



Folded



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Clare Burnett, Artist in Residence
Leighton House Museum

7 December 2011–5 January 2012

Cynthia Morrison-Bell, Director of Art Circuit Exhibitions, went to meet Clare Burnett at her West London studio to ask her about her work and her experience as Leighton House's artist in residence.



Clare, I was delighted to hear that you had been awarded the residency at Leighton House and by the opportunity this would give you, and yet I was also intrigued. I wondered how an artist such as you, whose visual language is more akin to minimalism, would respond to Lord Leighton's work, his house and his magnificent eclectic collection of 'world' art? Can you tell me about your initial response to the residency, and what inspired you?

My first interest was whether it would be possible for minimal shapes and forms to hold their own in such opulent surroundings. I wanted to see if they could reveal aspects of the house and Leighton's work, rather than distract from them.

Were there any particular elements within the house that intrigued you?

I started by looking at the tulip motif which runs through the tiles, fabric and furniture and at the material qualities of the tiles. The tulips originated in Iran and Turkey, and travelled west in the bags of European diplomats. As part of the residency I went to Iznik and Istanbul to research both tiles and tulips further. I visited the Iznik Foundation, which has done extensive research into how the original tiles were made. They explained that the tiles were made of quartz and that this gives them the absorbent quality you feel so strongly in the Arab Hall. The quartz is painted with pigments, mainly cobalt and copper oxide – materials which I use to make my paints – then glazed, again in quartz. They also pointed me to several tile-filled mosques in Istanbul. Like Leighton House, these buildings, with relatively neutral exteriors, wrap up their culturally and visually rich interiors – for example, tiles from across the Ottoman Empire; layers of Christianity and Islam inside *Hagia Sofia*; and the surprisingly common feature of a British grandfather clock in many of the mosques.



What happened after your visit to Turkey?

The trip was the key to the rest of my residency. It wasn't the tulips or their story but the physical qualities of the house and the global travel of goods and artefacts that I wanted to pursue. But I also realised that I had become distracted, or maybe seduced, by the decoration, and had missed the thing I should have been looking at all along – Leighton's paintings themselves. The closer I looked the more I noticed his bizarre fascination with drapery – inspired, I knew, by his concern with all things 'classical' – but going far beyond what was necessary. It was a glimpse of a connection between his design flamboyance and his painterly restraint, which otherwise seem so at odds with one another. Take *Greek Girls Playing at Ball* for instance... the fabric is blowing all over the place, as if there were a wind machine behind them! And what about the

extraordinary drapery in *Dædalus and Icarus* and again in *Flaming June*? It's everywhere!

Leighton said that drapery was "a combination of expressed motion and rest; a wayward flow and ripple like a living water together with absolute repose"... maybe this goes some way to explaining his fascination with it! But tell me how this then fitted into your work, what connections did you make?

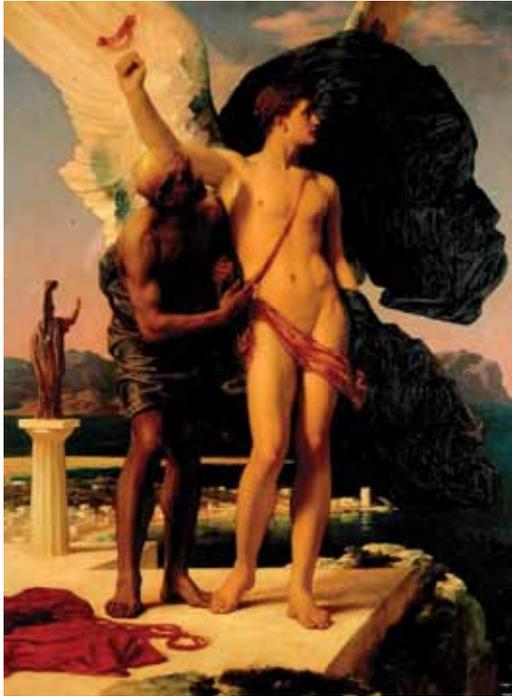
I started noticing and picking up blown about and crumpled paper in the city. Looking with a refreshed eye, I noticed something I'd never seen before – exquisite arrangements of boxes left out for recycling.

