

# WUNDERKAMMER

EMMA RODGERS





**WUNDERKAMMER** EMMA RODGERS

21st July - 1st October 2022

*Wunderkammer*

*/ˈvʊndəˌkɑːmə, German ˈvʊndɐˌkɑːmɐ/*

*noun*

*a place where a collection of  
curiosities and rarities is exhibited.*

## ROADS OF CONNECTION

It was an extraordinary moment when Emma Rodgers and I discovered that our respective families had both occupied the same house in Birkenhead, more precisely 42, Grosvenor Road in Oxton. It was the most affirming of coincidences, a sense that the world was a smaller place, all the more amazing because Emma and I had known each other for some time, with no knowledge of this common bond until 2008. It all began with a centre-piece of this exhibition, the portrait of my great aunt, Mary White, painted by William Charles Penn, and held in the Williamson Art Gallery and Museum collection. I was visiting Emma on a research trip, and telling her about my family's many connections to Birkenhead (both my mother's parents were brought up in the town). It was when I got on to the subject of my great aunt Mary and her husband Graham that Emma pricked up her ears. She immediately mentioned the portrait of Mary which had made such an impression on her on visits to the Williamson over the years, and of the connection to the house where she was brought up, 42, Grosvenor Road. In moments her mother, who was in the next room, confirmed that her family had bought the property from the Whites, whose family were the first occupants.

What of the woman in the portrait? Mary White (née Heath) was something of a legend in my family. She was the granddaughter of Henry K. Aspinall, the Birkenhead brewer. Her husband, the Right Hon H. Graham White (1880-1965) was Liberal MP for Birkenhead East for many years. He was a Freeman of the Borough, a Privy Councillor and a member of the National Government of 1931-35, under Ramsay MacDonald. He later became President of the Liberal Party. Mary (1888-1962) meanwhile had an interesting C.V. of her own. Her death made front-page headlines in the local papers where she was described as "one of the best known and best loved women in the public life of Birkenhead". She was deeply committed to women's causes in the locality, and to child welfare. A dedicated committee member, she was sometime President of the Liverpool and Birkenhead branch of the National Council of Women, and a founder member of the Council of the Women's Liberal Federation. There were numerous other local appointments which were an occupational hazard for an MP's wife, and as a committed Anglican, she was a regular attender of St Saviour's Church, Oxton. But Mary's life presented its difficulties too. As one of her grandchildren remarked to me, the portrait perhaps doesn't show her in the best of health. During this period she suffered from tuberculosis, a persistent condition which meant she spent her winters in the therapeutic air of Switzerland

for many years (and fortunately she had the resources to be able to afford this). In addition, her youngest son Sam would die in a tragic accident in 1945. But the painting also shows very clearly her spirit, and my mother remembers her aunt's humour, her easy-going kindness and warmth.

Her portrait by William Charles Penn forms a kind of historical centrepiece to one aspect of Emma Rodgers' exhibition, one that focusses on this sense of coincidence, one based on geographical serendipity. 42, Grosvenor Road, the Williamson Art Gallery itself, Caroline Place (where Penn lived, and whose vivid painting of his home and garden is also included in the show) and Birkenhead Park (celebrating its 175th anniversary this year) all lie off the Slatey Road which forms a kind of main artery in this project, bringing together the filaments of a closely interwoven story. Emma, very excited by these coincidences, has enjoyed researching this exhibition, which is also a kind of Wunderkammer mapping of so many aspects of her creative life in Birkenhead, and, with her imaginative recreation of her studio space and her responses to other objects in the Williamson collection, it adds up to an autobiographical tribute to what this locality has given her as an artist. From her homage to Birkenhead's famous Della Robbia Pottery to a rolling menagerie of her inimitable beasts and creatures, here is the vivid and energised world of Emma Rodgers very much on its home turf.

