

Thomas Hawson

Lost at Sea



Published as a record of the exhibition

Thomas Hawson

Lost at Sea

Eyemouth Hippodrome
27 August -18 October 2015

The exhibition hosted curated and made possible by Ian and Paula Tod.

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‘I make to see the world. Making helps me see the details not found any other way.’ T.H.

Foreword

For Lost at Sea artist, Thomas Hawson, making is imbued with meaning. After the death of his father, Tom began making a boat. The process of making recalled Tom’s experiences learning and working alongside his father as a child and as a man. But making for Tom is also imbued with consciousness of the wider context: of the traditions of boat-building and seafaring; of the artist’s practice; and of elemental human experience.

Boats operate at the interface between man and nature. The greatest sailors and fishermen are those most empathetic and connected to the natural world. Tom considers such men to be like shaman with the ability to see between worlds. This ability is also the potential of the artist. Through his making Tom endeavours to journey honestly and openly within an historical tradition that places human activity firmly within the context of the natural world.

In this exhibition Thomas Hawson explores his experience of grief through themes of inheritance and tradition. The making of the boat and its accompanying pods embodies the honest human endeavour at its most natural and elemental.

Kate Neil
Creative writer and photographer.

Sailing From a Craftsman’s Past into a Family Future

Beached high above the floating moorings of Eyemouth’s steep-walled harbour, Thomas Hawson’s hand-built dinghy Guffaw lies, sail hoisted, in The Hippodrome, the former Fishermen’s Mission that was turned into an arts venue by Ian and Paula Tod earlier this year. The boat is an elegant form, its lattice wooden hull skinned in treated black cotton canvas below a black lug sail, typical of traditional working boats. It speaks loudly of journeys and history, its fragile appearance belying strength and a debt to wind and oar. But here, too, there is a sense of impotence, a ship in a bottle, marooned metres from the sea.

The boat, named Guffaw, which has been made to measure for Hawson’s two young children, is the centrepiece of an exhibition that has grown up around the installation the artist made for the Visual Arts Scotland Open exhibition 2015, at which Hawson won the exhibition prize for ‘most original artwork’. A maker and artist who is steeped in all things Nordic and Icelandic – he was commissioned to make the Speaker’s Chair for the Icelandic Parliament in 2000 – Hawson was inspired in making his Guffaw by Faroese rowing boats, the light plywood boats of the noted wooden boat designer Ian Oughtred, geodesic hyperlite boats and the traditional coracle. Floating around Guffaw at the Hippodrome – as if the flotsam and jetsam washed in on the tide or the idiosyncratic contents of a local folk museum – are charts, maps, illustrations, plans. A charcoal drawing of a bent-backed man lugging a boat on his back suggests the weight of inheritance, of tradition. On the ceiling hang similarly shaped black cotton canvas pods, shaped like two hulls joined seamlessly together, the forms organic and tactile. Another, set on a plinth, is carved out of wood, a seed pod, rather like an oversized version of the beans one might discover washed up on the West Coast from the other side of the Atlantic. Everywhere there are voyages, sugges-

tions, evocations of a life at sea. There is levity, too, in a rather amusing key to the international code flags traditionally decked about a yacht on high days and maiden voyages. The new flags which Hawson has designed for his own young crew range from the black flag that communicates “Throughout life there is the danger of death” to the rather brighter “We need ice cream”. This is Hawson’s first solo art exhibition, rooted strongly in his trade as a maker in wood and furniture designer, and also in family. Hawson originally studied Engineering at Edinburgh University – his father worked in the offshore drilling platforms in the North Sea – but followed an interest in art to study Furniture Design and Craftsmanship at what is now Brunel University. “The course tutor called it Fine Craft,” says Hawson, when I speak to him by phone at his rural home, a once semi-derelict mill which he has slowly rebuilt around his family. “It was taught like it was fine art, but with politically a very different sensibility.” That sensibility, that faith in the human hand to craft and provide for human needs, is the bedrock of Hawson’s evolving art. If Guffaw has its own connotations in the gallery, it was also made for Swallows and Amazons adventure, every inch painstakingly crafted in the pursuit of Hawson’s children’s childhood. If many children are ‘lost at sea’ in a world of overwhelming technology, Hawson is determined to give his every chance. “They’re going down a river in a canoe to camp, independently. Everyone dreams of that,” he says. “I’ve given them the tools to mediate with nature, but it’s their exploration. I get to stand back and see them do it.”

