

Charles MacQueen RSW, James Hawkins, Alan MacDonald

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THE PAIRING of two of Kilmorack's regularly exhibiting artists, Charles MacQueen RSW and James Hawkins, with exciting new figurative work by Alan MacDonald give the viewer plenty to savour in the gallery's latest show.

Exhibiting in the United States and Holland, Dundee-trained Alan MacDonald has clearly distilled his own unique visual language in an impressive debut at Kilmorack. This is sophisticated, visually literate work both in terms of technical execution and multi-layered exploration of ideas, infused with humour and defined with precision.



Alan MacDonald - A Master and Margarita

While there are many art historical influences to be seen in this work, MacDonald remains his own man, in full knowledge of the canon, playfully seducing the viewer with familiarity of style then subverting expectation of traditional narrative. Displacement of elements; the surreal juxtaposition of classical and industrial architecture, the adornment and status of costume with utilitarian functionality and the presence of consumer branding/ Pop elements in the same frame as traditions of historical painting and portraiture thankfully never allow the audience to get too comfortable.

The work is archetypally Northern in its interior quality, the dark grounds and focussed illumination reminiscent of Flemish masters, the looser paint handling, particularly in the landscape backgrounds, akin to Dutch landscape

and maritime painting of the 18th century. The unforgiving choice of oil on board makes the sublime delicacy of the painted surface all the more impressive.



Alan MacDonald - Bullfighters Never Know When To Quit

The beguiling *Bullfighters Never know When To Quit* is an excellent example, a figurative group of seated male matador and classical female nude with an attendant leopard at their feet, all enigmatically focused on a scene beyond the frame. In the background three blazing buildings infuse the contemplative stillness with vitality, imminent danger and movement. This is contrasted with the delicate play of light between three aspects of self, radiant and luminous as a Titian Venus. The paint handling in this image is infused with care and vulnerability, while the presence of a line of song lyric; "welcome back my friends to the show that never ends" provides an ironic counterfoil to the conscious theatrical staging of the composition. This humour is characteristic of the way in which MacDonald visually stages his own subterfuge, an admirable quality in work with a decidedly intellectual edge.

The tension in these works is compelling, and their real beauty lies in the fluid nature of association which imaginatively expands the mind of the viewer along multiple pathways of interpretation. These are works not just of a moment but of lifetimes, a real rarity in the world of contemporary art. MacDonald's skilful and intelligent manipulation of plastic and ideological elements can be seen in the compositional strength of a large scale work, *Whims of Desire*.



Alan MacDonald - Whims of Desire

Here a young woman stands in the tiered architecture of her black domed gown, tethered to something or someone we cannot see, a number of openings in her skirt revealing a punch spring, ball and chain, the unfurling script of a popular Joplin lyric; "lord won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz", a Magritte-like spoon and a bouquet of white flowers suspended from her dress. At her feet a white monkey eyes the open red "Kettle sweet chilli

flavour” crisps packet in her hand while she gazes past us impassively, a smile dawning in the corner of her mouth.

The elegance and restraint of her clothing, symbolic presence of the monkey, together with the iconography of burning buildings in the background convey psychological and sexual tension. The composition itself is a powerful pyramid structure, aligned with light, centring on her pale skin, white ribbon of script and rope tether. Within this triangle are multiple triggers for the imagination.

In *Venus On Wheels* a codified genre and its associative meanings are temporarily displaced by the presence of a contemporary branded object. The Classical Goddess and symbol of beauty of the title is being hauled on a cheap looking trolley, the familiar striped design of a Tesco bag a Pop prop within an image spanning multiple timeframes. The deep umber background of “dark satanic mills” heightens the illumination of the consumer object and the female nude.

Luna is an intriguing and ambiguous image of femininity, beautifully rendered. The head and shoulders portrait is suitably enigmatic, aligned with the symbolic associations of the moon and her phases, linked with the element of water and tides. The three-quarters profile – like the trajectory of all of MacDonald’s work – conceals and reveals. There is implied confinement in the twisted twine and safety pins which secure and tether her costume in silvery textured gossamer blue, a hue to match her eyes. Attached to one line of twine the script “fly me to the moon” introduces a Pop element /humorous Sinatra twist to what initially reads like an encoded Renaissance society portrait.

Work in the exhibition by James Hawkins shows signs of potential development in the more experimental abstract pieces such as *Strath Nimhe Above Leckmelm* (Acrylic on paper) with fragments of vibrant coloured paint creating a landmass. Suspended in the frame the shadow gives the collaged layers of pigment a map like quality.



James Hawkins - Strath Nimhe above Leckmelm

An adjacent work, *Ben Mor Coigach*, utilises a similar technique, but due to the arrangement of form and colour lends itself to a more literal interpretation of landscape, a characteristic Hawkins scene of mountains and water. These two works appear to encompass dual trajectories in the artist's current practice; the desire for evolution through experimentation and reliance on painterly formula.

Sanded acrylics on canvas such as *Loch A Bhraoin* feel as if the artist is grappling with his own technique in an attempt to transcend stylistic limitations; however, what is revealed is simply a textural, painted surface. Compositional structure is absent in this work and as a result the eye moves indiscriminately around the surface with nothing to draw the mind into the image and hold it there. As a stage of evolution the sanded acrylic works are interesting but beg further development in terms of the essential relationship between technique and ideas.

Hawkins's drawings and other works on paper reveal immediacy of mark and draughtsmanship, demonstrating that the artist is capable of pushing the boundaries of his own practice; however, there is visible hesitation in this show, rather than bold, unflinching commitment to go where the process leads. Once commercially established

an artist will always have their style card in their back pocket, but to continue to lead the market they must challenge and engage the audience by challenging themselves.



Charles McQueen - The Magician's Trick

Charles MacQueen's work also charts familiar stylistic territory in this latest showing with some exquisite examples of his mixed media work, among them *Souvenir Shop*, *Rajasthan*, *Offering* and *Magician's Trick*. MacQueen's command of colour, texture and mark is ever present; dreamlike delicacy and structural integrity defining his best compositions.

This is a fascinating show of contrasting styles, raising expectation about potential developments in Kilmorack's regularly exhibiting artists and introducing an exciting and dynamic new artist to the gallery's audience. It is an

absolute pleasure to become lost in the multi-layered nature of Alan MacDonald's work, encouraging repeat viewings of this extraordinary show.

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