David Whiting, Critic, Writer and Curator  
June 2022



Williamson Art Gallery and Museum



42 Grosvenor Road



Caroline Place



Birkenhead Park

SLATEY ROAD

CERAMICS  
created at age 16



The exhibition is a mini-retrospective of Emma's practice and gives visitors a chance to step into the artist's studio and see how her work has developed over time – from the young art student awestruck by the collections in her local Williamson Art Gallery, to one of the country's foremost sculptors in ceramic and bronze. 'Wunderkammer' explores the objects, people and places that have fascinated and inspired Emma throughout her career.

Alongside of the exhibition, the Williamson Art Gallery will be unveiling a specially commissioned new sculpture by Emma for the Gallery's outdoor courtyard. The 'Garden of Artemis' is a life-size ornamental oak tree sculpture in steel and bronze – a nod to both the oak tree in Birkenhead's coat of arms, and the trees that feature in the Gallery's collection of Della Robbia decorative ceramics.

The sculpture has been made possible by funding from the estate of Fanchon Frohlich, through the Williamson and Priory Friends.

Niall Hodson, Curator, William Art Gallery and Museum

## EMMA RODGERS: WUNDERKAMMER

*/ˈvʊndəˌkɑːmə, German ˈvʊndɐˌkɑːmɐ/*

noun: Wunderkammer; plural noun: Wunderkammern

a place where a collection of curiosities and rarities is exhibited.

German, literally ‘wonder chamber’.

Wunderkammer seemed like the perfect title to celebrate my lifelong relationship with Williamson Art Gallery and Museum.

I am locally based and first exhibited work in the Williamson when I was 15 years old. This experience in my formative years instilled the belief that it was possible for me to pursue a career in art, wherever that may take me.

I have been privileged to travel around the world and exhibit my sculptures internationally; working on Marvel film sets and creating public art: opportunities that I would not have had if it wasn't for my chosen path.



Cilla Black



Mother and Child - Marvel films



Liverpool Football Club Awards



Salford Firsts



Elaine Morgan



Meccano Liver Bird



Our family home was 42 Grosvenor Road and it was built in 1886. The first family to reside here were the Graham Whites. (I discovered much of their history from the Williamson).

Our family moved in 1956 and stayed until 1995, a considerable length of time for just two families to have lived in one house.

As a child I would often visit the Williamson and this continued when I went to art college, creating a body of work in response to The Della Robbia Pottery collection. I studied the construction techniques, including slip and glaze applications, some of which I still use today, along with the varied resources that continue to influence me in this magical place.

Growing up with the Williamson on my doorstep has definitely had an influence on my work and it has been a constant source of inspiration, which I continue to enjoy. I have always enjoyed the journeys this magical place can take you: from far off climates to travelling through time; the marks of the artist that evoke a response, taking you into another world. Since a small child I have gazed at paintings to grand, carved furniture, ceramics and artefacts and I've marvelled at their making. Some acquired through local history, other treasures gathered by exploring far off lands. I have exhibited my work here many times over the years under Colin's trusty eye and I feel very privileged to have had, and still have, such an asset in my home town. This exhibition is an extravaganza in celebration of the Williamson, interpreting the gallery's collection from past and present.

I look forward to watching how the Williamson continues to develop and evolve and I hope this exhibition provides inspiration for future generations to continue exploring art.

SPECTACULAR EXTRAVAGANZA meaning:

1. a lavish or spectacular show or event.
2. something extravagant.
3. a literary or musical work marked by extreme freedom of style and structure and usually by elements of burlesque or parody.

## WOUNDED BUTTERFLY

porcelain

This sculpture is created in response to 'The Wounded Butterfly' by Edward Atkinson Hornel (1864-1933) and is a childhood favourite of mine as I could relate to the youthful wonder of nature. The texture and application of colour is exquisite and has inspired the surface and finish of my sculpture.



The Wounded Butterfly painting by Edward Atkinson Hornel



## MEDEA THE SORCERESS

porcelain, fresh water pearls and metal foliage

I was inspired by the 'Medea' painting by Evelyn De Morgan in the Williamson's collection. Medea is a powerful sorceress and this beautiful, enchanting painting depicts her wandering the marble halls of Ancient Greece where the story is set, driven mad by her abandonment. I have created a porcelain figure in response to this painting's rich narrative. Clasp her glass, she strides gracefully as blossom, butterflies and doves ascend from the painting, adorning her jewel like coloured taffeta as it sweeps along the marble floor. Medea is the most fascinating women of Greek mythology.