Sarah Urwin Jones
Writer

Herold, 03.10.15











INTERNATIONAL CODE FLAGS AND CHUCKLE'S SIGNAL FLAGS

NUMERAL PENDANTS



LETTER FLAGS



CHUCKLE'S SIGNAL FLAGS







The Three Ravens

Settlement of Iceland began around 870 AD when Ingolf Arnarson sailed there in his Viking ship with his family members, friends and slaves. It took 3 days to sail from the Faroe Islands in the favourable winds. As an aid to navigation it is said that Ingolf took 3 ravens. The raven lives on land, so when released at sea from a boat with no sight of land, it flies as high as it can until it sees land. It then flies straight for it. So, from a boat, you can observe the direction in which the raven flies, and steer your course appropriately.

Ravens 1, 2, and 3 are caught and put in a cage. Raven 1 says in an objectionable squawky voice, "Where on earth are these men taking us on their ship, in this uncomfortable cage?"

The next day Raven 1 is brought out of the cage and set free. He flies as high as he can until he can see land, and in a gleeful squawk he tells the others, "I can see home, I'm off, see you".

The ship, with the Raven's friends, carries on in the opposite direction. He looks back and wonders, 'Where on earth are those men going in that ship?' The other two ravens sit in wonder in their cage. They discuss in their squawky voices (much to the annoyance of the men on the ship) how fortunate their friend was to be going home, where on earth the men on the ship were taking them, and whether or not they would be set free to fly home too.



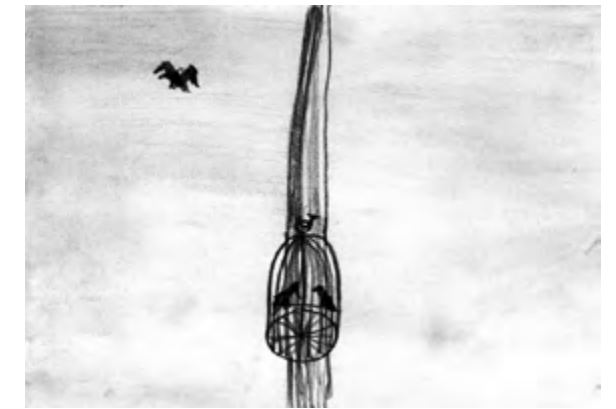
The following day Raven 2 is bought out of the cage and set free. Squawking loudly she screams, "I'm free, I'm free, I'm free" and flies up as high as she can until she can see land.

This time the land she can see is in almost the same direction as that of the ship, away from home. With some confusion in her mind, and realising that it can't be her old home she is flying to, she decides it must be her new home. Raven 2 remembers the stories of a far-off land in this direction, told to her in the past by a very wise old raven. This land was Iceland.

On the ship the remaining raven is feeling alone and sad that his two friends should leave him like this. Where on earth was his friend Raven 2 flying off to, in the opposite direction from home?

When Raven 2 reaches Iceland, she is exhausted and finds herself alone, with no sign of any other ravens or anything at all that seems familiar. After a cold and lonely night, Raven 2 wakes to find the ship in a nearby bay. Raven 3 having been set free from the cage on the ship, sees what he thinks must be his friend Raven 2. He gives a loud "squawk" and flies up to meet her. They are both so overjoyed to see each other again they squawk freely and fly high into the sky.

Written by Thomas Hawson
The Three Ravens, 2004.



List of Illustrations

These illustrations are of the works shown at the Lost at Sea Exhibition, open from 27 August to 18 October 2015, at The Hippodrome, Harbour Road, Eyemouth. All works belong to and all photographs are taken by the artist unless otherwise stated.

