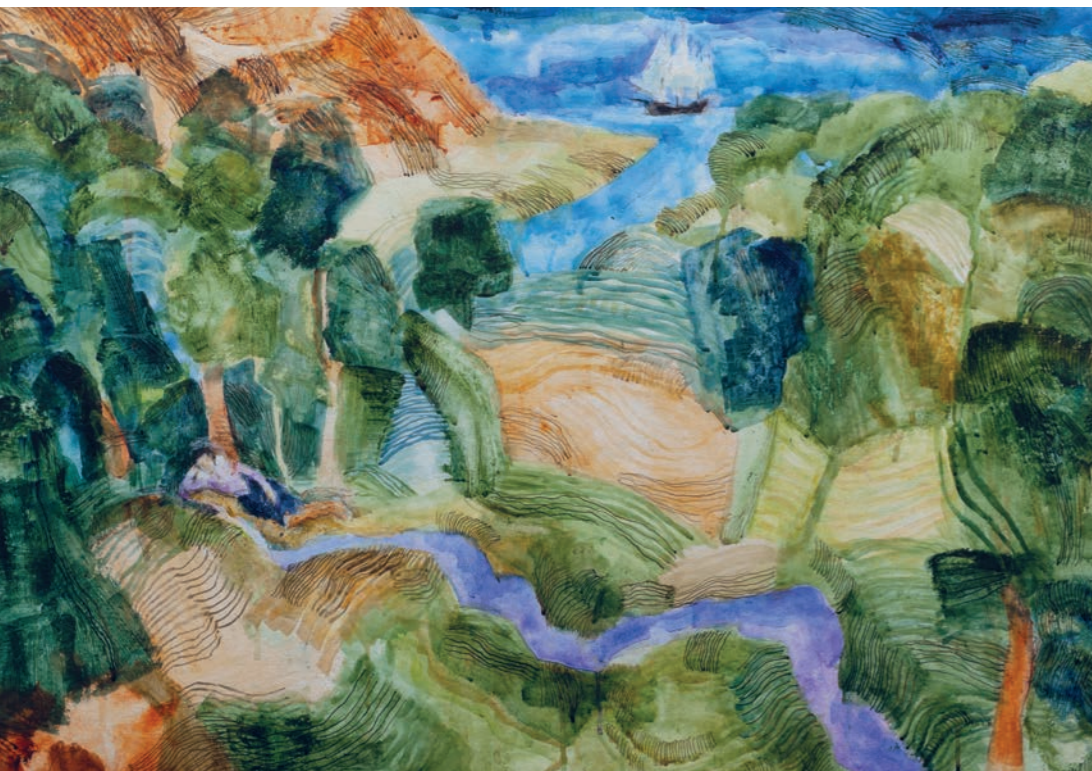
In 2013 her New York experiences and creative interventions with print and acetate during a period of post graduate study in Aberystwyth and the Ruthin residency resulted in 'Voyages' her sixth Thackeray Gallery monograph. — Columbia University's Professor Judith M Burton "*Eleri's work is gloriously poetic; it is innovative and elegant,*



*Yn y dyffryn – trwy'r coed II diptych* (In the valley – through the trees II diptych), ink and pastel on paper, 69 x 210cm, 2020



above: 'Pink moon....', paint and ink on khadi paper, 70 x 102cm, 2019  
 below: Bardd yn ei awen (Poet reclining), paint and ink on khadi paper, 70 x 102cm, 2019



*intuitive and investigatory. She opens for us a new kind of consciousness by offering an almost endless tapestry of passages through the threshold of her own passions."*

Alongside this the bicentenary of the death of Cambria Depicta landscape artist and writer Edward Pugh enabled a return to Ruthin for the "Window on Wales", residency and exhibition. The poignant drawings of back lanes around Ruthin were among the images of Eleri's work chosen by Cerys Matthews for the WOMEX 2013 festival opening concert backdrop at the Wales Millennium Centre. David Alston, Arts Director, Arts Council of Wales wrote *"The artist brings gestural mark and history together. Cerys said 'I want that red line.' ... The staves of Eleri's accomplished graphic art are lending themselves tonight to the weave of tunes and songs, on the stage of Land of Song."*