Medea painting by Evelyn De Morgan





THE GREAT MAN  
porcelain



Count Leo Tolstoy painted by Ivan Vladimirov

The Williamson has been a huge part of my working life and the relationships I have formed with a number of working artists has been possibly the most valuable part of that. The gallery's collection has been boosted to try and guarantee that names of people whose work is worthy of preservation are not lost. There are no fears that Emma Rodgers will be overlooked, she has built a national and international reputation from her home town of Birkenhead.

Watching Emma's career blossom has been a joy. She developed her own way of looking at things and of handling clay early on, but has gone way beyond that into other media and mixing techniques with an inventiveness that is wonderful to behold. I am pleased to have played a small part in that creative progress and look forward to seeing what the future holds for Emma's work.

Colin Simpson, Principal Museums Officer,  
Williamson Art Gallery & Museum

HELEN OF TROY: EPIC JOURNEY  
bronze (edition of 9)



My 'Epic Journey' sculpture is of a female figure sailing through the waves. The piece is made of bronze and was modelled on my daughter. I endeavoured to capture Helen of Troy, pursued and surrounded by small sailing boats. Her dress is sculpted in clay to represent coral and shells in the sea as she was the face that launched a thousand ships.

BRACE OF PHEASANT (right)  
porcelain and mixed media

FOX (left)  
bronze (edition of 9)

“Emma Rodgers’ world is powerfully elemental, her cast of characters often shown in situations in extremis. They are energies of nature, her players, shapes which can merge, or shift from one state to another. They take on different form and character through conditions of confrontation, of flight and speed, death and decay.”

“Her dog fox, modelled on one particular animal she knows intimately, is sinewy and alert, but there is vulnerability and fragility too, the surfaces brittle and open in places, while the lively and prominent tail extends the energy of the head and neck in this moving depiction. It too is a magical creature,”

David Whiting



OWL OF MINERVA  
porcelain



SKYGOD ALIGHT  
bronze (edition of 6)



“It is her forensic and unsparing eye, her sense of excavation, which gets to the heart of the matter, not only anatomically, but to the very life-spirit of the creatures and interactions she explores. It is because of this that the work, even though it can touch on our ever-present mortality, is ultimately optimistic. Her expressively treated surfaces (her forms often move into abstraction) truly reanimate her subjects. Her art is a kind of dance, one with enduring grace, and what comes across is not only virtuoso skill and a complex creative mind, but a profound feeling and empathy for what she depicts, so in the end life, its spirit and energy, very much transcends death. In the process we get an extraordinary insight into what it means to be both animal and human.”

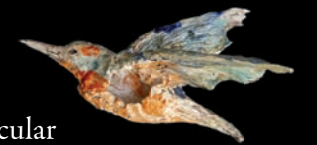
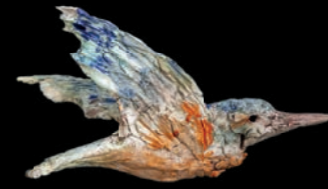
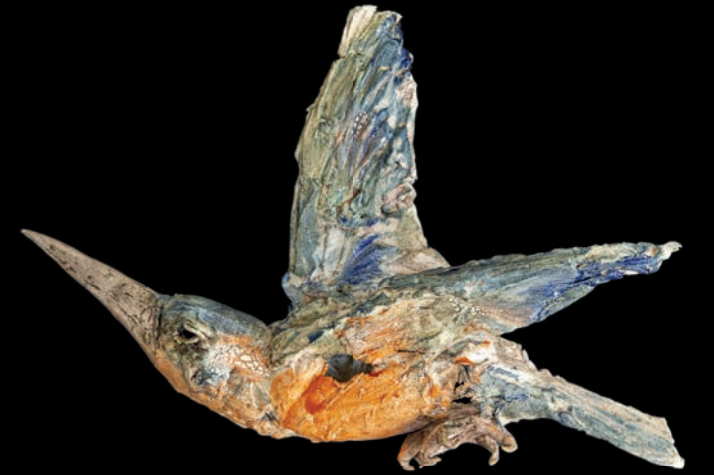
David Whiting

