

Faces and Figures from the Permanent Collection

Inverness Museum & Art Gallery, until 9 February 2013

THIS LATEST exhibition in the IMAG main gallery space presents the opportunity to view some magnificent works from the Scottish figurative tradition, drawn from the Highland Collection held by the Highland Council.

CONSISTING mainly of work by artists from the Highlands of Scotland, the collection reflects acquisitions from temporary touring exhibitions from the 1980's and 1990's, supplemented by part of the Scottish Arts Council Collection Bequest when the SAC's permanent collection was dismantled in 2001. Featured artists include Joyce W Cairns, Ken Currie, Adrian Wisniewski, Heather Wade, Andrew Walker, David Donaldson, Patricia Douthwaite, Margaret Hunter, Calum Colvin and Peter Howson.



Joyce Cairns - Shadows of the Past

Scottish artists have contributed enormously to the figurative tradition in Western Art History and it is wonderful to see some of the greatest exponents of the genre represented in this exhibition. *Shadows of the Past* (also titled *Shadows of the Past, Liberation Ceremony Rennes 1984*, oil on panel) by Joyce W Cairns is one of the highlights

of the exhibition. Described by the artist as her “first war painting” and inspired by a journey to Brittany where she witnessed the celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the liberation of Rennes, *Shadows of the Past* marks the beginning of an exploration of personal and collective memory which culminated in the artist’s major retrospective *War Tourist* at the Aberdeen Art Gallery in 2006. In terms of Cairns’ *oeuvre* this is a significant painting, and the Highland Council are indeed fortunate to hold this work bequeathed from the SAC collection.

The painting draws a powerful link between Scottish figurative art in the 1980’s, German Expressionism and the *Naue Sacklichkeit*, specifically the paintings of Max Beckman, Otto Dix and George Grosz during the Weimar period in its compression of the figure within the picture plane. Cairns’ uncompromising vision, bold delineation and paint handling are uniquely tempered by an unsettling delicacy. Paint is applied fluidly and scraped or wiped away to allow luminous highlights of ground to emerge, like truth illuminated in darkness.

The depiction of the central female protagonist, a symbol of occupied France, is characterised not by the idea of liberation but collaboration; the choice of palette a distortion of the bright tricolour into steely militaristic blue and deeper hues evocative of caked mud and blood. The overlay of figures is claustrophobic and absolute, a composition of powerful intensity and subtlety, with ghostly elements visible on closer inspection; the childlike face above the woman’s exposed breast, the hand in the right hand corner with a milk jug, part of the genteel ritual of taking tea with the enemy. In the foreground, the female protagonist’s hand reaches for cake offered on a tray by a German soldier, while she gazes absently beyond the picture frame and the contained chaos of war and invasion.

The positioning of gun and bayonet and the immersion of the female figure within the composition achieves a level of psychological violence which is as unflinching as it is humane. Cairns’ great gift is placing the heart of the work within the viewer, causing us to examine our own complicity and vulnerability as human beings. There is care in every brushstroke and in the painstaking inner architecture of the image, characteristic of all the artist’s large scale figurative compositions. Form and feeling are rendered equally, inviting deeper contemplation of the subject.

Unlike the work of Peter Howson, an official war artist in Bosnia whose early work is also featured in the exhibition, Cairns achieves not a shocking display of violence distancing the viewer from the human condition, but a level of emotional gravitas and inner reflection befitting a major artist of consummate skill and insight. The image is of a country despoiled, a commemorative image of complicity and guilt, not just in the context of a single war but for all time. Joyce W Cairns is one of the UK’s greatest living artists and this important work of international significance should be on permanent display in the Highland capital as one of the highlights of the Highland Council collection.



Andrew Walker - The Bishop

Andrew Walker's *The Bishop* (Oil on canvas) is a subtle and introspective work of unexpected beauty, echoing early Picasso in its abstracted, planar treatment of the face and body. The central ruffed figure, perched upon a stool with arms folded protectively around his bent legs, occupies a tonally charged space of light and shadow. The face is defined in a few elegantly poised lines, conveying with economy a pervasive mood of contemplation in the ambiguous, Pierrot-like central figure. The darkest shadow behind the figure to the left is almost a presence in itself and the way that the shifting ground pigment is handled adds to the atmosphere of inward deliberation. In a monochrome world warmer flesh tones bind our gaze to the figure, drawing the eye into this intriguing painting of profound stillness.



Heather Wade - In A Spiritual Place

Heather Wade's beautifully enigmatic *In a Spiritual Place* (Mixed media on canvas) is a surreal composition of landscape, figure and symbolic still life, rendered in a finely tuned palette of greens, blues and accented flesh tones. The eye is immediately drawn to the central female figure with her head cranked awkwardly to one side, her stance and penetrative gaze evocative of an altered state of consciousness/perception, together with the clear liquefied depiction of three birds in flight to the upper right as archetypal symbols of the spirit. Like the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites, Wade's work is steeped in personal and collective iconography; the feminine vessel held aloft in the palm, the antique statue to the left in cold classical marble contrasted with an earlier cat-like deity depicted on a terracotta plaque beneath, two aspects of sensuality held in the background of the protagonist.

