Jeffrey Dennis Jamie Shovlin

Short Stories, Unfinished Visions

Here are two parallel and contrasting shows by artists whose work involves the complex task of making art and chasing meaning from different directions.

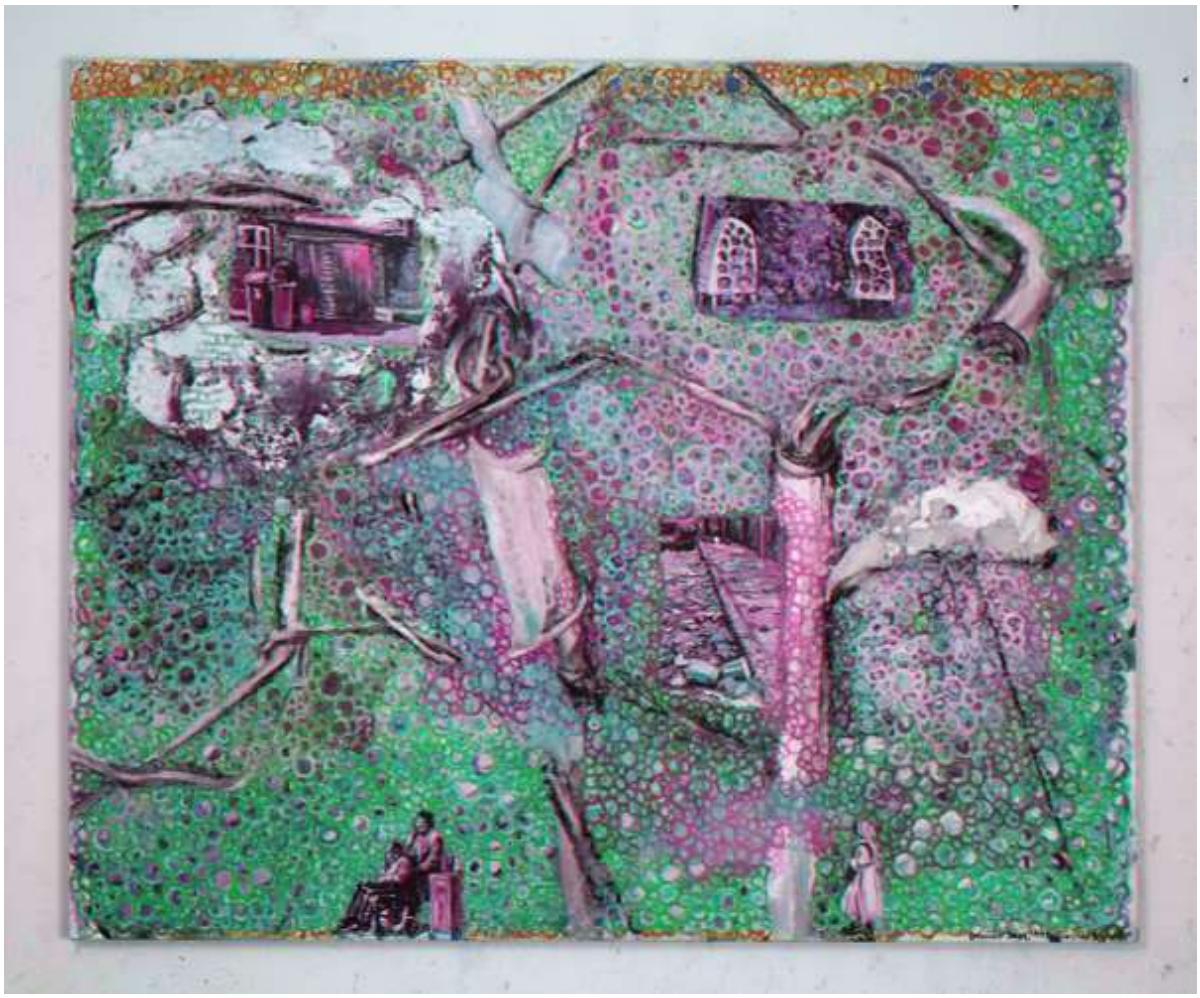
One show teems with diverse action in the forms of painted representation and controlled but effervescent gesture. The other is sparsely installed yet no less full: an image of a crow repeats at intervals around the walls, generating a kind of mystery about its origin and meaning. Colour and texture are features of both shows although the effects are quite different.

