JON BUCK MARCH OF MUTABILITY



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For as long as I can remember I have been intensely fascinated by the amazing profusion of shapes, forms and colours that make up the natural world. Much of my recent work in this exhibition not only celebrates this profusion but has also been inspired by our current understanding of the biological principles driving the evolution of this diversity.

All humans are pattern-seeking animals, searching out and recognising the underlying compositions of nature. We not only find these patterns useful to make sense of our perceptions but also find them profoundly beautiful. In an attempt to interpret and communicate these phenomena, contemporary scientists have often reverted to culturally-derived metaphors and analogies. Perhaps this is not so different from how people in the past explained the history of life, telling stories that celebrated a sanctity of life, brought into existence by an invisible omnipotent creator. I can imagine that it was these stories that became the birthplace of art.

In the nineteenth century however, Darwin and Wallace rocked the foundations of belief in a supernatural creator with their theories of evolution. Since then science has brought to light many of the evolutionary mechanisms that govern how the Earth came to be inhabited by such a prolific and diverse web of life. What a huge irony then, that just as we are coming to understand the underlying principles of how life began and developed, it is we humans who threaten this very diversity. We are now living in the era we call the Anthropocene.

Many people have come to believe we hold a privileged position in the hierarchy of life, separated from its natural forces. The latest pandemic shows just how mistaken this point of view can be; we continue to be intimately connected to the rest of the natural world and are affected by the same principles of evolution. Both viruses and bacteria have co-evolved with humans and we now know that they are not simply a threat to our health but that they are literally part of our physical make-up and played an important part in early human development.

It could be said that mathematics is science's own discrete language but luckily for the majority of us, to effectively communicate its theories and discoveries it often employs more allegorical symbols. In 1973 the biologist Leigh Van Valen proposed just such a metaphor to brilliantly describe a universal rule for evolutionary change. He advanced the theory that all organisms are caught in an everlasting arms race. To survive they must continually evolve and change in order to compete against other ever-mutating opposing organisms. He famously entitled this thesis *The Red Queen Hypothesis*, referring to Lewis Carroll's character in 'Alice Through the Looking Glass'. The Queen, as part of a bizarre and counter-intuitive chess game, informs Alice that according to the rules:

"...it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place."

At the end of the 1990's, another biologist, Anthony Barnosky, introduced a new player to this evolutionary chess game and also coined the phrase that is the title of this exhibition. He maintained that while the *Red Queen Hypothesis* adequately explains the ongoing pressure of gradual biological evolution, one should also take into account that there are occasional huge catastrophic events that interrupt gradual change, causing mass extinctions and subsequent rapid transformations. He referred to this idea as *The Court Jester Hypothesis* and although it is not exactly clear why, my thoughts are that a jester is normally a maverick or wild card and he is completely unpredictable because he does not play by the rules of the main game.



These intriguing ideas have stimulated me to make a new series of works, in what I like to think is a parallel process of artistic evolution. On the surface of my sculptures I have created patterns that have spontaneously developed. Each individual glyph or element in the pattern has had to respond to and change according to the shape of its neighbour. This echoes and refers to the biological processes that form the living networks of natural organisms in the real world. The result is that these individual elements are now less representational than on some of my previous sculptures and perhaps it is not too fanciful to imagine them to be in the very act of modification or evolution.

The sculptures underlying these new patterns are intended as timeless representations of *The Red* Queen and *The Court Jester* and in the newest pieces the jester has further evolved to become what I have named *The Fool*. The difference between the two in my mind is that the *Jester's* role is to behave outrageously, whereas *The Fool* is out of control and refuses to acknowledge his harmful actions. In these newest sculptures, I am proposing that it is we humans who are *The Fool* and much like Barnosky's *Jester* it is we who are having an unpredictable and devastating effect upon the essential patterns of biodiversity and the whole web of life.

