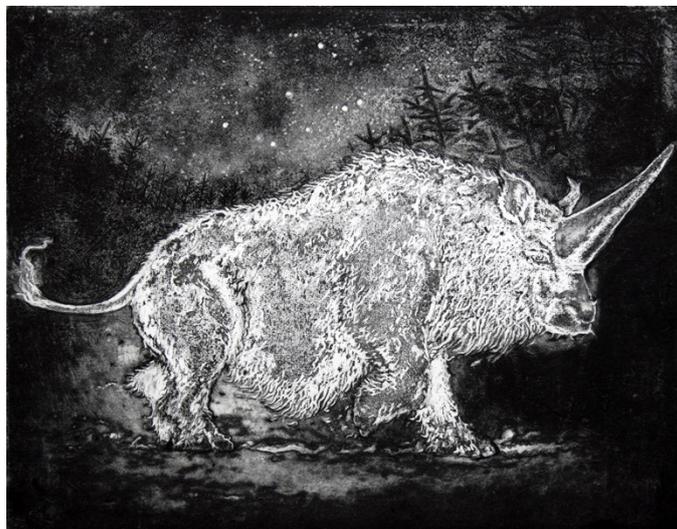


## NICOLE WASSALL: UNICORNS ARE REAL

15<sup>th</sup> SEPTEMBER – 20<sup>th</sup> OCTOBER 2023

FIUMANO CLASE



Nicole Wassall, 'Ghost of a Unicorn', limited edition etching on Fabriano Unica 250gsm, 30 x 42 cm, 2023.

'Unicorns are Real', an intriguing solo exhibition by British artist Nicole Wassall, opens at Fiumano Clase 15<sup>th</sup> September and runs until 20<sup>th</sup> October 2023. The exhibition explores ideas of belief by looking at myth, science, spirituality, superstition, environmental concerns, feminism, magic, and absurdity.

Wassall's thought-provoking approach combines techniques such as etching, sculpting, and the ancient art of water gilding, with materials such as gold, semi-precious stones, wax, wires, and even a handkerchief.

The phrase 'the medium is the message', coined in 1967 by Canadian communication theorist Marshall McLuhan, is certainly true of Wassall's art. The significance of each work is uniquely tied to the materials used. As she masters techniques new to her, she embraces and celebrates the interesting, and at times curious, outcomes.

'Ghost of a Unicorn' is a delicate and haunting etching: it is Wassall's interpretation of an *Elasmotherium Sibiricum*, also known as the Siberian Unicorn.

A 2018 study using cutting-edge radiocarbon dating, led by Professor Adrian Lister, Merit Researcher at the Natural History Museum, London, confirmed that unicorns lived as recently as 35,000 years ago, a far cry from the 100 - 200,000 years previously believed. This means unicorns were roaming the Eurasian grasslands alongside modern humans, proving the point, 'Unicorns are Real'.

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Our current vision of unicorns is informed by classical antiquity; an elegant beast with a single pointed horn. However, Wassall reimagined this real and mythical creature as a glowing ghost of its former self. Keeping the essence of the unicorn's magic and mystery she researched skeletal structures of Siberian Unicorns, resulting in a beast that is almost unrecognisable.

This raises questions about what information early man passed onto later generations. What forces were at play in this multi-millennial game of Chinese whispers? What transformed this mighty beast into a white horse-like animal, infused with cultural symbolism, to the point where it stopped being something real?

Wassall's practice is steeped in research and discovery, leading her to create works that are both surprising and somehow familiar. She often explores feminist ideas alongside broader issues of inequality, race, class, and religion. She describes the exquisite jewel like piece 'Pope Joan, Patron Saint of Feminists' as a contemporary take on icon painting. Pope Joan, the legendary female pontiff, supposedly reigned under the title of John VIII for just over 25 months, from 855 to 858.

It is said she gave birth during a religious procession and was subsequently stoned to death. Wassall depicts her patron saint of feminists floating above a golden road, with a symbolic hole in her stomach.

Pope Joan is rejected as fiction by the Vatican and academics disagree as to whether she existed. Some argue she was invented to discredit the Catholic Church, whilst the Australian archaeologist Michael Habicht, found evidence of two different Pope John VIII's represented on coins from different decades. Two establishments, the Church (faith) and archaeology (social science/anthropology), have their own beliefs about her story.

Wassall's 'Pope Joan, Patron Saint of Feminists' applies the conventions of religious icon painting. However, the sky is left as bare gesso, atypical for an icon. Her reasoning is that this is not a 'blue sky' picture, and the story remains unresolved. The bare gesso also provides a contemporary take on a tradition of icon painting; it should symbolise a story rather than tell it.

Informed by her study of neuroscience and psychology, Wassall strives to create works that challenge the way we, the viewer, read the objects she places before us. Do we respond more instinctually to something that is recognisable but at the same time unconventional in its presentation (such as an icon painting of a female pope)? Combining the familiar with the unorthodox opens the mind to new ideas and thoughts. The unconventional use of conventional materials stimulates different parts of the brain and awakens us to new potentials in our understanding of what we are seeing.

As is the case with Wassall's work, things are never quite as they first appear. Process, theory, and authenticity are the cornerstones of her practice, with a pinch of magic added for good measure.

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## Notes

Nicole Wassall: 'Unicorns are Real'

### **Exhibition dates:**

15<sup>th</sup> September 2023 – 20<sup>th</sup> October 2023

### **Artists Talk:**

Francesca Fiumano in conversation with Nicole Wassall:

9<sup>th</sup> October 2023, 6.30 – 8.30pm

### **Fiumano Clase Family Saturday:**

14<sup>th</sup> October 2023, 12 noon – 3pm

**For further information, images & interview opportunities, please contact:**

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### **Gallery Opening hours:**

Tuesday – Friday 11 am – 6pm

Saturday – 12 noon – 4pm

All other times by appointment