The paintings of Jeffrey Dennis comprise small marks spread over large canvases. Uneven layers of texture and colour divulge disconnected scenes of human activity; like flashes of memory, they start stories from diverse time zones that are never completed.

Jamie Shovlin is not restricted by media: an idea will select its own way of working. He has used film, painting, objects, music, performance in previous projects. On this occasion he returns to his first loyalty, drawing. Whereas the idiom is most associated with recording reality, Shovlin is interested in how we process information and often fail to separate truth from fiction when outward appearances lead us astray.

At that point, stories and theories arise to help us make sense of these worlds. Dennis evokes a sometimes farcical and sporadically frustrating attempt to join fragmented narratives despite the obstacles the same painting puts in the way. Showing in the upper gallery, Shovlin draws the abundant natural light of the space into how his work can be enjoyed and interpreted.

For both artists, these shows represent their debuts in Cornwall, which they have prepared for over many years by first exhibiting in museums and galleries around the world.





. . . but not always as we know it

Martin Holman

There are as many ways to make a picture as there are artists compelled to create them. Prevailing mainstreams of style are less strong now than in the post-war decades (when abstract Modernism held sway) and tributaries run freely towards a single, big category of 'image-making' that embrace all sorts of combinations – of materials, representations, origins and outcomes. Art, for instance, no longer has to be conclusiveness; investigation and exploration might take priority, as might the process of making. Why? One reason is that art relates to life, and life ceased resolving itself into clear options years ago (if, indeed, it ever did).

How things seem to be now ('seem' because even that eludes definition) hands a great opportunity to artists who follow their intuition into proposing new images for the rest of us to look at, think about and, maybe, remember. And that is how the viewer also gains the space to ponder more than the surface but to consider what led up to it and what, for each of us, leads away. The old relationship of the artist who actively represents (perhaps a reality we all think we see in common) and the spectator who passively consumes is no longer

Previous pages

Jeffrey Dennis, *The Wayside Signs III*, 2022, oil and charcoal on linen, 101.5 x 81.5 cm

Jeffrey Dennis, *The Girl who came Back*, 2016, oil and charcoal on linen, 12 x 130 cm



Jeffrey Dennis, *Cover Your Tracks*, 2017, oil and charcoal on linen, 101 x 148 cm

sufficient. Again, the nature of life dictates a degree of estrangement from one-to-one exchanges. The hand-made image has mass media to contend with, with social media and the 24-hour news cycle; with wall-to-wall streaming and the relentless demands on our attention.

Dennis and Shovlin are two artists deny their audience a clear statement of what might be going on in their pictures. The familiar expectation of a cohesive image, or the starting point for a narrative, isn't offered here. As such, they present an authentic reflection of their times but from different perspectives. In Dennis's paintings, the once unified canvas has dissolved into a fluid-like miasma through which pockets of incidents break surface in search of connection. Humanity has always sought to make sense of the world, often making links between unviable facts and events that nonetheless get them through the haze of half-remembered happenings from uncorroborated sources. People still do that – while also running for the train,

scrambling for the best offer, dreaming of tussling with bureaucracy, hassling for a job and dreaming of escape. The hectic, discontinuous, fragmented daily experience of urban lives emerges as one of his strongest themes, given form by paint, line, colour, design because art has the extraordinary ability to transmute ideas and mute matter into a projection of experience.

Shovlin has been fascinated for a long time by how the trust people place that what is 'generally accepted' probably represents the truth. What alternative do we have? We are not all our own researchers, scientists, diplomats and economists. Instead, we take the safest attributions. Mischievously, perhaps, rather than critically, he tests that trust with projects that are not what at first they seem. He probes ambiguity about authorship and the unreliability of assumptions in a world packed full of 'known unknowns', alternative truths and the endless repackaging of old ideas so that they look new. As Artificial Intelligence begins to test our credulity, Shovlin arrived ahead of time not with warnings but holding common practice up to the light. With disingenuousness occurring almost as policy in government, has there ever been a better time to create your own history?

Both artists leave their work open for viewers to stake out their own claims to meaning, as we do in our own lives, and to question their preconceptions. Above all, their work demonstrates their deep respect for the traditions of the idioms and media they use. The individual, investigative, even eclectic way they approach 'image-making' – painting and drawing – proves the enduring vitality of these ancient artforms.