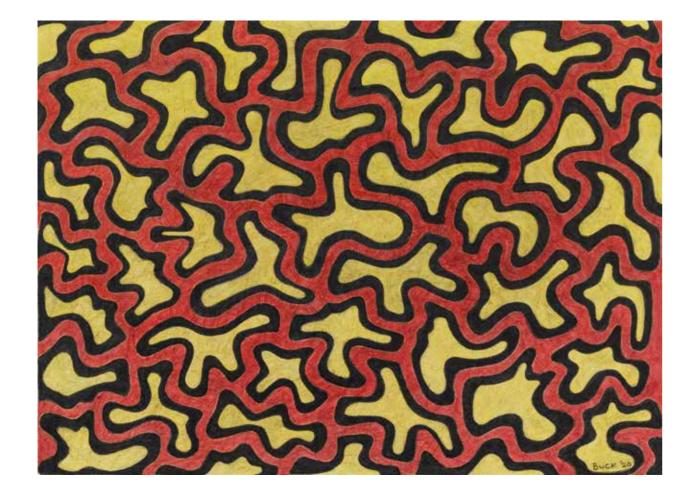
In more recent years it has become more apparent that the process of evolutionary change is not one solely of competition and conflict. In consequence, the drawings that accompany and complement my sculptures not only reflect and expand on the ideas discussed above but also refer to evolutionary processes that are more benign in nature. Historically, Darwin's metaphor for the evolution of life was that of a tree with an ever-expanding canopy of branches emanating from a single trunk, literally the 'Tree of Life'. In the light of more contemporary research it has become apparent that this is not a completely satisfactory analogy. It is now known that many of the branches are not only divided and bifurcated but, quite unlike a tree in reality, there are many places where the branches have fused back together forming a lattice-work. This model can more accurately be described as a 'Web of Life'.

As long ago as 1969, biologist Lynn Margulis conjectured that some of the most significant moments in evolution were the coming together of completely non-related organisms in symbiotic relationships. As a result, all complex life, including ourselves, is a story of what she called an 'intimacy of strangers' or as others have put it, we are all 'lichens' living in symbiotic relationships with other organisms either on us or within us. Surely in this light alone it is incumbent upon us to urgently search for a new secular sanctity for the whole network of life.

Jon Buck 2021

Becoming the Fool, 2020 Bronze Edition of 10 30cm high







previous Red Queen Effect i (detail), 2020 Pastel

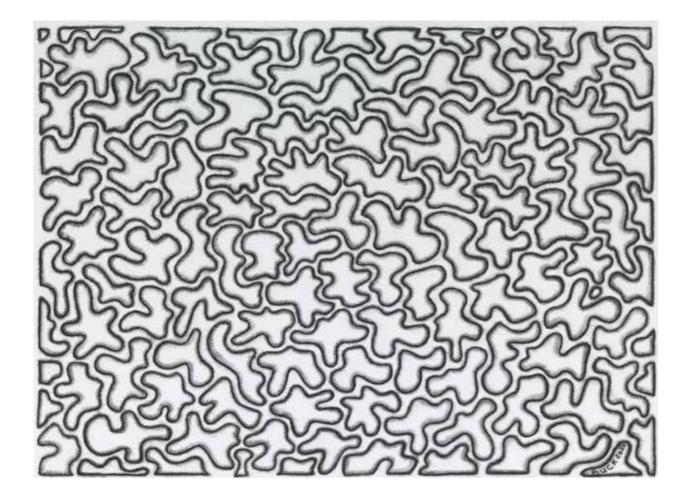
opposite Theme and Variations i, 2020 Pastel