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21 x 15 cm each

Spirit vessel 1, 2014, Cover
Painted canvas and timber
270 x 60 cm

Biography

1973
Born, Louth, UK

1993-94
Foundation in Art and Design
Lincoln College of Art

1994-97
Fine Craft BA (Hons)
Brunel University, BCUC

1997-Present
Lives and works in Scottish Borders

!998-2003
Visiting Lecturer, Glasgow School of Art

2001
Morton Fraser Award
Royal Scottish Academy

2002-03
Taught at Brunel University, BCUC

2003-06
Practice based PhD
Contemporary Craft in Iceland: Communicating Culture Through Making
Brunel University

2012-13
Lecturer at Heriot Watt University, Galashiels, Scotland

2015
The Flora Wood Award
Royal Scottish Academy

Solo Exhibitions

2004
Handverk og Hönnun (Handwork and Design), Reykjavik, Iceland

Gunnarsstofnun, Skriethuklaustur, Egilsstaethir, Iceland

The Faroe’s Crafts Society, Tórshavn, Faroe Islands

Shetland Museum, Lerwick, Shetland, Scotland

The Lighthouse, Glasgow, Scotland

The Viking Ship Museum, Roskilde, Denmark

2015
Hippodrome, Eyemouth, Scotland

Selected Exhibitions

1997
New Designers, London

Shiopley Art Gallery, Gateshead

1998
Scottish Natural Heritage Headquarters

2000
Shiopley Art Gallery, Gateshead

UK-DK Designer Days, Copenhagen

Hamburg Day, Hamburg

National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh

2000, 2007-08-09-10-11-12-13-14-15-16-17
Visual Arts Scotland, Edinburgh

2001
Sit Up, Ettrick Riverside Gallery, Selkirk, Scotland

2001-02
Onetree, National Tour of UK

2008
Pauline Burbidge and Charles Poulsen Open Studio Guest Artist

Prestigious Commissions

1999
Roof Garden Benches, Oncology Unit, Birmingham Hospital

2000
Speakers Chair, Icelandic Parliament, permanent collection

2000-01
Crossing Furniture, St Mary’s Cathedral, Glasgow

Collaborations/Assistants

1994
Assistant to Richard Harris, Sculptor, Bourne Wood, Lincolnshire

1995
Assistant to Richard Harris, Sculptor, Petange, Luxembourg

1998
Assistant to Miles Aldridge, Photographer, set design, L’umo Vogue, N.292

1999
Assistant to Richard Harris, sculptural decking and roof garden, Oncology Unit, Birmingham Hospital



Acknowledgments

Without any doubt I must first thank my father, who will always remain a touchstone regarding my art and making practice. None of the work in this show would have been possible without the enduring support of my wife Jenny. My children Fergus and Freyja give me a fresh perspective on the world through their eyes and experiences. Ian and Paula Tod have shared their enthusiasm and curatorial skills in hosting and supporting the exhibition at the Eyemouth Hippodrome. The Eyemouth harbour masters, past and present, fishing folk, old salts, yachtsman and others I have met along the seaway have all assisted me in my apprenticeship with the sea and thanks to them all for freely sharing

it with me. Søren Nielsen head boat builder at Denmark’s Roskilde Viking Ship Museum provided an all too brief experience in boatbuilding within his yard for me, I loved every moment of it. Thanks to Søren and his colleagues, they installed confidence in my hands and imagination to realize I could take boatbuilding much further. To all the craftsmen and artists I have met in Iceland and the Faroe Islands who have undoubtedly been inspired by their affinity to nature and their northern environment, thank you for sharing your wisdom in resourcefulness.

Thomas Hawson and Shona Sinclair, in Conversation

16.8.2015

In Thomas Hawson’s studio, Shona Sinclair (Curator, with the Scottish Borders Council) and Tom are standing beside his *Lost at Sea Boat* and related drawings, discussing the work shortly before his show at the Hippodrome, Eyemouth.

Shona Sinclair: What’s the title of your exhibition Tom?

Thomas Hawson: *Lost at Sea*.

SS: What is the theme for this piece (referring to the boat installation)?

TH: I would like it to be misunderstood in a way, or people to take their own view of it or take away their own ideas. For me, it’s that idea we’re not supposed to be at sea, when you go there it’s a bottomless environment because you can’t master it in a way, you float across the top of it but there is so much to it, it’s fascinating.