MOTHER AND CHILD

featured in Marvel's 'Guardians of the Galaxy'  
bronze (edition of 9)



KINGFISHERS  
porcelain and bronze



Spectacular

/spek'takjələ/

*adjective*

beautiful in a dramatic and eye-catching way.  
"spectacular mountain scenery"

BEAR  
bronze (edition of 6)

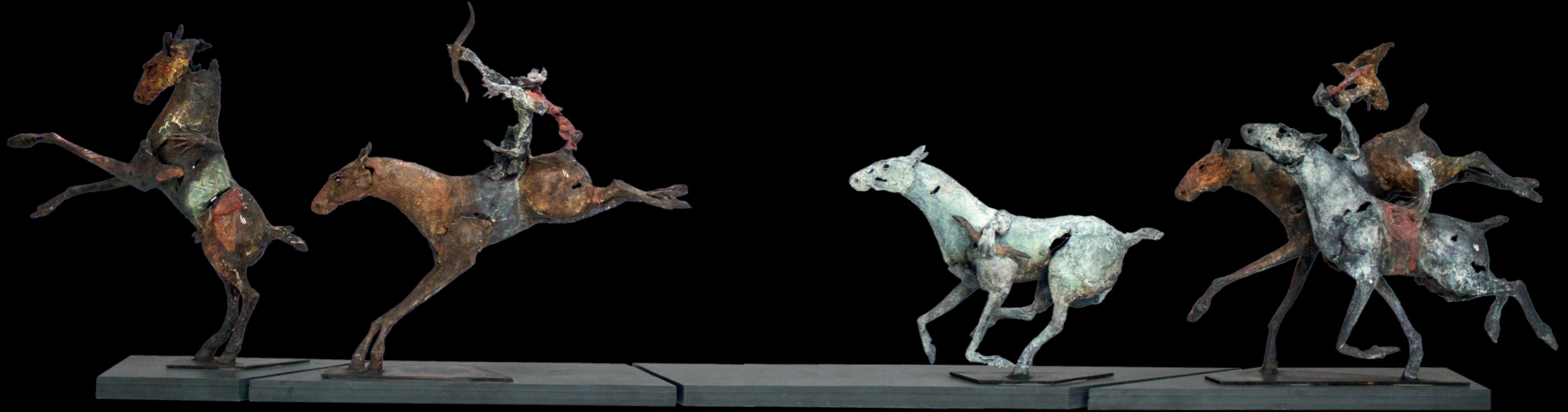


RAGING BULL  
featured in Marvel's 'Avengers: Age of Ultron'  
bronze (edition of 6)



SPIRITUS  
bronze (edition of 6)

“The spirited horse, which will try to win the race of  
its own accord, will run even faster if encouraged.”  
Ovid





SWALLOWS

procelain

“Forms transformed to bodies new and strange” Ovid



LIVER BIRD  
bronze (edition of 6)

“Our native land  
charms us with  
inexpressible  
sweetness, and never,  
never, allows us to  
forget that we belong  
to it.” Ovid

# JUNO

bronze (edition of 6)

also available in porcelain & steel



The Peacock has marched into the gallery and taken its place in the aviary. The bird is associated with the Roman goddess, Juno, who needed to keep an eye, or a hundred, on her husband Jupiter. The peacock has flowers and foliage entwined in their wings inspired by the details from the Della Robbia collection. It is highlighted in iridescent blues and greens to suggest their famous 'hundred eyes' which in many cultures symbolize the stars, wealth and royalty. The Peacock is strong, proud and poised, standing firmly amongst nature.