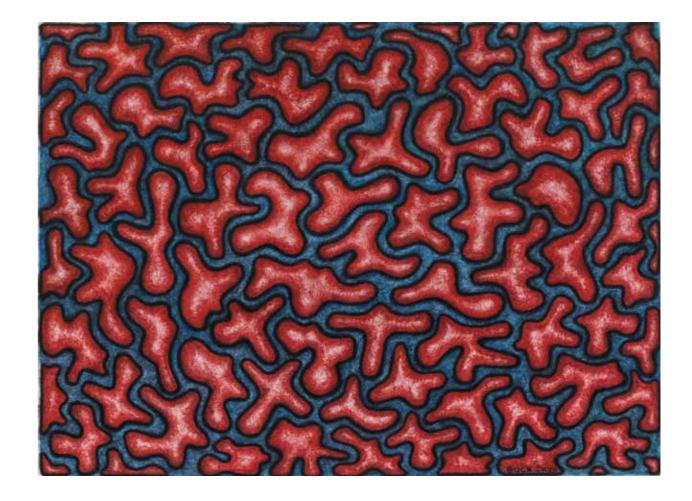
Theme and Variations ii, 2020 Pastel

Theme and Variations iii, 2020 Pastel









previous Gene Pools (detail), 2020 Pastel

Morphic Patterns ii, 2020 Pastel

Morphic Patterns iii, 2020 Pastel

Fool III (detail), 2020 Bronze Edition of 10 40cm high





Fool III, 2020 Bronze Edition of 10 40cm high









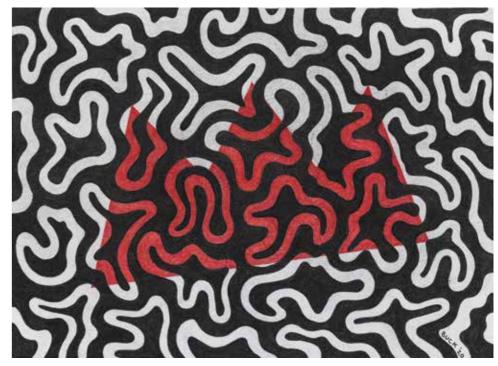
previous Game Changer (detail), 2020 Pastel

Red Queen Dynasty, 2020 Pastel

Red Queen Effect ii, 2020 Pastel Queen's Influence, 2020 Pastel

Red Queen Effect i, 2020 Pastel





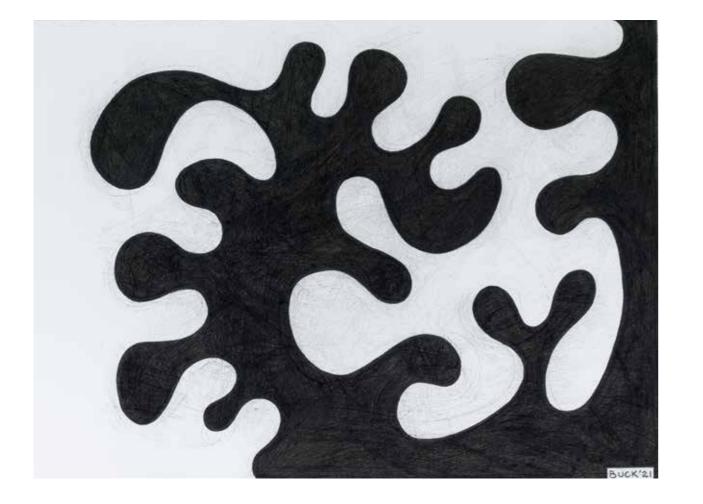
Red Queen IV (detail), 2020 Bronze Edition of 10 27cm high