Jamie Shovlin, *Leonard Jack, The Sad Crow (066)*, 2023, watercolour on paper on canvas

Coming back to where I've been before

Jeffrey Dennis

When my grandmother's first husband Mr Pryor (prior to her meeting Mr Dennis) brought his St Helena bride back to Cornwall, I'm not sure how long they stayed before moving up-country. I claim no ancestral affiliation to the county. I have been simply one of the thousands of devoted, returning visitors.

My family first holidayed here in the early sixties, but I was too young to have anything but imagined, black-and-white memories of that trip. It wasn't until 1978, when Alison Jones and I extended hopeful thumbs on the M4 Hammersmith slip, that I returned to the county, having signed up for the Slade School's away-week in an old hostel booked by tutor Philip Sutton. Having triumphantly hitched as far as Penzance, we realised we hadn't written down the actual address. But eventually, after calling at random residences on the road between Land's End and Zennor, we eventually found our fellow students in the old grey schoolhouse outside Carnyorth.

That and subsequent trips with my life-partner-to-be Jocelyn Clarke proved Cornish art baptisms: a freezing Atlantic plunge with Patrick Hughes, drinking with Terry Frost's family, staying at Patrick Heron's 'Eagle's Nest', visiting Ben Nicholson's and Barbara Hepworth's studios. A fall from a dry stone wall, on the way home from the local lock-in,

left me with the souvenir of a slight limp that lasted somewhat longer than my student overdraft. Other trips followed over the years: sand-caked, infant-strewn stays with family and artist friends in houses around the peninsula. Although the buckets and spades have long been lying neglected in a London cellar, images of many of the Cornish places and people (residents, visitors and workers) continue to pop up in unpredictable combinations, as in the paintings exhibited here.

There are also images of another recent visit; to Rome where, in the 'Non-Catholic Cemetery for Foreigners' in Testaccio, the bones and ashes of famous poets and painters, including Keats and Shelley, rest under pine and cypress. I've depicted the shady corners of this place guarded by various imaginary visitors. It's not necessary to believe in ghosts to imagine that something of the spirit of those buried there persists in that place, sustained and refuelled by the generations of their followers who call, like pilgrims, to pay their respects. Surely something like that must be true of Cornwall too, where, saluting artists that came before, people like me return to explore the relationship between the rock and froth of the coast, the churn and spit of imagination.



A few minutes with

Jeffrey Dennis

Martin Holman **At what age did you decide to pursue a career as an artist? How did your family greet your decision?**

Jeffrey Dennis My parents had a huge respect for education of all kinds (not having had any opportunity for higher education themselves) but a mistrust of any whiff of bohemianism. They were quite risk-averse (understandable in those who had to be self-reliant from an early age, and whose lives were bifurcated by the Second World War). I am therefore massively grateful to them for nervously acquiescing in my decision to decline university in favour of art school. Being quite stubborn I probably would have done it anyway, and perhaps they foresaw that, but it was like taking the hand-brake off to know your parents trusted your decision.

What was your earliest cultural influence?

I remember looking very closely at the reproduction (I think it had been given away with washing powder) of Constable's 'Boat-building at Flatford', hanging in our hall, noticing how he had included swallows, tiny dabs of paint, skimming the pasture. I gave similar close-up scrutiny to two very dark oils of river landscapes, by family folklore bought by a relative returning home on a troop-ship that had stopped at Naples. I recall thinking how exciting it was that these were real paintings. But really the most massive early influence was the television: I spent endless hours redrawing blood-soaked battle-scapes, cowboy shoot-ups and implausible spacecraft.

If you hadn't decided to be an artist, what would you have done (or have liked to have done) in your working life?

Amateur electrics and plumbing are now quite understandably discouraged, but I belong to a generation of art graduates who, eking out a low-key postgraduate existence in Britain's large cities, were allocated semi-derelict, so-called 'hard-to-let' housing (an oxymoron today), and left to figure out how to connect up basic amenities for themselves. I have an unusual skill-set: ready, if required, to install a low-flush, close-coupled toilet whilst

simultaneously holding a conversation about post-painterly abstraction.

