

Henry Fraser and David Cook

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THIS inspired pairing of two artists of equal intensity in their engagement with subject and paint handling is full of potential discoveries.

DAVID Cook's landscape and still life works and Henry Fraser's figurative paintings demonstrate that creative vision is as alive in Kilmorack Gallery's programming as it is in the studios of the artists it represents.



David Cook - Blizzard

The visceral potency of David Cook's *Blizzard* (Oil On Canvas) brings forces of nature together with impassioned handling of paint in bold, broad strokes, thick impasto and a complimentary palette of blues, purples, yellow and ochre. While elements of landforms are visible in the low slung sea and headland in the fore ground, it is the monumental sky which dominates the composition. It is here that the emotional gravitas of Cook's work can be found, rooted in Abstract Expressionism and in direct response to the landscape.



David Cook - Lochgelly Loch

Reminiscent of early Kandinsky, *Lochgelly Loch* (Oil On Canvas) is another superb example; a pure engagement of the senses in sweeping gestural brushmarks which reflect the soul of the work in water and sky. The vivid, joyous palette of pink, orange, yellow, blues, greens and deep alizarin together with variation of mark, create a finely balanced composition of form and feeling.

This quality is also exemplified in *Harvest* (Oil On Board), where an abundance of yellow and orange coupled with cool luminous blue are brought together in abstract form. Held by a universal vibration of life-affirming colour, the sky nestled in the hollow of the land feels like a vessel for the soul. The formal division of the composition and strength of feeling that the palette imbues is stunningly profound in its simplicity.

Sun Splitting Through (Oil On Board) is almost calligraphic in its signature treatment of light; three articulated marks in yellow which unite dividing strata of the composition (sky, sea and land) and elements of air, water and earth. The relative stillness of the ground, tempered with watery sweeping strokes of blue and pink is divided by the introduction of gestural marks which lead the mind in contemplation.



David Cook - Horizon Line

A smaller square composition, *Horizon Line* (Oil On Board), further illustrates the artist's immersion in his subject and the art of painting. Here an intense line of dark ultramarine with layers of cadmium red, yellow and impasto white reduce the image to pure expression through colour and form. Cook applies layers of pigment to the image and scrapes them back to reveal unexpected vibrancy.

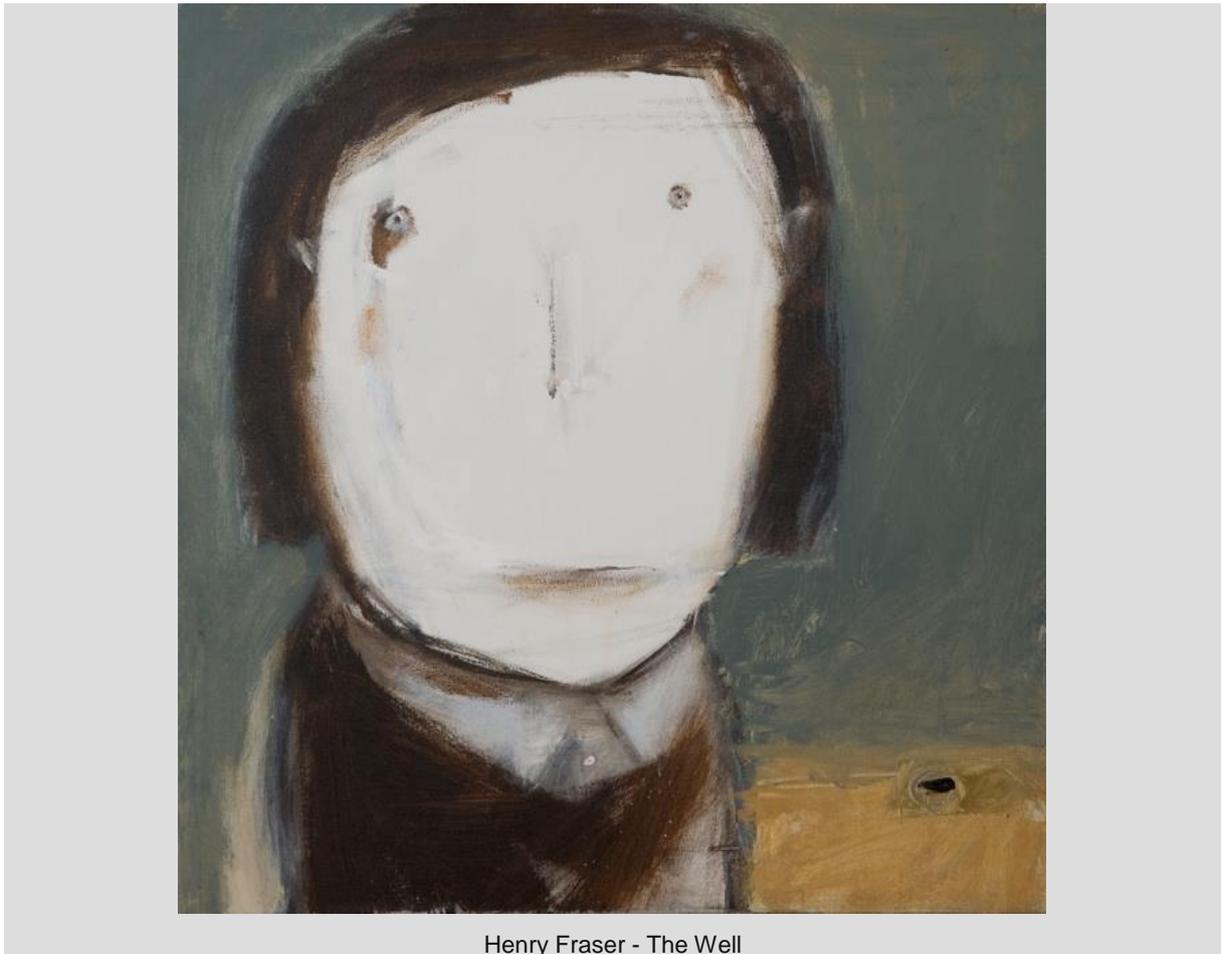
Wheat Fields (Oil On Board) is equally intense in its beauty, with a range of colour taken from the artist's entire palette. Even in an image of relatively intimate scale the investment of energy in every mark and balance of colour are powerfully resonant. Cook's work is an exciting combination of raw, intuitive energy and deliberation. The degree to which this dynamic can be further distilled will define future work and hopefully lead to his next solo exhibition.