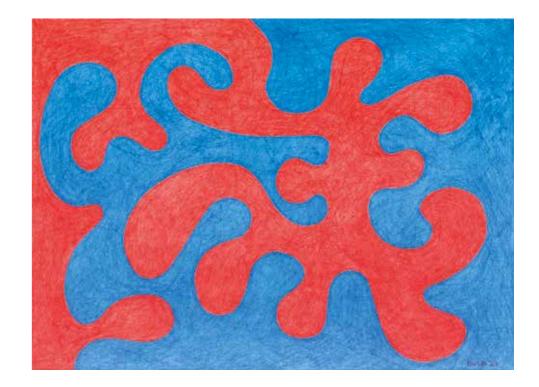




Red Queen IV, 2020 Bronze Edition of 10 27cm high





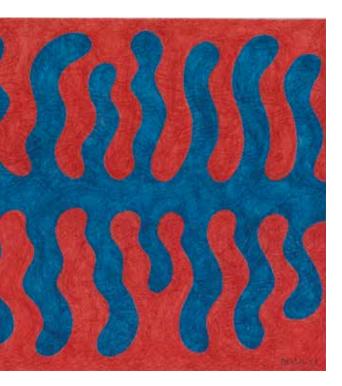


opposite Symbiosis i, 2021 Pastel

Symbiosis ii, 2021 Pastel

Symbiosis iii, 2021 Pastel

overleaf Symbiosis iv (detail), 2021 Pastel





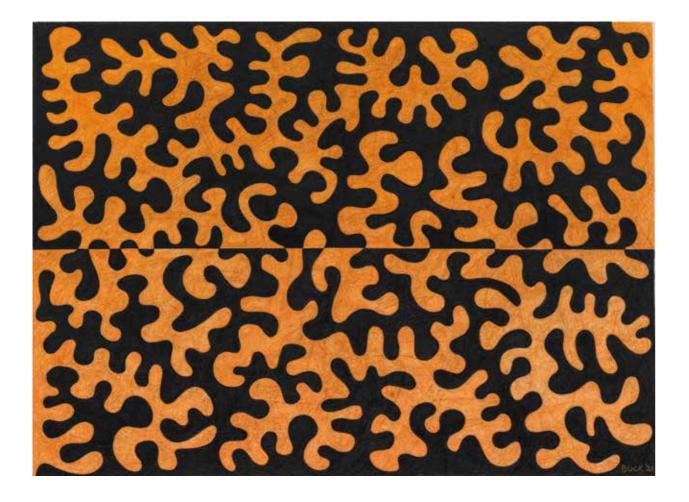
Court Jester I (detail), 2020 Bronze Edition of 10 33cm high