SS: So what inspired you to create it apart from that?

TH: Yeah, my father died and he had worked all his life offshore, all the life I knew, and of course I couldn’t go with him. I was at home, but you know, it obviously installed in me a deep fascination. We went on holiday together on the sea, in a way it was another home to him, it was an environment he was used to, all be it, the fact that he was on an oilrig.

SS: Tell me there’s a lot of difference between dark and light in your work, and at the end of the project the drawings that you have made they’re quite dark, and the fact the boats black but it’s got the lightness of the wood, do you see it as a positive piece of work, an uplifting piece of work?

TH: I imagine he’s inside the pod, I’ve made the pod like a sort of floating coffin, if you like, and the idea about making the boat and the pod, is to metaphorically take him offshore, tow these pods offshore, in an offshore wind and then see them float off out to sea, blown across the sea, too you know, wherever they come to their end. When we come to do that, it is going to be full of me, Jenny, and the dog, and the kids, and we are going to decorate the boat with our colourful flags, stuff. It’s kind of like opposite you know, it’s something, it’s somewhere you can’t go it’s not taboo, it’s something, it’s an abyss, it’s appropriate, blacks an appropriate thing, maybe for a funeral.

SS: Well that’s what I mean, the colour is funereal, but the light, you see the light.

TH: The light there is the moon, of course the moon, if you go to sea, the moon, the moon in a way, is everything, because it’s the tide and it dictates the currents, along with the sun of course.

SS: So how you used the lightness of the wood to contrast.

TH: Yeah I like the contrast of the lightness of the spruce and the dark canvas, and also my dad

worked in the oil industry and it killed him, it was a cancer related to the industry, and you know, dripping the shiny black goo all over the canvas, soaking it in that, it’s kind of like, you know it’s what happened to him basically.

SS: So you’re going to involve your children in the final sendoff?

TH: Yeah, that’s the idea.

SS: And the whole family?

TH: Yeah.

SS: So tell us about the oars and how you’ve made it a practical piece as well an art installation and very artistic, there’s a lot of practicalities about it, so?

TH: Yeah, it all works and it’s made by my own fair Lilywhites, and there is a commitment to craftsmanship there, honouring a time served relationship with wood and making things work well and efficiently, and seaworthy, I have tried to make it as seaworthy as possible, it’s a very practical boat for my kids to use, and for me and Jenny my wife to lift it on and off the roof of the car. So it’s kind of like made-to-measure really, to our needs.

SS: You’ve come from a very practical background and it’s all about practicality, technique and usability, how have you found making that jump from your practical furniture making and boat building into a more artistic conceptual work?

TH: Well I suppose I’m just free, I’ve given myself an open brief to work for myself, and I’m making something that makes me happy, in response to my life, you know. And when you come to contemplate why your father died, or how he died and who was he, what does he mean to you, you know, what’s the meaning of death, why was I so obsessed with the sea, what’s the sea got to do with death or afterlife, or you know in away, it just felt so natural to make it, and because I was wanting to make art, it seemed as a project you know. I was fortunate I suppose because I felt like I hadn’t got any choice. Given the choice that was the first thing I was going to make, or do, something to, you know, as a tribute to him, he gave me the inspiration in a away, with a commitment not to rush in and make something happen. My father had possibly too much patience because he hardly ever got anything done (laugh), I don’t know how to put it, knowing your limitations.

SS: Your dad would have understood what you’ve done here, he would understand it, it’s not beyond, it’s straightforward.

TH: When it comes to the artful side, you know there is a fabulous relationship between materials and craftsmanship and nature and environment and animals. When you look at a ship that’s made by hands and made from natural resources, you know aesthetically they are married; they have respect for each other. You could say the same about a big boxy square container ship, but, (loud exhale) it’s difficult to see it, you know, it’s harder. But you see that pod (referring to the work, Spirit

Vessel), that’s made like a sea kayak, an Inuit sea kayak, or a small canvas canoe, they are so anthropomorphic, like a folded leaf, or something you would find in nature. If you made it small and hid it in the woods you would not be surprised to find it, you know if you made a boxy containers ship or an oil rig small you would be struggling to find something in nature to resemble it.