This expansion of self throughout the arrangement and display of objects surrounding the figure is also expressed in the angular shard of mirror, which disrupts the dream-like elevated state of the composition. Wade's gently articulate palette and rippling brushwork are subtly rendered to great effect, creating a rhythm which is hypnotic, meditative and rather haunting. The juxtaposition of Christian and pagan imagery; the crucifix adorned with bones, the masks of sun and moon, expand our frame of reference in relation to spirituality. This attitude, the

freedom for the viewer to make their own connections with Wade's own personal iconography, together with the piercing, steady gaze of the protagonist infers that "spiritual place" held within the individual.

I Wandered Through The 30's (Charcoal/ Conte on Paper) is a fine example of Ken Currie's superb draughtsmanship in heightened chiaroscuro, reflecting his early work on eight panels for the People's Palace, commissioned for the 200th anniversary of the massacre of Glasgow's Carlton Weavers. Influenced by the socialist realism of Diego Rivera and the biting social satire of Dix and Grosz as part of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* in Germany during the rise of Nazism, Currie's murals contrast with his later intimate, ethereal portraits and larger scale figurative work focusing on human vulnerability, death and decay.

Here the robust rendering of the human figure and sense of forward movement in the crowd present a vigorous image of protest and self-determination. Figures gathered around the fire to warm their hands evoke the plight of the man in the street during the depression era, with reference to the fight against Fascism during the Spanish Civil War in the burning newspaper headline "Aid To Spain". The mother and child drawn as one embrace together with the central masculine figure of strength and resistance hold the structure of this figurative composition in a great pyramid as a powerful visual expression of political struggle and human aspiration.

Calum Colvin's *Self Portrait* (Cibachrome Print) presents a layered image of the subject, the act of seeing and the crafting of visual images typical of the artist. The visual game of exploration suggested by the checkerboard-like floor and the successive layers of print, photograph, mirror, three dimensional still life and stacked canvases as a multidimensional representation of self and creation in black and white tonality. The shaving mirror portrait in the foreground, open book of "truth" and photograph/postcard/billboard "walk a mile in my shoes", together with a cuckoo clock provide the only accents of colour.

The placement of these elements together with the shifting, elusive nature of the self- portrait as an image of truth and deception create a fascinating and ambiguous comment on existence; "I exist and all that is not. I is mere phenomenon dissolving into phenomenal connections". Both visual and written text in Colvin's art provide the opportunity for varied connections to be made in the mind of the viewer, positioning the portrait in relation to ourselves, ideas of self and of seeing- none of which are visually fixed.

With no permanent survey of Visual Art in the Highland capital's only public museum/gallery space, seeing even a small selection of this work on display is a joy. It is both inspiring and deeply frustrating to see what might form the core of not just a permanent collection invisibly scattered or in storage, but perhaps a future survey and programme of acquisition which places the work of Highland artists in a local, national and international context in a building suited for purpose.

While in a time of austerity this might seem like a distant dream, such investment in cultural infrastructure, which visibly exists in every other Scottish or international city, is an economic necessity, an important educational resource and a measure of worth. If we do not insist on seeing our own visual history consistently represented, we fail to value ourselves, and the image we project to the rest of the world is a great deal poorer. While the process of cataloguing works online is on-going, providing access to collections all over the UK through the BBC/Your Paintings website, doing a search for paintings in the Highland Council collections is arguably no

substitute for seeing and engaging with original work presented in context, doubly so in light of the historic denial of that visual history locally and nationally.

A visitor from New York, Barcelona or elsewhere may as well stay at home and play with a mouse because if they came here looking for visual culture in the public domain they would be hard pressed to find anything other than the temporary or tokenistic. This exhibition points powerfully to an alternative and the Exhibitions Unit are to be congratulated on curating such a resoundingly strong show; however, the fact remains that this exhibition exists in a single room for a month and can only be viewed during reduced winter hours from Thursday to Saturday.

The work in this show, together with the current exhibition of contemporary craft and the display of two of Gerald Laing's sculptures in IMAG's revamped upper foyer are a step in the right direction. The extraordinary work of artists based in the Highlands and Islands presented here demands a greater expansion of space, time and consideration. What this display of works from the permanent collection highlights is the lack of growth and understanding at civic level that hasn't significantly altered in the last decade of rapid social change. Visit just about any other city in the world and Visual Art has a presence not on a screen but visibly and physically as a cultural and economic statement of worth. There can be no pride or economic recovery if our greatest cultural assets remain hidden.

© *Georgina Coburn, 2013*