Court Jester I, 2020 Bronze Edition of 10 33cm high





above Like Night Passing over the Land, 2021 Pastel

The Intimacy of Strangers i, 2021 Pastel

The Intimacy of Strangers ii, 2021 Pastel

overleaf Transmission i (detail), 2021 Pastel







Fool I (detail), 2020 Bronze Edition of 10 33cm high





Fool I, 2020 Bronze Edition of 10 33cm high







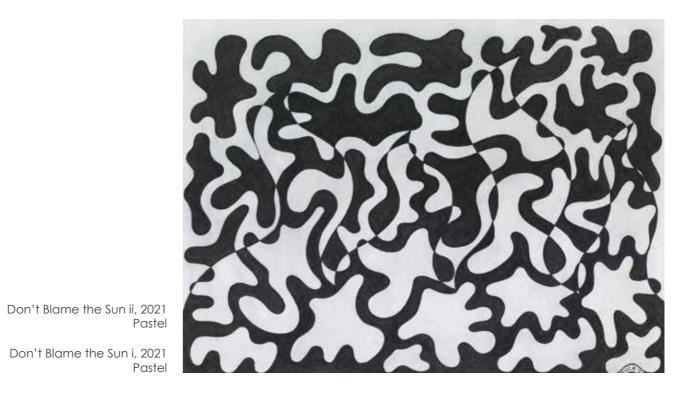


previous Fragmentation of the Fool (detail), 2020 Pastel

In the Queen's Presence, 2021 Pastel

Startled Tiger, 2021 Pastel





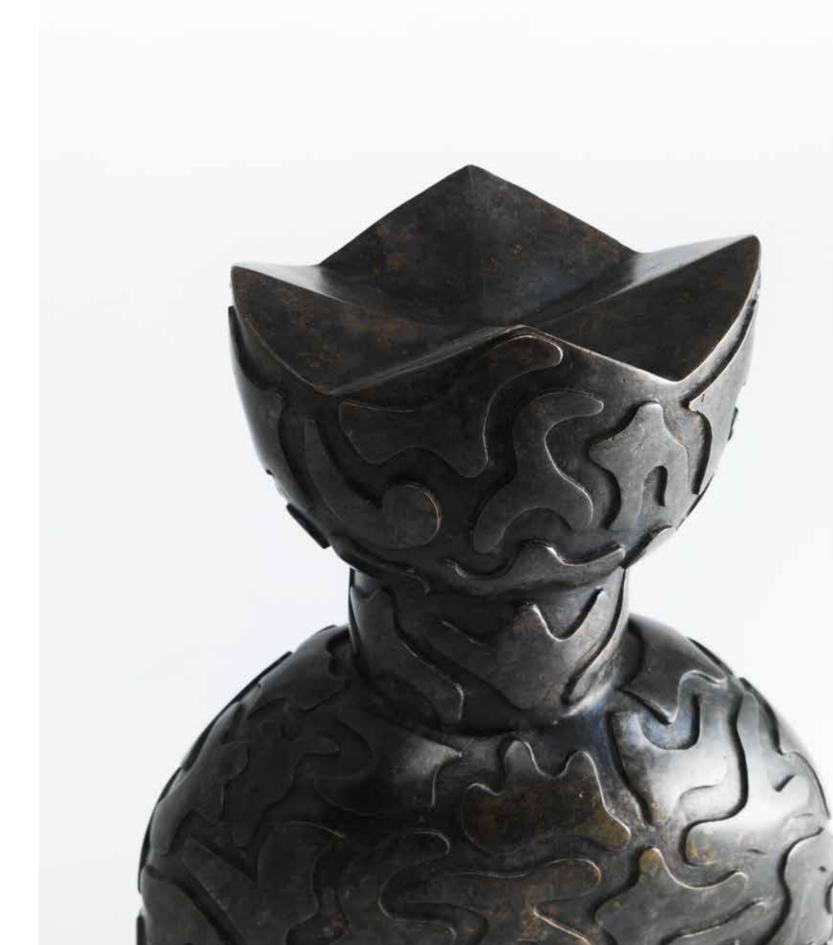




Messenger Moth, 2021 Pastel

Danger in the Wings, 2021 Pastel

Red Queen V (detail), 2020 Bronze Edition of 10 30cm high





Red Queen V, 2020 Bronze Edition of 10 30cm high





Where Fools Rush In, 2020 Pastel

Fools Make a Difference, 2020 Pastel

> What Fools We Are, 2021 Pastel

overleaf Honest Signals (Aposematic Patterns), 2021 Pastel







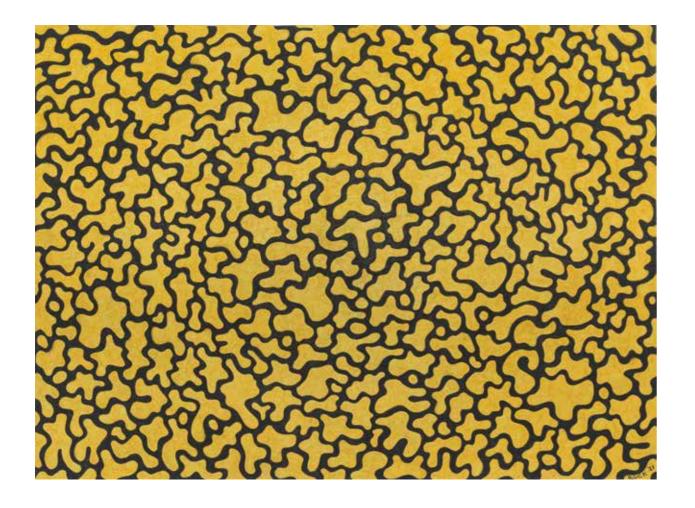
Fool II (detail), 2020 Bronze Edition of 10 38cm high

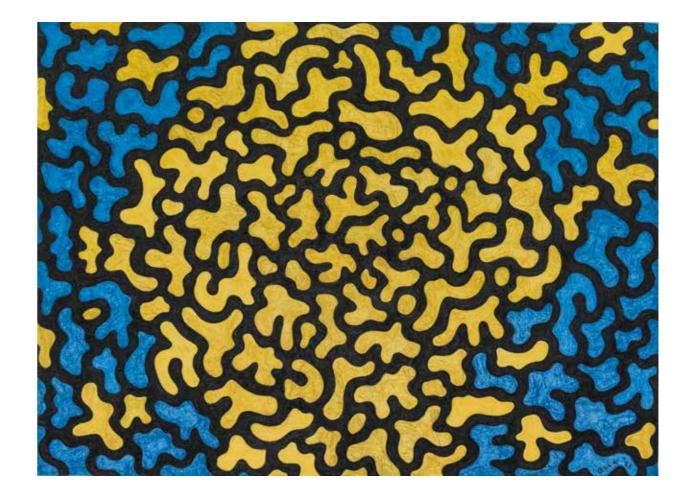




Fool II, 2020 Bronze Edition of 10 38cm high

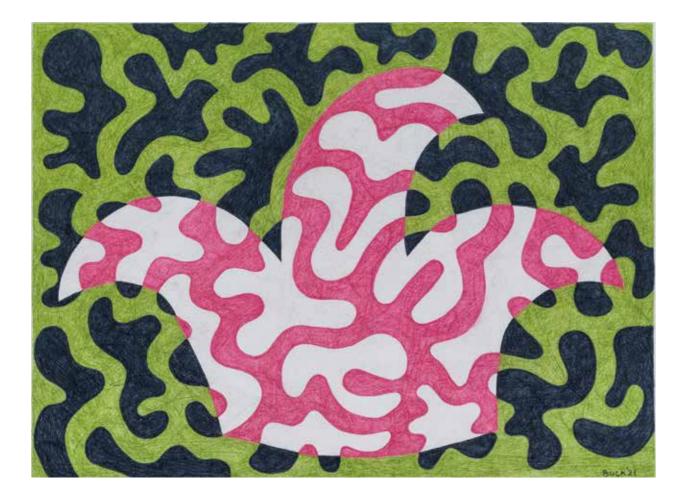






Just So You Know, 2021 Pastel

> Transmission ii, 2021 Pastel



PATTERNS OF CHANGE

The sculptor shaping clay or carving marble has long stood as a metaphor for a divine creator breathing existence into inanimate matter to create life. Numerous creation stories and myths have historically supported an anthropomorphic interpretation of the origins of life and have been the dominant inspiration for artists in explaining our origins and place in the world.

