

“The Living Mountain” by Nan Shepherd is a slim luminous text that describes a lifetime of walking the Cairngorm Mountains in North-east Scotland. It is a book about knowing a landscape intimately, in all its moods and seasons, and translating that embodied knowledge into precise, careful description.

There is a quality of knowledge that can only be gained by returning to a subject again and again. What pervades “the Living Mountain” is something subtler than the mastery of gaining a mountaintop. A quiet intimacy develops between Shepherd and her subject, resulting in language that is arresting in its translucence. Though Shepherd is describing a mountain in prose, and Laura Findlay portrays bats in paint, there is a deep correspondence in their approach. In Laura’s carefully assembled portraits of bats, at rest, in motion, portrayed in an array of different angles and aspects, she demonstrates that same lucid patience.

Bats have been understood by certain traditions as having the ability to move between the realms of the living and the dead. Bats often live in caves, underground places, in darkness; and they also fly above ground. They participate in two realms, both above and below. The expression “as above, so below” is often traced back to the Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus, a foundational text within Western esoteric traditions. It refers to the correspondence between the wider universe and its individual parts. There is an understanding of reality as having different levels, physical, emotional, mental, and that what touches one level touches all the others.

There is a magical quality in these paintings that reflects in between-ness, a quality not quite naturalistic and not quite metaphorical. Ears and noses enlarged to alien proportions are described in loose strokes of fluid paint. Painting on board is a rather unforgiving

surface, it is necessary to act quickly before the paint dries, or the image is fixed. This sense of physical and material movement imbues our perception of a bat in flight. Speed, fluidity, motion and control align to create the image, and can be disassembled into painted parts.

I move between these ways of seeing and back again. I can see these as images of bats, and I can see them as painted surfaces that have been handled and touched; in fact they insist that I do. They insist also that I look upon the face of a creature not designed for human eyes, but for other purposes—for flying at night, gathering pollen, sucking blood. The light, especially in the portraits, is often high contrast. It is as if a flash bulb went off suddenly, capturing secretive nocturnal activity in mid flow. The drama is of a mystery briefly illuminated, insinuating a kind of truth that is in fact a momentary appearance. The bats land within the space of the painting before immediately taking off again.

Bats have evolved to have exquisite abilities to communicate, such that they can know at all times their precise position within the colony, even while in mid flight. They move at high speeds in close proximity and never lose themselves. It is their hidden grace. It is a mystery that imbues the web of correspondences within this body of paintings, connecting motion, emotion, stillness, touch, ugliness and grace.

Rachel Crummey, 2018