Do you feel your painting has a place alongside other art forms? Literature and music are often cited to painters as parallels. In your case, I am wondering, too, about film and performance.

The late Stuart Morgan memorably argued, in the nineteen-eighties, that art criticism should not be confined to a formalist or connoisseur-ish niche, but visual art should be discussed as an equal partner to literature or music, relevant to any and all aspects of society.

The zone where one medium attempts to adopt the attributes of another is very fruitful; an extension of what is sometimes termed 'ekphrasis'. Thinking about how film can jump-cut between scenes and places was key to my experiments with new forms of painting that combined different kinds of space and scale together within one frame. I like to think of the studio as a sort of private stage, or small arena where improvised models, daft experiments and miniature performances can be recorded, later to appear in paintings, perhaps.

As a painter of contemporary subjects, what role does 'history' have in your way of working? How our surroundings change seems to play a part how you view the world.

'History-painting', as a category of art, saw a resurgence through the work of Kiefer and other European artists in the late twentieth century, another refreshing riposte to the formalist critical ghettos mentioned above.

But more subtly, history is embedded in the contemporary pursuit of painting: a very direct medium — just making marks on a surface — but as soon as you start a painting you are by implication starting a conversation with every other painter from the past (no pressure, then). Living in London (but also strikingly visible in, for example, Rome, or hundreds of other towns and cities) you are made aware, every day, of your local environment as a sedimentation of acreted layers of rebuilding and adaptation. Many utopian architects crave a clean sweep, but this is usually disastrous for city

life. This idea of accumulated layers of improvisation and adjustment is also crucial to my way of painting.

The influence of our personal history seems apparent as a source to your imagery, of memory and perception as forces in our daily lives.

What is sometimes called 'embodied viewing' is crucial to our experience of painting: of course a painting is conceived from all sorts of personal stuff to do with me, as its painter, but the subsequent experience of that painting for anyone (including me) standing in a room, sharing physical space with it, is a reflective transaction. John Berger, in his essay 'Between Two Colmars', wrote about revisiting Grünewald's altarpiece painting of 1516 after a gap of ten years, describing how he was forced to reflect on how he had changed since his first visit — by all the life, politics and memories that had accrued in the interval — and how that changed his understanding of the painting, not necessarily understanding it better; just differently.

Jeffrey Dennis has exhibited in solo presentations since 1979 in venues in the UK, USA and Italy that include the Whitechapel art Gallery, London, the Orchard Gallery, Belfast, Salvatore Ala Gallery, New York and Milan, and Art Space Gallery, London. In 2015 he was the subject of a major retrospective. 'Ringbinder', at the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, Sunderland, and recently showed at the Keats-Shelley House in Rome. He has participated in numerous group exhibitions, most notably at Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt-am-Main, Tate, London, and the Royal Academy of Arts, London. His paintings are in the collections of the Arts Council, British Council, Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris, Italian Government Art Collection, Keats-Shelley House, Rome, Leeds Art Gallery, Priseman Seabrook Collection, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Swindon Museum and Art Gallery, Tate, London, and in private collections worldwide.

Jeffrey Dennis was born in Colchester in 1958 and lives and works in London. He studied at the Slade School of Fine Art, London, and is currently a senior lecturer on the Fine Art programme at Chelsea College of Art.

Reading list

In 2017, 'Ringbinder' was published by Slimvolume to accompany the exhibition at the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, Sunderland, and contains essays and interviews with fellow artists, writers, curators and gallery directors who have known Jeffrey Dennis since the late 1970s. Also well worth consulting are the catalogues to Dennis's solo shows at Art Space Gallery, London, in 2003, 2006, 2008, 2019 and 2022. Older texts still have great value. These include those by Stuart Morgan (Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1986), Tony Godfrey (Salvatore Ala Gallery, 1988), Trevor Richardson (Weatherspoon Art Gallery, Greensboro, USA, 1991), and Martin Holman (London Magazine, 1994).

As the crow sighs

Martin Holman

By contrast with Jeffrey Dennis's paintings, which teem with activity and has diffused points of interest across the surface rather than a central focal point, Jamie Shovlin has conceived watercolour drawings that are small, intimate concentrations of colour, surface and texture held in dramatic suspension by the repetition of a single image, a crow's head in a variety of positions. Although their dimensions are slight by common exhibition standards and their number (twelve) creates a spare hang, their colours reverberate through the space. They seem to converse with the space they occupy, the light-filled upper gallery at Tremenheere where the ambience corresponds with the changing seasons. Shovlin's birds are bathed in the glow of a warm late summer and in lengthening shadows.