The choreography of movement in *Big Sky* in swathes of purple and flurries of white and yellow reflects the way in which Cook transforms our vision of the Scottish landscape as scene to an interior journey. The earth itself is

anchored to the base of the composition with the imagination and spirit expanded in the dominant sky. While the proximity of Joan Eardley's Catterline to the artist's own studio is bound to draw comparisons, the emotional weight of Cook's work is be found not in laden impasto but the vibrancy of his palette. His vision draws us not into the swell of the ocean or the grit of sodden earth but upwards into the element of air and sky which dominate his land based compositions.

Henry Fraser's naïve treatment of the human figure is both compassionate and revelatory in its abstraction. With none of the trappings of conventional portraiture, Fraser strips humanity back in pictorial, psychological and emotive terms, conveying profound sensitivity in his paint handling and choice of composition. With striking economy, Fraser is capable of incredible delicacy and insight.

The Great Escape (Acrylic On Board) is a beautiful example; the large faces of two children in a field, turned to the viewer in round-eyed innocence dominating the image. Their childlike simplicity is tempered by detailed treatment of the painted surface; speckled accents of gold amongst the spikey imprint of grasses and immediately tactile stippled brushwork, the barest wash of blue under-painting reflected in characteristically small but universally expressive eyes. Varying treatment of burnt umber gives the whole image an earthy, elemental quality, while human faces appear ethereal, like childhood remembered, two birds in the distance echoing flight of imagination and freedom in nature.



Henry Fraser - The Well

Fraser's humanity as an artist is also revealed in two deeply affecting images; *The Well* and *Everybody Knew But Nobody Said*. Abstraction of the figure into bare pictorial elements heightens the emotional resonance of each work. In *The Well*, placement of the figure and dominance of the head illuminated in white is starkly framed by dark umber hair and clothing. Psychologically the space is compressed and a single oval mark in the lower right hand corner, the well of the title, expands like a threat in the mind's eye. Anxiety is concentrated in the protagonist's eyes using the barest marks, and like the figure, the feeling swallows the viewer whole.

In *Everybody Knew But Nobody Said* a lone female figure in a green dress, her dark hair and eyes defined in blue, turns her eye in confrontation to the viewer who is complicit in her gaze. The sadness and recognition in this work are palpable and Fraser skilfully renders the figure in a rapid smear of marks and bold form, set against an empty psychological ground. Colour has drained out of the world and we stand eye to eye with the protagonist in knowledge and experience of betrayal shared.

One of the most daringly effective works in the show is *Hope*, which utilises the barest suggestion of pictorial elements in the pursuit of the most expansive idea imaginable. Recognisably a human face but still unformed, the artist defines space for a smiling mouth with unprimed board, eyes and other features are suggested but unfinished. We see a glimmer in the white face and red cheeks, of possibility, of life still to be lived in a child-like figure whose lightness against a wash of umber illuminates the whole world.

Hard bare board, a raw everyday material, forms an unlikely halo around her head. The equality between the artist's technique and the idea of hope is unexpectedly revelatory. Similarly an emotive state is beautifully realised in *Penitent*, where bare board and marks of the brush rendered like flagellation represent realisation of the idea through inspired paint handling.



Henry Fraser - Mither Tongue

Mither Tongue echoes John Bellany in its stark procession of figures clothed in blackened umber. One appears cloaked in a shawl, another in an incised striped nightdress, their heads swathed ambiguously in either bandages

or bonnets, eyes fixed penetratingly on the viewer like an outsider stumbled into a small village. Mouths thinly drawn and stitched shut, if present at all, are resoundingly mute in an image which sits uneasily and timelessly in the mind between historical past and cultural present.



Henry Fraser - The Writing's on the Wall

The Writing's On The Wall is another fascinating work, the figure isolated in the lower right hand corner of the composition and architecturally confined within a tomb-like frame with the mark of a cross overhead. The surface itself feels aged in intricate layers of acrylic on board, splattered, scraped and weathered and the fate of the protagonist pre-ordained, no mouth to speak with a voice of one's own. The confinement and inevitability within this work is both illuminating and, like all of Fraser's figurative work, uncompromisingly humane in its acknowledgement of the human condition.

Celebrating its fifteenth birthday in June, Kilmorack continues to be one of the most astute galleries in the country in the presentation of new work. This is a dynamic and powerful show which successfully challenges expectation by two artists equally engaged with their chosen subject and medium.

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