

## Will-o'-the-Wisping, in Word and Image

by Florian Mussgnug, 2018

“Logic will train your mind all right; / Like inquisitor’s boots it will squeeze you tight”, exclaims Mephistopheles when he meets the Student in the third scene of *Faust: Part One*, and goes on to taunt him: “Your thoughts will learn to creep and crawl / And never lose their way at all, / Not get criss-crossed as now, or go / Will-o'-the-wisping to and fro!” *Irrlichtern*, the astonishing Goethean neologism that is here rendered in all its exquisite oddness by [David Luke](#)’s magisterial translation, has long entered everyday language: “to will-o'-the-wisp”, in conversational German, means to behave unpredictably, to flit about.

My own, recent will-o'-the-wisping has been inspired by Liz Rideal’s extraordinary artwork: a series of digital photographs and large water colour abstract paintings, which originated during a long period spent by Rideal in Italy, as a Leverhulme Fellow working with the British School at Rome. I first saw these works at a [conference](#) in April 2017 and was dazzled by the unfamiliar beauty of their seemingly airbourne shapes: trails of colour and light that appear to arrest time, against the backdrop of tantalisingly half-familiar landscapes. Rideal’s enigmatic glimpses of fleeting figures speak powerfully of a spectral but luminous world, complex and evanescent at the same time. When she suggested a collaboration, I knew that it was time to doff the heavy boots of disciplinary training and tiptoe out into untrodden territory.

*Feu follet* – the title of Rideal’s latest exhibition and of our co-authored artist’s book – recalls the flickering shapes of European folklore, hovering and blazing with delusive light, scheming to lead the wanderer astray: ignis fatuus, *fuochi fatui*. Like in Rideal’s earlier project, [Splicing Time](#), flying cloths and non-figurative pictures evoke and record human traces in a richly historical landscape, the Roman Campagna. My own attempts to explore the fascination of Rideal’s mutable forms in a verbal narrative echoed this concern. The textual fragments that accompany Rideal’s images centre on local history, and more specifically on the peculiar region of the Pontine marshes: a vast expanse of foul-smelling swamps, that used to extend for miles, from the Tyrrhenian Sea to the Volscian Mountains.

Sightings of ignis fatuus, I learned, are rarely reported today, perhaps as a result of the conversion of marshes to farmlands. What happened to the mysterious bursts of lightning activity that inspired the title of our book, and that were dear to Emily Dickinson, Italo Calvino and Jorge Luis Borges, among others? The dreams and fears engendered by the subtle spirits, it appeared, are now mostly figured by their absence. My exploration of the past – syncopated by Rideal’s images – thus unexpectedly conjured visions of a disquieting future: ruins from a world after the end of man. With a shudder, I felt myself awoken from the slumber of progressive time - the featureless, calendrical line across which history, supposedly, marches forward – to face the intimate, interlocking temporalities of powerful emotions: nostalgia, regret, forecast, desire.

*Feu follet*, then, is more than the record of a creative complicity, a collaborative object. As a potentially open-ended process, our joint work encroaches on the layered processes of history itself, inviting complex and fleeting responses to what is read and what is seen. Pairing images with texts, we hope to inspire curiosities that will transcend our efforts, negotiations that will continue to flit around, like the deep-seated human need for pictures and stories itself.

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**Liz Rideal** is an artist, author and Professor at the Slade School of Fine Art, UCL, with over fifty international solo exhibitions and artworks held in public collections; which include; Tate; V&A; BM; Vancouver Art Gallery, Canada; Museet for Fotokunst, Denmark; Berkeley Art Museum & Yale Centre for British Art, USA. She is the author of *Mirror/Mirror: Self-portraits by Women Artists* (2001); *Insights: Self-portraits* (2005); *How to Read Painting* (2014) and *500 Self-portraits* (2018) and co-author, with Kathleen Soriano, of *Madam and Eve: women portraying women* (2018).

*Feu Follet* opens on **Thursday, 15 November 2018** at **The Crypt, St John's, Waterloo**, SE1 8TY, where it can be seen until 9 December 2018. Open Saturday and Sunday, 14.00 - 18.00, or by appointment contact: [lizrideal.com/about/contact](http://lizrideal.com/about/contact).

Florian Mussnug and Liz Rideal, *Feu Follet* (Slade Press, 2018) – the artist's book that accompanies the exhibition – will be presented at the **The Slade School of Fine Art**, WC1E 6BT, on **Monday, 3 December 2018, 17:00 – 19:00**. The book launch will be marked by a multidisciplinary roundtable which will include contributions by Dr Maria del Pilar Blanco (Oxford) and Prof. Derek Duncan (St Andrews). All welcome.

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Image credit: Liz Rideal, *Tiberius' Grotto, Sperlonga (Fantasma II)*, A.