I began to make connections between the house, Leighton's paintings and my own practice; how we notice and filter the mass of visual information we

◀ Frederic, Lord Leighton
Study of Drapery
Black and white chalk on
blue paper, 1856–77
30.3 x 23cm

◀ *Crushed 1–3*
Charcoal and pastel on
paper, 2011
20 x 25cm

▶ Frederic, Lord Leighton
Greek Girls Playing at Ball
1889; Dick Institute, Kilmarnock
Oil on canvas
119.4 x 198.1cm



are exposed to; how to make visible those shapes in our everyday world that we hardly notice. Whilst the shapes and folds of newspapers flying around outside reminded me visually and formally of the blown material in Leighton's paintings, the boxes had a more conceptual connection. With their neutral exteriors they have contained and carried goods across the world. These found sculptures, left out in great numbers at night, speak of our relationship with what we consume as well as of our cultural and economic relationships with the rest of the world, just as the neutral exterior of Leighton House raises similar questions with its rich interior acquired and collected from around the world. From then I knew where I was going with the residency. I began to

work on paper and on boxes – ordinary boxes and paper from the street – crumpling, unfolding and refolding, flattening, bending and painting.

◀ Frederic, Lord Leighton
Dædalus and Icarus
1870; Faringdon Collection
Oil on canvas
138.2 x 106.5cm

Tell me about your training, how you started.

I first read architecture at Cambridge. At the time I found it really difficult to think spatially and in three dimensions, and at the Byam Shaw I focussed mainly on painting. Only in retrospect can I see how relevant the architecture training was. Proportion and the shape of spaces are important in my work and I've made a number of site-specific interventions in architectural spaces, such as wall paintings in Le Corbusier's *Unité d'Habitation* building in Marseilles and an installation in the Brompton Cemetery in London.

How was your experience of art school?

I spent a large part of my time at the Byam Shaw in the life room and the National Gallery. This was how I discovered that what I was really interested in was the abstract, formal qualities of art, rather than narrative or figuration. I studied Veronese's *Family of Darius in the house of Alexander* for over a year. I painted in front of it, in the National Gallery, then made two life-size paintings (2 x 4m). Gradually, and despite myself, I removed all signs of the figure and concentrated on shape, proportion, line and colour. I never expected to become an abstract artist, and certainly not as a result of studying Veronese!

So in fact your interest in Leighton's drapery may have been based on your own training and looking at Renaissance art... But I can see that in your work you emphasise the formal quality of a shape by paring it down to its 'essence'. Which artists or art movement do you look at or have influenced you?

We're exposed to so many visual influences, especially with the internet, so it's difficult to know what we take in subconsciously. But there are a few artists I constantly return to – Ellsworth Kelly and Donald Judd in particular, and also the painted steel works of Phillip King and Anthony Caro; artists such as Richard Wright, Katharina Grosse and David Tremlett who articulate spaces with paint; and anonymous artists who make temporary interventions in the street. Most recently I've become excited by the continuing tradition of geometric abstraction in Latin America which connects closely with my work.

What about the work you're making for the Leighton House exhibition? Tell me about your choice of materials and colour for the works exhibited here? Colour is very important to you isn't it? Was it chosen in relation to Leighton's paintings?

For the exhibition, I've come back to my original question of how can a minimalist, pared-down shape fit into such a lush, opulent environment; how can it articulate that space; and how can it hold its own? I want the work to help the visitor see other things in the space. The exhibition features two series: the crumpled paper pieces in the house and the 'unfolded box' work in the Perrin Gallery. In the bedroom, painted with pigment and acrylic and

Crunch – 1-3 ▼
Copper, 2011
12 x 12 x 2cm each



soaked in shellac, *Blown Away/red* will hang alongside photogravures of Leighton's paintings. I have collaborated with Daniel Robbins, Curator of Leighton House, to hang a selection of Leighton's works which reveal his extravagant approach to drapery.