## GARDEN OF ARTEMIS

The rich flora and fauna of the forest  
bronze and steel



In celebration of the Greek goddess of the wilderness, wild animals, nature and vegetation, Artemis would often roam the forests of Greece followed by nymphs, some mortals and hunters.

The sculpture was designed to engage people from the moment they walk out of the doors into the garden and they continue their journey of discovery as they walk around the tree.

The tree was inspired by the oak tree featured in the Birkenhead coat of arms which is also present at the entrance of the Williamson Art Gallery. The motto is, "UBI FIDES IBI LUX ET ROBUR" meaning, "where there is faith there is light and strength" and is discreetly incorporated into the sculpture. As the Williamson Art Gallery is the home of the largest public collection of Della Robbia pottery in the UK, I thought it would be only fitting to incorporate aspects of her work into my design. The structure of the tree is inspired by the Della Robbia ceramic panels and the Mason Vase (currently on display in Gallery 9 of the Williamson Art Gallery). The flowers, leaves and foliage represent the wings and tail feather of the peacock. I have also included a shallow bronze bird bath at the root base of the tree, incorporating fish, water lilies and a small boat to symbolise the typical mark from a piece of Della Robbia, the sgraffito ship motif. The colour palette is also inspired by her work. By purchasing a flower, you can help provide much needed funds for the Williamson Art Gallery. The flowers are available in a variety of scale which grow along the wall.



MELAS: PROTECTOR OF SHEEP

porcelain

Maliades were tree nymphs worshipped as protectors of sheep and of apple-trees. In ancient Greek, the word 'melas' meant both 'sheep' and 'apple' giving the nymphs their double role. Maliades could disguise themselves from the eyes of mortals by transforming into trees.

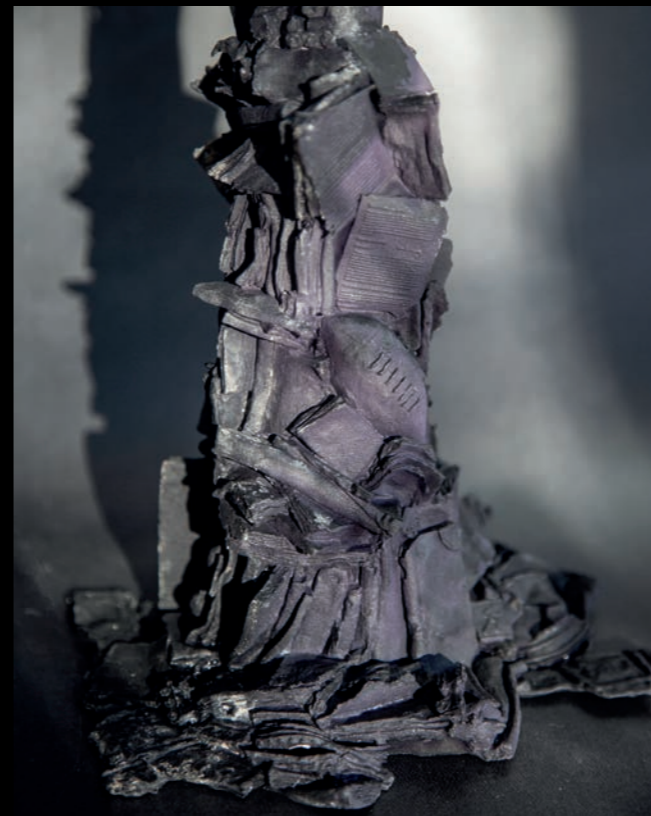


DANCER

bronze (edition of 9)



SALFORD FIRSTS  
bronze maquette (edition of 24)





FINAL DESCENT

porcelain, slate and bronze



“Nothing retains its form; new shapes from old  
Nature, the great inventor, ceaselessly  
Contrives. In all creation, be assured,  
There is no death - no death, but only change  
And innovation; what we men call birth  
Is but a different new beginning; death  
Is but to cease to be the same. Perhaps  
This may have moved to that and that to this,  
Yet still the sum of things remains the same.  
Nothing can last, I do believe, for long  
In the same image.”  
Ovid

Special thanks to:

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