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Remarkable work inspired by the unremarkable things in life

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VISUAL ART: IF THERE were an artistic equivalent of the slow-food movement, it's safe to assume that Tom Hammick would be a fully signed-up member.

Although it is usually straightforward-looking in its finished state, his work in *Pro Tem* at the Paul Kane Gallery is characterised by its reflective consideration. He aims to distil a mass of complex material into as simple a form as possible, and his paintings, with their blocks of intense colour and their spare, stylised drawing, somehow manage to conjure up not just specific scenes but a whole world view.

Hammick was born in Wiltshire in 1963. He initially studied art history and then trained as a stonemason for a while before returning to college, this time to study fine art at Camberwell, where he went to complete an MA in printmaking. One gets the sense of someone with a general feeling for what he's aiming for but not a precise idea. That came into focus along the way. Now Hammick lives in East Essex and also spends time in Nova Scotia in Canada. He first visited and worked there some years ago, and the experience was transformative.

His art is humane in its detail and its generalities. That is, the images he makes are inspired by small, unremarkable things in life – unremarkable but vital and cherishable. Collectively, those images sketch out a much bigger picture, relating to what it is to be alive in the world, to questions of what is valuable and important and how we might fruitfully engage with our surroundings. All of which might sound a bit preachy and didactic, which is not the case. We can infer all this from the work not because Hammick sets out to sermonise, but because his work seems to honestly reflect his own experiences and sensibility.

The broad view emerges most clearly in pieces that stem directly or indirectly from that original visit to Nova Scotia, pieces that frame the individual within vast settings of woodland, landscape and the limitless reaches of the night sky. Scale is central, because much of Hammick's work is close and intimate, even domestic, in its concerns, and the omnipresent awareness of these successively greater spaces situate the human subjects in a cosmic rather than a domestic frame of reference. This isn't to diminish the significance of the domestic. On the contrary, it underlines its importance in the scheme of things.

A striking number of Hammick's paintings feature the hours of darkness. The little *Night Pylon*, for example, is a beautifully poetic image, almost abstract. *Sea Wall* features a starlit expanse of water and a lone figure. Perhaps Hammick relishes night-time so much because it brings the stars into play, opening out the stage. It also emphasises another recurrent preoccupation, which is the idea of the homestead, a comfortable refuge in the darkness. In *Norman's Bay*, the pattern of a house's lights against the night reads as a Mondrian-like composition, a paean to order, light and the creativity that is specifically addressed in the Night Studio paintings, in which the branches of a tree spread out symbolically into the sky. The heart of the show is contained in studies of vegetable beds, one colourfully emblazoned with images arranged in orderly rows, like a display of seed packets. It's an optimistic image, expressing a Candide-like view of realistic contentment.

ANDREW CLANCY'S sculptures, in *What's bred in the bone*, his show at the Cross Gallery, are technically exemplary. He uses a range of materials, including wood, steel, bronze and marble, and is to all appearances impressively and thoroughly comfortable with all of them (he taught bronze-casting for some years). This mastery, and his liking for precision generally, comes at a price. In

some cases, the formidable physical presence of the work is disproportionate to the import of the punning title it is designed to convey. All that effort, one thinks, for a bit of wordplay. Hence *Useless is a gun that cannot be fired*, and *Pointless is a hand with a truncated finger*. Beautifully done, but . . . That's why the work is better when the correspondence between title and meaning is not so rigidly enforced. Even *Cloud Nine*, which has a literal meaning in the way the form of the work reflects its title, works in a wider sense as well. And *Boy and Multiply*, the latter a bust carved from multiple sheets of edge-on plywood, look further in terms of metaphor. Clancy is formidably capable; it's great to see someone with such a level of technical skill, and when he gives his imagination free rein you get an indication of his potential.

SHERMAN SAM'S *Let's Stay Together* at the Rubicon Gallery is a tremendous installation, a single wall of interrelated drawings and paintings and, more than an installation per se, each piece, many really small, merits individual consideration. Sam deliberately works on a small scale, often on scraps of paper. It is part of his casual, informal aesthetic, which, though it is indeed casual, is also rigorous in the sense that his mark-making is invested with a wealth of experience. He is exceptionally alert to the possibilities as he sets about making patterns with line and colour.

His aim is not to tell us something, to convey a message, but to engage us in a dialogue, to get us thinking about a form of expression and communication that might well be as old as human consciousness. To this end, he tries to establish conversational spaces in his work, spaces free of the trappings and connotations of high art but that nonetheless offer challenges to our eyes and minds. He does so with good-natured wit and inventiveness.