The Perrin Gallery, adjacent to Leighton's Winter Studio, is a tricky space with dark brown walls and horizontal panels in four stripes around the room. The sharp, crisp lines of my aluminium floor sculptures and the softer cardboard and paper of the wall pieces, will emphasise the room's box-like quality. Collected from the local area at night, the boxes are sandwiched between paper and painted with a mixture of pigment, glues and ready-made paint. The colours are high-key to hold their own against the dark walls and to relate in weight and energy, if not in hue, to the intense colours of the rest of the house.

Residencies are a bit like a journey, with a beginning and an end, but it's what you find along the way or what you bring back that's unexpected... What would you say this residency has done for you?

At first I thought this residency would just be about how I might work in a historical space, which I had wanted to do for some time. But I've been surprised by the way so many themes running through my work have been brought together and made sense of – the discarded materials I've been experimenting with; how we relate visually and philosophically to urban space; how slight changes to proportion, colour and material can entirely change a work; how pared down shapes and forms articulate a space; and how encounters with artists and architecture of the past informs my practice. The pressure of an exhibition at the end of the residency has made me push my work further and has raised new questions for the future.







Previous pages:

Icarus' Cloak (side view)

Oil on paper, 2011

43 x 34 x 24cm

Blown Away/yellow-green

Paper, pigment, cellulose paste,
acrylic, shellac, 2011

38 x 38 x 10cm

◀ *Throwaway News 1*

Newspaper, acrylic, pigment
and shellac 2011

20 x 16cm

▶ *Discarded/blue*

Gouache and printing ink on
paper, 2011

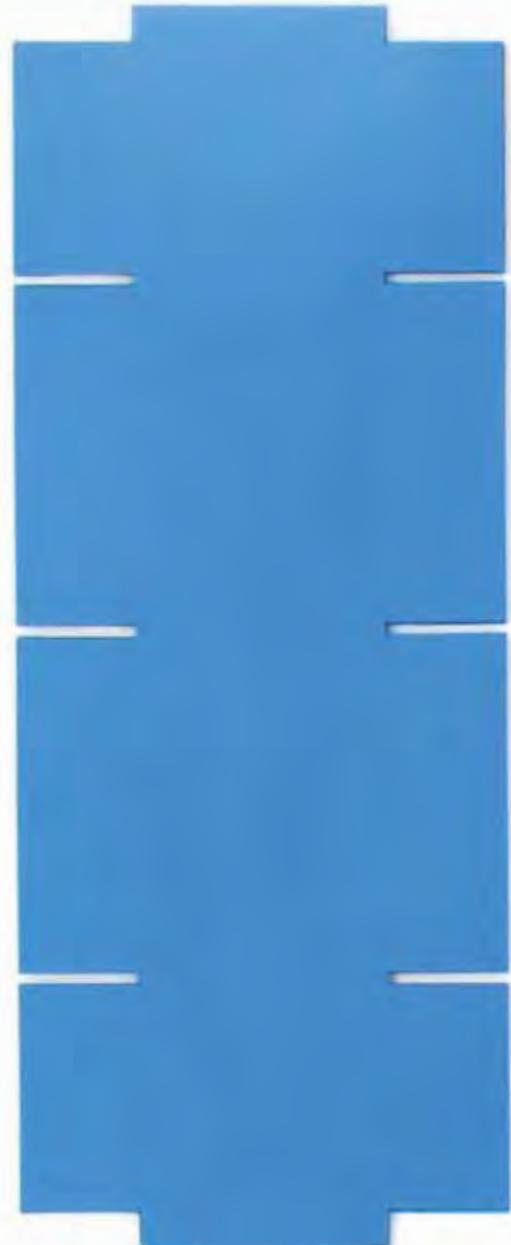
20.5 x 27.3cm

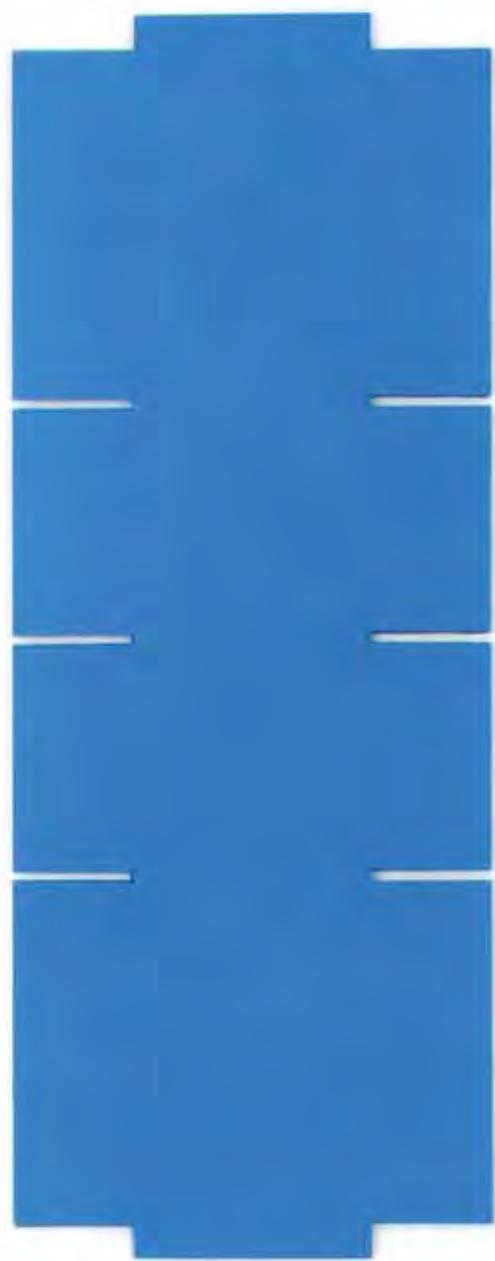
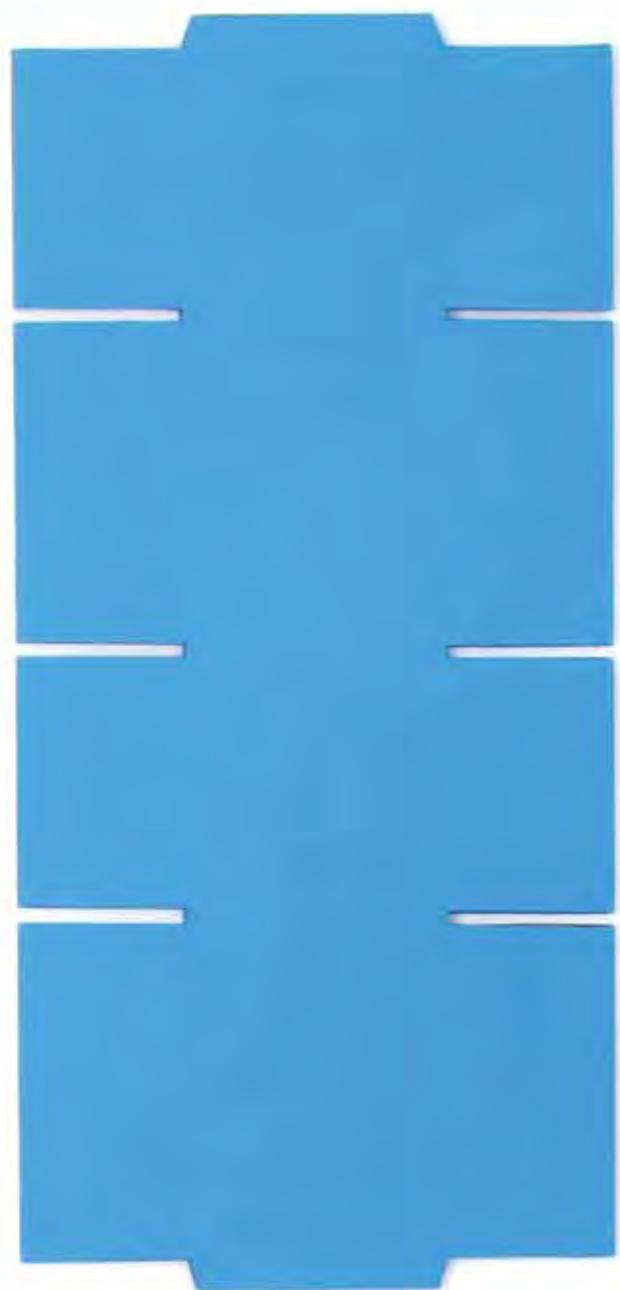






