

Drawing From The Landscape

Published 3 Jul 2012 in *Northings*, Highlands and Islands online Arts journal.

RSA Projects, Royal Scottish Academy, Edinburgh, until 22 July 2012

FEATURING work by RSA members, artists and architects selected for RSA awards and exhibitions programmes, *Drawing From the Landscape* is a fascinating exploration of the human mark in natural and built environments.

WORKS by David Cass, Caroline Dear, Jean Duncan, Anna Gibb, Mhairi Killin, Matthew MacPhee, Michael Visocchi RSA, Frances Walker RSA and Richard Walker provide an impressive survey of established and emerging talent, highlighting the importance of investment in creative process and in the distillation of each artist's unique visual language at each stage of their career.



Frances Walker - Shore Walk, Antarctica (triptych)

In Adam Proctor's short film, *Frances Walker Place Observed in Solitude*, the artist comments on "a pair of human eyes, a mind, a sensibility" perceiving the landscape, qualities clearly felt in every mark made by the artist's hand throughout the exhibition. A selection of Frances Walker's Antarctic notebooks, separations, screenprints, drawings and lithography reveal the artist's ability to unearth the human spirit hidden in such isolated territories, illuminating in Geopoetic terms "a mindscape in a landscape". Walker's practice defies classification within the landscape genre in her evocation of human history and memory as residual and enduring marks of consciousness.

Landing at Vernadsky (Pencil and charcoal drawing) is a particularly fine example, a work of unexpected beauty and elegance seen in the curvature and geometry of man made structures set against the stark Antarctic landscape. The heightened perspective and monumentality of the scene extend beyond the confines of the picture plane with the foreground spilling into the viewer's own space, successfully placing the observer in the mind's eye of a territory few human beings have experienced first hand. The human figure is entirely absent; however the artist characteristically creates presence in absence in marks of human habitation in the landscape.

The sheen of the artist's chosen materials gives an impression of light rendered in the most finely executed drawn marks, typical of Walker's magnificent draughtsmanship. Traces of colour, a red cable and blue shed to

the left give the impression of a transitory footprint in pigment and the composition, cut off in the manner of a panoramic snapshot, reminds the viewer of the passage of time in uniquely human terms. The scene is expansive in its treatment of the subject in a scene not just observed but “absorbed” and felt. Walker communicates with immediacy in her drawn response to this environment the inherent vulnerability and epic endeavour of human exploration in one of the most isolated and remote places on earth. Her ability to illuminate the human spirit in these “distant islands” is inspirational, a reflection of the integrity and discipline that has shaped her work consistently for over 60 years.

The screen print *Shore Walk, Antarctica* with its vast curvature of rocky beach, penguins scurrying along its edges, equally communicates the idea of a human mind perceiving the landscape. Glacial hues in sea and sky seem to shift before the viewer’s gaze, with incredible subtlety in tone and mark contributing to the sense of climatic change and spatial depth. Broken ice at the water’s edge and distant icebergs shape the shifting ground of the earth beneath our feet. Walker’s mastery of printmaking techniques in a multi-layered interpretation of land, sea and sky are undeniable, testimony to her remarkable and enduring vision of humanity in land and seascape.