At the 2014 National Eisteddfod's Y Lle Celf exhibition she was selected to present a selection of experimental acetate pieces. Returning to her mid-Wales studio in March 2015 'Ancestral Landscapes' became her seventh Thackeray Gallery solo exhibition. David Alston again nails the spirit of the work *"She lays just claim to the ancestral in her work. Few working with images of their land in contemporary Wales exhibit what might be termed this aboriginal instinct for a Welsh "dreaming" – one that layers, an intuition of myth, strata, mapping and contouring, history and husbandry, weathering, light and atmosphere. [It] radiates simultaneity between surfaces and depths, between surface pattern and underlying structure...the recall is of both a view and a sort of personal mappa mundi... a layout of the land that is both physical and spiritual."*

2015 was also the year that Eleri was chair of the National Eisteddfod Visual Art committee at Meifod. 2017's 'Borderland', presented at the Thackeray Gallery, depicted the vibrancy and edginess of the landscape along the border of The Marches particularly a group of pen and ink drawings of the Ridgeway

near Capel y Ffin — Eleri writes *"Borderland is a place on the edge, a place with its own distinct spirit. It can be an ancient contested landscape, or an idealized woodland setting as depicted by the great medieval poet Dafydd ap Gwilym. There are many layered meanings in these works, because 'borderland' can be both a physical place, and a state of mind....."* in many ways the Meifod Eisteddfod, the 'Borderland' Eisteddfod, was directional in the primary research of this group of works.

In 2018 a residency at Powis Castle was developed after Eleri worked on the Welsh language audio guide interpretation for the National Trust's House of Portraits project curated by Dr John Chu. Inspired by the permanent acquisition of the superb Isaac Oliver miniature portrait of Herbert of Cherbury\* this re-presentation was a pivotal departure for the display of the collection, it has been much lauded as an inspiration for others.

During this residency BBC Radio Wales broadcast an episode of its Arts Programme from Powis Castle and presented three aspects of Eleri's oeuvre; her long-term use of materials through stitching, drawing and painting; the delight of seeing Herbert of Cherbury's portrait at seventeen and her ongoing fascination with it; and the significant body of new work inspired by her recent visit to India.

An opportunity to visit India presented itself early in 2016; a two week residency at the Sanskriti Foundation, Delhi and time spent in Uttarakhand near the Himalayan foothills. It started a new journey that culminated in the group exhibition 'Indian Threads' that premiered in Ruthin. Supported by The British Council and Wales Arts International it was opened in November 2018 by Wales' Minister of Culture Lord Dafydd Elis-Thomas. Indian Threads was curated by Ceri Jones and showcased four Welsh and two Indian textile artists.

This year Eleri's latest monograph exhibition 'Landscape: real and imagined' was shown at the Thackeray Gallery in



above: Llygad y fflnon I (The source I), paint, hand stitching and appliqué on cloth, 52 x 85cm, 2010  
 right: Tirlun i dywysogion (Landscape for princes), paint, ink, charcoal and pastel on paper, 94 x 59cm, 2016

London throughout March. It was a tour de force of observation and imagination; intimate arbors, dramatic mountainous views and depictions of exotic nightfall, all joyously assembled by Eleri and Thackeray Director Sarah Macdonald-Brown.

Eleri's latest pieces premiered at the 2019 National Eisteddfod 'Yn y dyffryn' ('In the valley'). The series comprises large scale ink drawings on paper, as she describes *"While my work has always been influenced by the landscape and bardic tradition of Wales, these drawing which belong to a new series of ink works on paper, challenge me in terms of scale, technique, emotional content and tempo. In these works I am representing a layered landscape, and a sense of belonging to a place. There are risks involved when working with ink with no room for error; my concern is always dealing with balance and rhythm. It is an intensely physical and gestural process.....a form of choreography and personal mapmaking which celebrates an old familiar landscape."*

A decade is a significant period of time, much happens. This exhibition shows a representation of works produced and shown over this decade, others hang in public and private collections. Today Eleri is prolific producing works in textile, paint, ink and pencil from her mid-Wales studio, while also restoring a nineteenth century chapel and ecologically supervising the care of her family's land.

#### Philip Hughes

*"The miniature portrait of Edward Herbert, 1st Baron Herbert of Cherbury by Isaac Oliver has been on display as one of the star items in the collection at its historic home, Powis Castle, near Welshpool, which is cared for by the National Trust. One of the most important miniature paintings of the Jacobean age has been purchased for the nation thanks to a funding partnership between the National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF), Art Fund and the National Trust in 2016.*

*Egni: a decade of creativity, is curated by Philip Hughes. It was first shown at Oriol Davies, Newtown during autumn 2019, and subsequently at Ruthin Craft Centre in summer/autumn 2020.*