Unfolded 1-3
(maquettes and details)
Precatalyst basecoat on
aluminium, 2011
Final dimensions approx
80 x 180 x 80cm









Previous pages:

Electronic Equipment/cyan

All Saints Cossack Boots/cyan

Printer Package/cyan

GTC Imports/cyan

Acrylic, paper and

cardboard, 2011

Approx 207–212 x 79-93.5cm

◀ *Clothing Consignment* (detail)

Acrylic, paper and

cardboard, 2011

49.5 x 24cm

▶ *Discarded/yellow*

Gouache and printing ink

on paper, 2011

20 x 27cm



Blowing in the Wind:

Leighton and Drapery

Daniel Robbins, Senior Curator, Leighton House



In 1889, writing in *The Magazine of Art*, Annie Williams identified Frederic Leighton as ‘the great English master of drapery’. Partly this came as a response to his technical skill in representing every folded and rippled surface but it was also recognition that Leighton had found a method of fully exploiting the ‘expressive’ potential of drapery. That same year, Leighton exhibited *Greek Girls Playing at Ball* (1889; Dick Institute, Kilmarnock) at the Royal Academy. Depicting two women on a raised terrace in the act of playing catch, the picture was a striking example of the artist’s pronounced and particular treatment of drapery. Painstaking in the rendering of concerted folds, elaborate gatherings and flowing torrents of fabric, at the same time these draperies are at the very least ‘improbable’ in both their arrangement and in their relation to the figures they enfold and contain. They are the result of precise observation and yet products of the imagination. *Greek Girls Playing at Ball* was only the most recent and striking example of Leighton’s preoccupation with the representation of costume and drapery. Evident in his earliest pictures, it took on an increasingly expressive quality – a ‘life of its own’ – from around 1870.

◀ **Blown Away/light blue**

Paper and acrylic, 2011
26 x 62 x 8cm

▶ **Frederic, Lord Leighton
Study for *Dædalus and Icarus*
composition**

Black and white chalk on blue
paper, c1868
24.2 x 20.5cm

Leighton's *Daedalus and Icarus* (1870; Faringdon Collection) was one of his earliest works in this manner. Father and son are shown high on a cliff edge as Icarus prepares to launch himself into flight. The large dark blue length of fabric in which he was wrapped has been removed and caught by the wind. Trapped only by his left arm and the edge of his wing, it has flown into an improbable 'Q' shape behind him; a form that it could only hold for an imperceptible instant before the same wind that has lifted it clear of his body causes it to be pinned against his wing or to fly into the distance. As a wind-blown piece of fabric it is singularly unconvincing. Too weighty and solid, it is both animated and entirely motionless. The same could equally be said of the draperies in *Greek Girls Picking up Pebbles by the Sea* (c.1871, Private Collection). A second windswept location causes the draperies to lift and swell not behind or away from the four female figures, but vertically in loops and arches. In *Greek Girls Playing at Ball* the nearer figure, who has just released the ball, is encircled by a spiral of trailing fabric that defies any connection to a throwing action. There is a disconnect in the way her draperies relate to her body. An understanding of why these draperies appear as they do comes in part from an understanding of Leighton's practice.