SS: So are the pods are they about rebirth?

TH: yeah, I think they are.

SS: and carrying on the seeds so your father lives on through you and your family?

TH: yeah, I suppose.
SS: I was just wondering about that, you were talking about the mix between craftsmanship and nature and the environment.

TH: I like the anthropomorphic nature of it, I like the fact that the boat and the pod belong in the sea, but, kind of we don’t (laugh), we are passengers on the boat, you know, it’s our bridge into that environment, it’s a bridge into my father’s past environment that I knew nothing about, and it’s a bridge back to remember him, you know.

SS: And what do you think your father would think?

TH: I don’t know I dread to think.

SS: What would he say to you. Tim, what would he say?

TH: He would probably open a bottle of champagne and shed a tear actually, rather than say anything (laughing), he would say go for it probably, he would be happy I was getting away with it (laughing).

SS: It’s not about getting away with it.

TH: At the moment I am making this stuff for myself, so selfishly not giving a hoot really, I mean I’ve made the boat a bit for the kids, not really thinking of anyone else, it feels very selfish, but it feels like it’s the only thing I can do, so it feels like I am getting away with it, so far.

SS: It’s not that though, you can’t say that, you know, that your getting away with it. It’s your tribute, is it not your tribute? Is it not a bit cathartic for you too, working through, you know your loss?

TH: Yeah but I’m very fortunate to be able to do that aren’t I?

SS: You are.

TH: Not everyone else can do that you know, but I’ve worked very hard to get into a position where I can start to make art. And my dad helped me an awful lot, he facilitated that in a way.

SS: So do you see this as a start?

TH: Of course it’s always a start isn’t it, it’s not the start it’s a narrative, it feels like a start, I am making a stab at a professional art commitment, you know I’m not a professional, but I’ve got stuff for sale and it’s my first solo show.

SS: And do you see that reflecting in your craft, in your practical craft as well then, do you think it’ll bring?

TH: Yea, I think I’ll forget about, because I’m only working for myself, the output might go down but the craftsmanship will go up.

SS: Have you got an urge now, to do more?

TH: Oh yeah.

SS: I know you’ve got the kitchen, but are you distracted by ideas for new bodies of work?

TH: Yeah. Absolutely, it’s painful doing anything else now, I’ve got so much stuff I want to make, I think it’s got a voice, for me, but it’s also got a resonance with you know, the way we live now and.

SS: So do you think that’s the way you’re going to go?

TH: Yea, if I can be disciplined enough.

SS: So it’s not going to be, Tom Hawson furniture maker?

TH: No

SS: House builder (referring to Tom’s own home and studio building)

TH: Well I’m going to have to do house building in the background, but if I can get away with just doing it, you know we’ve all got to make a contribution to paying the bills, and until that day happens when I can pay someone else to do that stuff for me, then I’ll have to do it. But I will make for myself now I think.

SS: I like your work because it has a real practical output from it as well, you know.

TH: Thanks very much for that.

SS: Your work, it’s beautiful, but you always have a, it has a purpose; there is something very practical about it as well as, beautiful and artistic as it is. So you’re not having any other pieces of your work displayed alongside the exhibition?

TH: We’re just sticking to the lost at sea bits, I think we might, well, there are some related sculptures upstairs and some other drawings.

SS: Are you going to launch it (the boat) at the end of the exhibition?

TH: No. I don’t know when I’m going to do it.

SS: Is that going to be private?

TH: Well not really, I think I’ll invite people. To share it, I’m going to document it with black and white photography, produce a small book or something.

SS: That would be nice.

TH: With an explanation and some context, with a visual diary of the day of what we did, I don’t know, but it would be quite nice as a small book.

SS: I’m really taken with the one of the man (Inheritance, drawing), is it supposed to be you carrying the pod, it looks like a real burden?

TH: Yeah, that’s right.

SS: It looks like a real struggle.

