

Frances Walker – Place Observed in Solitude

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THIS IS a landmark exhibition by one of Scotland's most respected and influential artists. This selection of works spanning the last sixty years represents an extraordinary artistic vision which has led the artist to remote locations throughout the Highlands and Islands and beyond. Although not a comprehensive retrospective, evolution and consistency within the artist's work is richly in evidence from the earliest works in the show dating from the 1950's to the present day.



Aberdeen Window, 1990, by Frances Walker (photo - Mike Davidson, Positive Image).

In 2007, as recipient of the James McBey Travel Award, the artist journeyed to Antarctica, fulfilling a lifelong ambition and producing a body of work exploring a wilderness “observed and absorbed”. These current works from the world's edge signify the artist's ongoing engagement with landscape “not isolated from the human spirit”.

Central to Walker's work is the hidden territory of geographically isolated places, what she describes as “the endeavor of the human spirit to live in those remote places”. The human relationship to the environment, “a pair of human eyes”, is ever-present in her compositions, together with the human mark upon the landscape.

Many of Walker's compositions bring us to the edge of a scene; the viewer stands resolutely in the foreground, our human scale dwarfed by a high horizon line, suggestive of an expanse of sky and sea infinitely beyond the confines of the canvas or board. The artist encourages us to imagine a scale of life beyond our mortal view.

Staffa Visit (Oil on wood panels, 2003) takes us to the edge of a steep path and descent to the boats waiting below. Even with day trippers populating the cliff tops, the viewer feels isolated, seemingly standing on the world's edge due to the global curve of the horizon. The tiny island is placed within a wider sphere of reference; it is both edge and centre.

The mindscape of Walker's art is consistently expansive with the human scale of activity depicted in relation to the immensity and endurance of the natural world. The act of painting draws us into a state of solitude akin to the contemplation of nature. *Antarctic Waters (Oil on wood panel, 2008)* contains the wake of a ship moving slowly through water, the only visible sign of a human journey through the image.

Oransay Shore (Oil on canvas, 1970) is a fascinating work in terms of the crafting of an image and implied human presence. This beautifully balanced composition is almost a tonal abstract study – the texture of grasses, green-yellow algae on rock, distant blue ocean and black seaweed drawn marks on white sand form a complex pattern of nature. The subtle tonal variations in the foreground create barely discernable impressions of footprints in the sand. This succession of marks, suggestive of the passage of time and change, are tinged with poignancy and the fleeting nature of human existence.

In *Foreshore at Footdee (Oil on board, 1980-1983)*, the complex pattern of rocks, flotsam and jetsam are intricately bound together with meticulous draughtsmanship, framed by the industrial and residential buildings on either side of the high horizon line. Human presence is depicted as debris, with the scale of buildings dwarfed by the timeless cycles of waves, wind and erosion on the shore. Built structures are peripheral to the scene and we are led by contours of form and the soft palette of pinks and greys into a site of contemplation.

At the Edge of the Glacier (Oil on wood panel, 2008) is another superb piece of work, a small fraction of a vast landscape we experience through layers of perception. The viewer becomes submerged in the scene, the absorption and refraction of light and hue through the varying densities of the ice flow conveyed by masterful paint handling. The feeling of suspension within a moment in time combined with the perceptible movement of the frozen ocean creates a feeling of unease, of bearing witness to vanishing beauty.

Andvord Bay, Antarctica (Oil on wood panel, 2009) with its great serpentine swathe of reflected sky in water, a snapshot of a vast scene we imagine in our mind's eye, conveys the awe and wonder of nature in sublime triptych form. The progression of colour from white through aqua and cerulean into ultramarine isolated in reflection heightens the sense of revelation in the work.

In spirit it is evocative of the reverence, austerity and profound sense of inner stillness seen in the more stylistically abstract work of Canadian artist Lawren Harris.

Frances Walker's consummate skill as a printmaker is well represented in the exhibition in works such as *Tiree Shore Evening (Collagraph and watercolour, 2007)*, *Hynish Rocks (Screenprint, 1985)* and *Winter in Achnasoul Wood (Collagraph and watercolour, 2007)*.

Tiree Shore Evening, cut by channels of water erosion through pink tinged stone, greenish algae and cobalt contours of rock, creates a pattern of beautiful textures, given depth by the printmaking process. The application of materials in collagraph, akin to low relief sculpture presents a myriad of textural possibilities. In this shoreline scene, form and texture lead the eye convincingly into the work.

Hynish Rocks (Screenprint, 1985) with its cluster of gigantic boulders creates an almost figurative presence in stone, defined by the artist's characteristic contour lines and layers of registration. Though drawings do not

feature predominantly in this exhibition, the element of design and draughtsmanship is strongly represented in the artist's prints.

Winter in Achnasoul Wood (Collagraph and watercolour, 2007) is an excellent example, a strong composition of black and white tempered with the subdued ochre glow of winter light. The impressions of twigs dusted in snow just penetrating the surface retain the quality and freshness of drawn marks. Light through the distant verticals of trees and reflected in the water give warmth to the image, while the block-like division of the composition, reminiscent of Japanese prints, conveys the hard-edged crispness of winter. Walker renders the image with clarity and skill, distilling her experience of the landscape into visual poetry.

Two short films especially commissioned for the exhibition from Adam Proctor, *Antarctica* and *Tiree*, featuring interviews with the artist, together with the exhibition catalogue, which includes essays by Griffin Co, Peter Davidson, Murdo MacDonald and Arthur Watson, give valuable insight into the artist's life and work.

Now in her 80th year, Frances Walker RSA, RSW, Dlitt, continues to be an inspiration to subsequent generations of artists. This is a celebration long overdue. Complimenting this exhibition at Aberdeen Art Gallery, an exhibition of prints and drawings: *Frances Walker A Path Along The Edge*, will run at Peacock Visual Arts from 13 March to 24 April, with a demonstration by the artist on 18 March and an artist's talk and tour of the exhibition on 20 March. In addition, The Royal Scottish Academy Sir William Gillies Bequest Lecture by Duncan Macmillan HRSA, *FRANCES WALKER in the wider context*, will take place at Aberdeen Art Gallery on 17 March.

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