Goddesses, gods, spirits and heroes, devils and demons mostly of humanoid form have populated world mythologies and the art of our many cultures. It is therefore surprising that the process of Evolution that Charles Darwin so succinctly described in "On the Origin of Species" over 160 years ago has so rarely had direct influence on the art produced to date. The beauties and revelations of nature and the natural world have in themselves always been a primary subject matter for artists ever since the very first art was painted in the cave. However, given that the origin of life has been scientifically verifiable for nearly two centuries and given the beauty of that process, it is astonishing that artists have rarely taken up the challenge of making evolution itself the subject of their art.

Jon Buck is unusual among many artists as someone who has long searched for a sculptural metaphor for the principles of evolution. Through his art he explores webs of life, the entangled bank, trees of knowledge and descent, the biodiversity of millions of lifeforms, as well as our role and place in nature. In creating Totems to the Red Queen, her Jester and the Fool, Buck has adopted from science as much as artists in the past have from religion. In this process Buck has evolved his own visual language using form, line, texture, colour, shape and drawing to create objects that reveal through their aesthetic images and in layers of meanings, our life stories and concerns for our place in the world. In constant development over many years, this language too has followed its personal evolutionary path. Buck's own favourable variations have prevailed as some he deemed less advantageous have perished! Along the way through his dexterous process of sculpture making, numerous histories, philosophies, images and artistic influences have been absorbed, translated and projected in his work although certain constants remain. In a quest for essential form, primal shapes occur and reoccur, mutating to suit fresh concepts and ideas or novel materials and shaping the role of drawing into or onto forms has become another linguistic development. A vocabulary of glyphs or signs, a lexicon interpretable as life, cells or whole organisms further emphasise the position humans have claimed in controlling the natural world.

In the most recent of 'scenes', the Anthropocene ruled by ourselves, we are "the fool", treading roughshod over the only garden of Eden we have ever known, trampling the treasure we share with our environmental gem and as yet undiscovered in its entirety.

A Fools Touch, 2021 Pastel



The Whole World Dances to the Same Tune, 2021 Pastel

> inside cover Transmission ii (detail), 2021 Pastel

cover The Intimacy of Strangers i (detail), 2021 Pastel

> overleaf Becoming the Fool, 2020 Bronze Edition of 10 30cm high

Evolution has created life in an inexorably slow developmental process, the results of which we universally enthral to, find beautiful, bizarre or amazing; from the microscopic to the enormous, life itself is the ultimate inspiration. Jon Buck's sculptures articulate a parallel beauty to this, the thrill of ideas discovered through image, the beauty of form in tension or balance and the primal story that unites us all as fundamental structures and vivify his enigmatic objects. Look at the surfaces of Buck's sculptures: the shapes shimmer between line and form and positive or negative; stare and scrutinise and you will see revealed between their surfaces the embryonic and developed, the meaningful and the decorative, the human and the animal, the abstract and the naturalistic, the conceptual and the sensual.

Evolve on Jon Buck! Your earliest talent of replicating nature in clay morphed into symbolic beings and mythic animals, to now; exploring a metaphor for life's own story united in your distinctive joyous language. You breathe an urgent message into your inanimate material, bringing exciting form to life with a reminder that we are but one part of life, so numerous and hungry are we that we risk destabilising the very process that brought us into being and with it the rest of life on earth. We may no longer see life as centred on us humans, but humans have become the biggest driver of evolution as we take over every niche and exploit every resource. What you create however are not pessimistic cautionary tales or didactic illustrations. They communicate with a deep joy of the creativity that defines our species and the potency of the emotion that bonds our human family together, they are ultimately a celebration of life.

Rungwe Kingdon July 2021

Printed to accompany the exhibition 'March of Mutability' by Jon Buck at Museum in the Park, Stroud, 2021



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