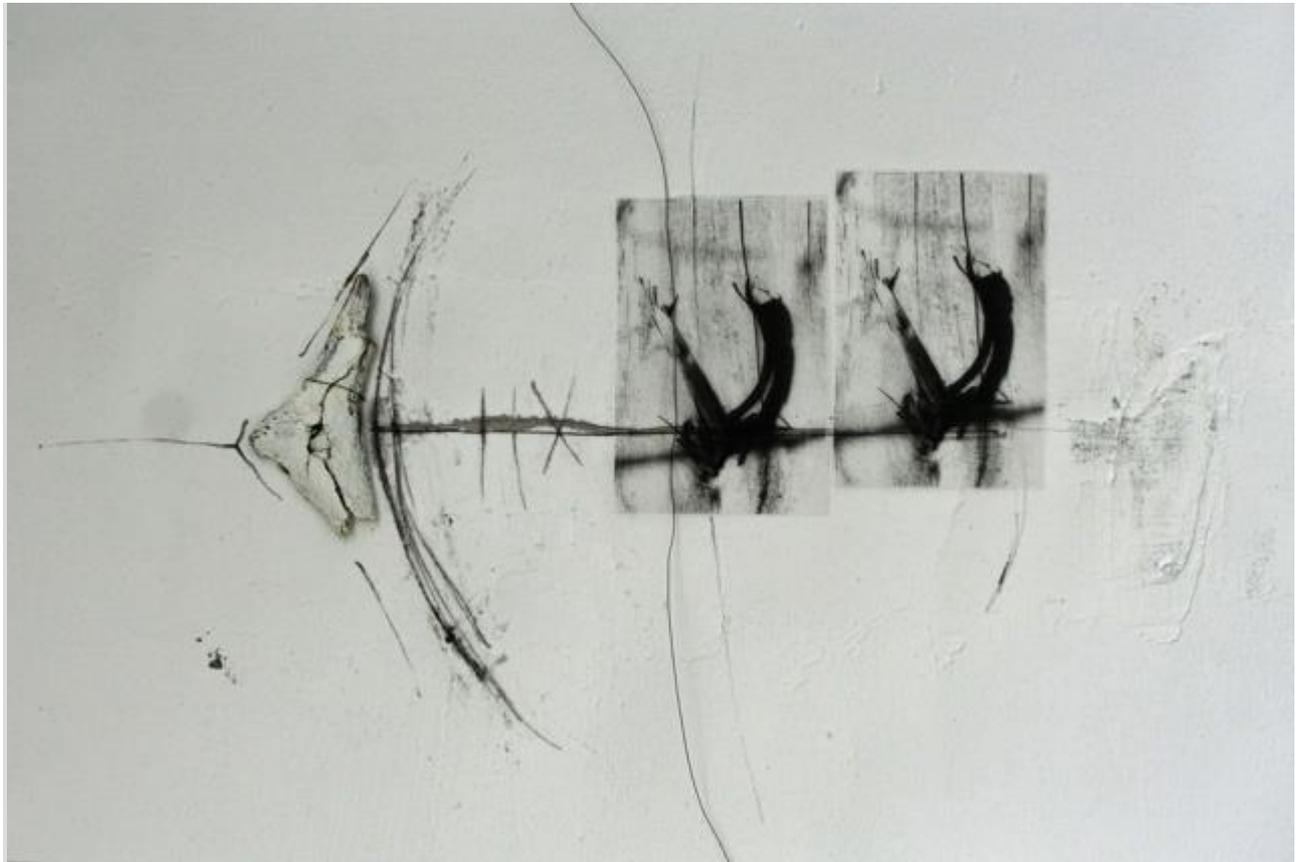


David Cass - Years of Dust and Dry (2011-2012)

David Cass’s *Years of Rust and Dry* skilfully utilises the found object as the textural ground for painterly and sculptural exploration of a collective human mark. The recurrent motif of a stylised ocean, a rhythmic swell of flattened greenish grey gouache painted on a farmhouse table top, combines the natural effects of time, life and decay with human design and deliberation. Weathered by time and domestic use the bulk of the table top, resting on two small open drawers, is overlaid by an expansive pattern of water. Cass extends this motif in the surface treatment, diminishing the circumference pattern at the edges to seemingly create an expanded world of unconscious aspiration contained in this mass of water, the wood beneath creating imaginative depth in contrast.

It is a poetic image echoed in miniature in a collection of matchboxes and wooden coffee grinder drawers an adjacent cabinet, bone dry elements juxtaposed with an infinite expanse of water. There is something aged about the choice of colour, reminiscent of folk painting and this combined with an almost sculptural quality to the wave

pattern gives the work a feeling of connection to generations past, together with a feeling of eternal longing that reaches deep beneath the distressed wooden surface. Cass's paper film reels and projector are equally intriguing, a dialogue between object and invention; a museum piece coupled with celluloid in a form that cannot illuminate itself. Cass presents a compelling sequence of thought about the mystery of life, knowing and the human condition.



Mhairi Killin - Uist Drawing, 2011

Mhairi Killin's *Uist Sketch*, a mixed media drawing of ink, graphite, found object, wire, photograph and gesso paste, combines stitch, drawn line and found bone in a gestural articulation of mark, implying a horizon or timeline of human habitation and memory in direct response to the landscape. In visual terms the artist's expanded notebook; a series of 34 photographic images and corresponding studies; paper, etched silver, wire, wax and acetate, also reflects this individual and collective mark in pages connected by a strong rhythmic line of ink.

The stark clarity of Black and white photography together with the multi-layered treatment of mixed media on this dual surface is sensitively rendered, revealing the artist's investigation of the physical, spiritual and cultural landscape and signature craftsmanship. The inclusion of such works in the exhibition gives valuable insight into the artist's creative process and the wider human context of their chosen environment.

Although *An Taistealachd/ The Pilgrimage* (Digital print with etched silver and silver wire detail, edition of eight) documents the artist's direct response to the Island of Inch Kenneth; Killin repositions the island as a site of universal illumination and ritual through creative process. The Pilgrimage is experienced by both the artist and

viewer in the fluid perspective and multi-layered treatment of the site as a vessel and repository of human experience. The central image of the well or portal, together with use of silver in an unpolished state bound around the entrance and extending into the white ground of the image is powerfully distilled. Flanked by photographic views of human dwelling and archaeology on the island, shifting focus and depth of field, together with the reflection of a window in an aged mirror within Inch Kenneth house, explore the concept of time and a horizon of human aspiration over centuries.

The artist's adept handling of tone and texture contribute to the rich interior life of the image in three living dimensions. The finely burnished silver luggage tag overlaid at the centre, incised with text in reference to an ancient cairn, implies a journey of illumination through ritual both in the choice and handling of materials. Killin's evocation of individual and collective memory through landscape relies not on a conception of this territory as a view or even as geography, seen in the ghostly contour map hovering to the right of the composition, but on an understanding of the earth beneath one's feet as a potent site for collective cultural excavation and reappraisal.

Caroline Dear's *Peatbog A Natural Archive* (Screenprint, edition of nine) combines formal design and text to evoke "a natural archive holding memory of place, of people of time". The single elongated strip of brown, like a furrow on white paper, suggests the raw material and the idea of the earth as a richly fertile creative ground for the imagination. Similarly *Peat Marks*, a square composition of peaty ground with a haiku like arrangement of words: "peat, marks, deep, time", create triggers of association from minimal visual and written elements.

In *Entwined/ Suainte* Dear explores the relationship between humankind and the natural environment in 100 ropes constructed from natural materials, combining traditional knowledge and living memory in a series of gestural marks on the gallery wall. This drawing in three dimensions utilising materials directly from the environment is characteristic of the way that the artist incorporates formal design and raw organic materials in her multidisciplinary practice.

It is exciting to see this collection of work by artists selected for RSA awards and exhibition programmes for the depth of exploration in territories natural and manmade; observed, absorbed and felt by some of Scotland's finest artists.

© Georgina Coburn, 2012