These works on paper, which are laid on canvas attached to a wood panel, are experienced in a different way to Dennis's canvases. The head stays still for the eyes to take in the entire composition and then to travel around a small area, looking at the black drawing, the flow and density of colour over paper, the top layer sanded to smoothness, perhaps also at the edge and the object's depth.

No perimeter frame or reflective glass exist as barriers to wondering why this image is here, why it looks the way it does and about the choice and handling of materials have made it look this way. Only the bird's head appears, not all its body, suggesting



Jamie Shovlin, *Leonard Jack, The Sad Crow (036)*, *(074)* and *(076)*, 2023, watercolour on paper on canvas

these representations are not intended as guides for spotters. An alternative purpose may be more poetic, even fanciful. Perhaps the imagination has already begun to turn over the different facets they contain, especially in relation to the enigmatic title each object-like watercolour shares: Leonard Jake, The Sad Crow.

So the bird has an identity. That might trigger a story. Why sad? How did it come by this name? It could be that the crow already belongs to a story. The American poet Edgar Allan Poe, for instance, famously wrote about a raven, the crow's cousin in ornithology, which symbolised the sorrowful remembrance of a lost love. In the book 'The Wizard of Oz' (and then in the celebrated film), crows taunt the scarecrow and noisily eat the corn. Crows have a poor reputation in folktales, where they are often portrayed as wreckers. In horror films, they invariably portend evil; their black plumage contributes to that role. Could it explain Shovlin's addition of colour?

No clue to the origin of this crow beyond these images is provided. What part does it play in the pictures? Did Shovlin see a

crow in his garden? Why, then, duplicate it in a single image yet mention only one creature? (Crows are naturally gregarious birds.) On occasion, three crows appear. Are they all Leonard Jake? Conceivably, Shovlin borrowed the image from another source. Illustration, after all, was once common in literature and household decoration. And what significance do the colours have and the dimensions of each work?

The questions outnumber the answers, which is maybe why each encounter can bring about fresh ideas. Questions multiply and that, of course, is the foundation of art. They release the great potential in examining perceptions and testing hypotheses. Art starts the conversation and seldom concludes it. From the artist asking what the next work will be to viewers assessing their part in bringing an artwork – in whatever medium – towards meaning.



A few minutes with

Jamie Shovlin

Martin Holman **At what age did you decide to pursue a career as an artist? How did your family greet your decision?**

Jamie Shovlin I'm not sure I ever pursued it as a career – I'm a terrible professional by any means. I think the first interest and decision that led to a situation whereby I later I realised that I might make some kind of living from making art came when I chose it as a subject at A-level – the first occasion of any progressive intervention in my own future that I ever made. That choice was met with mild confusion and mirth by my family – a very good kind type of support in inaction and disinterest.

What was your earliest cultural influence?

Probably magazine covers, VHS, cassettes, music videos, commercial artwork – popular media in all types, typically without an author or attribution.

If you hadn't decided to be an artist, what would you have done (or have liked to have done) in your working life?

I'm not sure. I've been working for the past seven years delivering different types of support within the homelessness sector, so I'd hope it would have been something progressive and evidently useful. I'd have liked to have been a professional bon viveur.

You do not feel tied down to specialising in one medium. In past projects you have made large paintings, constructed table-top interiors, condensed a history of the western world into a shorter text, conceived and directed a slasher film, invented the artworks of a talented schoolgirl artist who went missing and has never been found, and performed with a drummer and guitarist as a German 1970s noise-band to theatre audiences although you claim no musical ability. That list is not exhaustive. Is 'visual artist' sufficient description? How do you categorise yourself professionally?

I don't really. I just try and glide through. It's difficult sometimes to work alongside things that you've made in the past as they will always act as a frame within which anything new is regarded. That's sometimes useful, often not. I think having an idea or grand concept of how you consider yourself might only add to that feeling of suffocation when trying to make new things.

On this occasion, you have returned to drawing, which seems to be your first loyalty. What does drawing represent to you?