In the 1880s, through a series of published interviews, Leighton provided detailed descriptions of his method and the processes that lay behind his pictures. To an extent he defined himself by these methods. Leighton would carefully arrange fabric on the floor and tease it into the desired arrangement. Folds were supported by wads of cotton wool beneath. Alternatively, fabric was dipped into a plaster mixture, draped around a lay figure and allowed to solidify once the forms and shapes had been arranged. Large expanses of fabric could be treated in this fashion, supported by the horizontal plain of the surface beneath. Once recorded through

drawn studies, Leighton then replicated the forms of the drapery with great care in the painting itself, but turned what had been a horizontal arrangement onto a vertical plain. This method explains why undulations in the fabric show little deviation from a single dimension and are predominately parallel with the picture plane, scarcely moving backwards or forwards in space. It also confirms that whilst the extravagant forms of Leighton's draperies are truthfully recorded, they are artificially created at the service of Leighton's imagination and the composition in hand.

A second contributory factor was Leighton's habit of making drapery studies and nude studies separately. In the 1880s, selections of his elaborate drapery studies were published for the first time. Previously seen only by callers to his studio in Holland Park, the appearance of these drawings drew attention



to the enormous efforts that Leighton devoted to the careful rendering of drapery. We know that for every nude study, there was apparently at least one corresponding drapery study, with the latter demanding the greater attention and application. This separation of figure and drapery continued into the painting of the picture itself. Figures were painted nude in monochrome and then the draperies added later, also in monochrome, before the application of colour began. So while in theory the pose of the figure should dictate the hang of the fabric, in Leighton's case, the use of lay figures and the treatment of drapery as an element in the composition in its own right, broke or certainly complicated this relationship. For paintings in which the drapery seems to have a life of its own, such as in *Icarus* or *Greek Girls Playing at Ball*, it is because this is how it was conceived and created. *Greek Girls Picking up Pebbles* would not work as a strange, remote, yet balanced and harmonious composition if the figures were indeed being dragged by their draperies across the beach or struggling to prevent them from flying into the distance.

Leighton's use of drapery in these works is then about a layering of truth and artifice in the service of his art. He is not asking us to believe that in these scenarios fabric would loop and flatten in the way it does. Through drapery he is communicating the *idea* of movement, the *idea* of wind certainly, but above all, every fold and form is evidence of his involvement, part of the myriad choices that result in a finished composition. Leighton was concerned less with mirroring nature and more about the creation of a work of art that was true to itself and to his own conception – a curiously modern notion.



- ◀ Frederic, Lord Leighton
Study of Drapery
Black and white chalk on
blue paper
23.6 x 30.9cm

- ▶ Frederic, Lord Leighton
*Study for Greek Girls Picking
up Pebbles by the Sea* (detail)
Black and white chalk on
blue paper, c1870

- ▶ Frederic, Lord Leighton
*Study for Hercules Wrestling
for the Body of Alcestis:
Drapery for Death*
Black and white chalk on
blue paper
40.5 x 28.4cm





Front cover image:

Blown Away/red hung in Lord Leighton's bedroom, alongside photogravures of his work
Paper, pigment, acrylic and shellac, 2011
65 x 65 x 5cm
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Permissions:

Dædulus and Icarus

By permission of The Faringdon Collection Trust

Greek Girls Playing at Ball

By permission of East Ayrshire Council

Drawings of Drapery, Leighton House Museum,
Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea

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For more information visit
www.rbkc.gov.uk/museums
www.clareburnett.net

◀ *Throwaway Finance 2 and 3*
Newspaper, acrylic, pigment
and shellac, 2011
40 x 28, 36 x 29cm



Leighton House Museum



THE ROYAL BOROUGH OF
KENSINGTON
AND CHELSEA