TH: Well it is, isn’t it? You carry the weight of your fathers, that felt really apparent making it you know, and carrying it around, in a way you, as your father gets old and not so well he off loads to you his burdens, and you have no choice but to take the reins in a way, and that’s both practical and sort of intellectually as well I think. It has a big effect, I think of some of the ideas I used to hold have turned 180° (laughter).

SS: But that’s maturing isn’t it, its life experience that does that.

TH: Yeah, yeah

Interview Two

16.8.2015 in Thomas Hawson’s studio with Shona Sinclair

On receiving the Flora Wood Award (for most original Art work) at the 2015 Visual Arts Scotland show at the Royal Scottish Academy, Thomas has been describing the reaction from his peers to his work and the artists they have suggested he study.

TH: The art of Will Maclean, so he’s a formal painter trained in Scotland, who got into seafaring projects, he’s very fascinated with the Inuit as well, and that whole relationship of, that kind of, that anthropomorphic relationship, I can see that in the stuff he’s collecting and showing, of stuff, and the Hunter, and then you get into the shamanic level, you know. As soon as you get into it, any environment you get into the animals, as you get into the quarry and a respect for them, you end up having a shamanic view of it all.

SS: So how have you, looking at some inspirational painters like Will McLean, how is that developing the project, developing your work?

TH: I kind of like the way he uses, in a way he’s using found objects and drawing, combining them into sort of assemblages, as a response to his, as a sort of record, a way of reflecting upon his experiences with the sea.

SS: So you mentioned the next part of the project is to go with the kids.

TT: You see it’s important for me, you know, I’ve made a massive commitment to facilitate my kids own decision-making and risk assessment in hostile environments, and the sea being really important in a way, to me, to help to facilitate their own adventures into the sea. And because I’ve been doing that anyway, I’ve realised that’s, that’s also an outlook, a really strong outlook of my own, that’s the way I was brought up. It’s shared with many people but you know, in contrast to the environment we live in, the social constructs that we are building for ourselves, you know all this health and safety.

SS: Sanitised and safe.

TH: Rubber mats under all play equipment and all that, all that stuff drives me mad. And it’s giving them the confidence to go into an unfamiliar environment and survive, and empowering them.

SS: To have the skills.

TH: The tools you need and the knowledge you need, and the respect you need to do it. And the best way to do that is to get them there and give them a chance to do it for themselves. And that’s partly why I built that Lost at Sea boat (Guffaw). And the next phase of the project is to put them on, I wanted to tow them behind the boat, behind our ‘Chuckle’ (the families small folkboat sailing yacht). But now I think it would just be easier that me and Jenny (Tom’s Wife) are in the canoe, or Guffaw which is the lost at sea boat, either put them (the Kids) in it (Guffaw) and we’ll be in a rowing boat, and facilitate them to camp on their own island, and we might camp around the corner, but you know.

SS: It’s a bit Swallows and Amazons.

TH: Yeah.

SS: Giving them the freedom.

TH: It will probably be staged a little bit, but I will use them as my subject to study, I will draw them, I’ve taken up black-and-white photography and I want to collect found objects and whittle things. Bring all that together the drawing the black-and-white photography and the found objects and create assemblages that illustrate that commitment, you know. And the narrative of their adventure or something, and create little stage sets of the things that they did. It would be nice.

SS: That sounds really good actually, you never did, said any of that before, that’s the next part.

TH: That’s the next bit, that’s what’s coming next anyway. At the end of the day if I can take this art thing any further, I suppose some of it I’ve got to sell.

SS: Yeah, you do.

TH: And performance pieces and weird looking boats that are questionably seaworthy aren’t going to sell very well. (laughter).

SS: Well.

TH: Well doing all that visual stuff as well, consolidates the work, helps reflect on the work and the journey, and becomes formal examples of that thinking, which is art isn’t it?

SS: I know what you mean though; they can become separate pieces stand-alone pieces, they don’t have to be part of the installation as it were, so.

TH: Yeah, so the constant narrative of creative adventures, doing things and making stuff to make those things happen is possibly art in itself but it’s not sustainable because no one is going to buy it. It’s making me happy and perhaps the people taking part and the lookers on.

SS: But the likes of these look, all mounted up in a box, they would be great you know, sellable pieces you know, I think.