It's always the point of origin for anything I've done, a plot outline for the drama to follow. Sometimes it doesn't move beyond the outline and sometimes the outline becomes the thing itself. Drawing to me represents an attempt at teasing out some coherence from the noisy tangle of thoughts and fumbles. It's something that is achievable with little means, so it's a fundamentally approachable medium.

Your past production has invariably reused images that already exist publicly as the work of others, whether as drawings from an instructional manual, the cover designs of a famous series of paperback books or the logo of a rock band from the 1970s. Does the portrait of Leonard Jake have similar origins or did you invent it?

It comes from a reproduced watercolour by Basil Ede, a book plate that features a crow and a rook. The crow is at the foot of the page, is in full body profile and has a slightly beleaguered look. It's a small detail from the larger image that I've worked with repeatedly to the point where the image is eating itself, reproduction being reproductions of reproductions, etc. think I've redrawn the crow more than a hundred times. It's anthropomorphic projection, that it's sad. Who knows the sadness a crow feels? It's an associative assumption regarding an emotion, a description of the visuals received rather than the actual emotion. I think it's like the original Ede image of the bird itself, in that it captures reasonably accurately

the look of a crow but really is an echo of a crow, not the thing itself.

Jamie Shovlin's first solo exhibition at Riflemaker, London, in 2003, was purchased by Charles Saatchi. For the next decade, his projects were presented at venues in the UK, Europe and the US. He typically fabricates items purporting to be the work of other hands, as a kind of test of credulity. In 2007 he invented the memorabilia created by the fans of 1970s German noise-rock band, Lustfaust. Neither the fans nor the band ever existed although Shovlin did perform as Lustfaust, or its tribute act, in live venues in the UK and Europe in 2008-12. Tate Britain, London, the Museum of Contemporary Art (MACRO), Rome, Istanbul Biennial, Leicester and Southampton city art galleries, Cornerhouse, Manchester, Haunch of Venison, London and Zurich, and Freight & Volume, New York, are among the many venues to have hosted his shows. This exhibition is the first display of new work in several years, during which time Shovlin pursued alternative work in the social care sector.

Jamie Shovlin was born in Leicester in 1978 and lives and works in London.

Past projects include (2017) *Subs*, The Gallery, De Monfort University, Leicester, *Widows and Orphans*, Lincoln Voices, Lincoln. (2016) *Widows and Orphans*, DKUK Salon, London. (2014) *Redact Variations (Tehran Times)*, Ingleby Gallery, Billboard for Edinburgh. (2013) *How Most of What You Know is Reconstruction,* City Art Gallery, Southampton, *A Defect in Broke Tissue*, Boetzelaer/Nispen, Amsterdam, Netherlands, *(sic)*, Horton Gallery, New York, USA. (2012) Various Arrangements, Haunch of Venison, London. (2011) *Thy Will Be Done*, Tullie House, Carlisle,* *A Film By Jesus Rinzoli*, Horton Gallery, New York, USA and IBID Projects, London, *Three (and a Half) Films with Many Shared Characters*, Unosunove, Rome, Italy. (2010) Hiker Meat, MACRO, Rome, Italy, Grand Union, Birmingham, Fishmarket Gallery, Northampton (and Cornerhouse, Manchester, 2014).* (2009) *The Nature of Our Business*,

Outpost, Norwich, *The Evening Redness in The West*, Haunch of Venison, Zurich, Switzerland.* (2008) *The Ties That Bind*, Unosunove, Rome, Italy. (2007) *A Dream Deferred*, Haunch of Venison, London,* *Aggregate*, City Gallery, Leicester, ArtSway, Sway, Hampshire, Hatton Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne, and Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh.* (2006) *Lustfaust: A Folk Anthology 1976-1981*, Freight & Volume Gallery, New York, USA, *In Search of Perfect Harmony*, 'Art Now', Tate Britain, London.* (2005) *Fontana Modern Masters*, Riflemaker, London.* (2004) *For Some Other Cause*, IBID Projects Vilnius, Lithuania, *Naomi V. Jelish*, Riflemaker, London.*

*Publications accompanied these projects.





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Previous pages

Jamie Shovlin, *Leonard Jack, The Sad Crow (008)*, 2023, watercolour on paper on canvas

Jamie Shovlin, *Leonard Jack, The Sad Crow (005)*, 2023, watercolour on paper on canvas