

## **Absent Voices- Mhairi Killin**

The shores of Iona represent a unique vantage point; a historical centre of creativity and spirituality, a geographical edge between land and sea, a site of pilgrimage and emigration.

For artist Mhairi Killin the infinite substrata of human marks upon this landscape remain a rich source of inspiration. In her latest body of work themes of journeying and separation are explored with characteristic courage, curiosity and verve. A highly accomplished artist Killin moves easily between disciplines of drawing, weaving, silversmithing, sculpture and installation, creating a practice defined by its own unique rhythm. This fluidity between creative disciplines is a major strength, defying limiting beliefs about the boundaries between Fine Art and Craft disciplines and opening up new possibilities in contemporary art practice. Consistently pushing the boundaries of technique the artist reveals an unexpected and expansive vision of landscape; encompassing land, people and memory.

The unconventional aspects of the artist's practice are exemplified in the metal weave, working with materials not usually associated with the method and creating a fascinating dialogue of scale between personal and collective fields of reference. Textile methods of construction are integral to her approach; as superbly crafted pieces in their own right and as finely constructed components within larger forms. Stitching on top of etching, use of organza metal and naturally eroded found objects contribute to the exquisite range of textural possibilities employed by the artist. Led by form and texture the precision and detail of sampling and silversmithing is integrated into larger sculptural and installation pieces, providing points of meditation for the viewer. The artist's cumulative experience and creative development over the last twenty years has enabled her to create work of extraordinary beauty, sensitivity and insight. Absolute commitment to individual and collective creative process, attainment of the highest level of craftsmanship and the integrity of the human mark are defining principles of her practice.

Mhairi Killin's family history of silversmithing and weaving on Iona, together with study at Glasgow School of Art (BA Honours, Embroidered & Woven Textiles), Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art, Dundee (Master of Philosophy, Public Art) and studies in Field Archaeology at Glasgow University have informed the artist's ongoing exploration of her environment past and present. Research and travel in Scandinavia, North America and the Baltic Republics have contributed to the artist's conception of the potential role of the artist and creative process within a built environment. In the mid 1990's models of engagement with artists on public art projects in America, Finland and Denmark have influenced the artist's ongoing exploration of visual landscape both in urban and rural contexts. The impact of Design and visual literacy within a culture remains a potent area of investigation in her latest work.

In many ways the creative process itself is an act of remembrance, not just for the individual artist but as a mark of recognition of collective cultural value and identity. The history of visual culture on Iona has inspired an astonishing lineage of creative responses; from Bronze Age land works to the Book of Kells, Medieval cross slab sculpture, the Arts and Crafts revival of Alexander and Euphemia Ritchie, Iain MacCormick, the Iona Press and work by the Scottish Colourists. Historically the indigenous craft skills of boatbuilding, carpentry, weaving and silversmithing on the island represent a symbiotic relationship between art and life. The nature of Craft as a signifier of social cohesion and cultural identity is a central focus for the artist, reflecting the pride and integrity invested in a handmade or hand finished object as part of its tradition.

Mhairi Killin's work is both a continuation of this inheritance and a powerful comment on cultural decline and survival. This is echoed beautifully in the formal structure of her work, choice of media and superb handling of materials. The delicacy of silver wire, translucent woven microfilaments and transparency of glass convey the fragility of creative processes suspended in the ethereal, fragmentary realm of human memory. Use of sandblasted text upon glass reflects natural and cultural cycles of erosion in a union of technique and ideas. Drawing upon primary source material including poetry, waulking song, images, postcards and letters of correspondence between Iona and the New World the artist creates a point of contact between human experience past and present. The evocation of weaving and waulking and the social cohesion such processes generated is not an attempt at reconstruction but visual recognition of loss, of separation from one's own culture or homeland. Within the installation setting a strong and affirmative statement is created; however precarious or transparent the cultural thread, the artist makes this visible in all its delicacy and radiance, a powerful reminder of creative processes that have in fact endured and are part of a collective inheritance. Just as the physical act of waulking is transformative due to the rhythmical construction of the song, the act of making or viewing visual art allows us to connect with an essential inner rhythm. The role of the individual within the waulking process, as part of the circle illuminates the essential nature of the Craft. This line of enquiry can be traced through the artist's earlier residency work and public art projects in Dundee and Coatbridge Heritage Museums, exploring industrial archaeology, identity and regeneration. The universality of the human mark and the need to make this visible both in a personal and cultural context has remained a guiding principle for the artist throughout the development of her studio practice.

The importance of preparatory work in the studio, often excluded from the gallery or exhibition space, is an integral part of the creative process and final display of work for exhibition. Killin reveals a process usually hidden from our gaze, a foundation of research and experimentation that opens up creative choices and extends the artist's palette. This dynamic is a powerful force in her work, extending visual vocabulary and asserting the importance of the visual within a cultural and historical framework. In this way the studio is both archive and laboratory. The artist's notation in wire, ink, collage, stitching and photography expands the boundaries of the traditional sketchbook to the studio walls and into the exhibition space. Drawing in three dimensions employs all of the artist's skills and evolving methodology. The overlay of materials and ideas present a series of ambiguous surfaces; fragments of text, stitch, weave and etching that encourage closer investigation and contemplation.

The element of light and illumination is significant in the artist's choice and treatment of materials. Dominant use of silver, a precious metal associated with healing and transformation is a symbolic and physical touchstone throughout the work. Intimate, quiet spaces are created by contrasting textures and the reflective properties of metal drawing the eye like a glimmer of sunlight on the ever shifting sea. The natural stimulus of Iona's winter landscape; the texture, patterning and colours of the stones from the south end of the island are a strong visual influence, together with the subtle play of light and colour in a seascape of oxidised silver. Use of light and the symbolic encoding of images have provided further stimulus for the artist during the development of her latest work. The artist's journey to Italy in 2008 provided the opportunity to observe closely paintings by Caravaggio, Botticelli and Lippi. Filippo Lippi's *Madonna and Child with Two Angels* was particularly noted by the artist for its extraordinary light and translucency, the beauty of natural light and the spiritual nature of illumination richly

evident as a transformative element within the painting. The artist's engagement with this idea is also manifest in her investigation of digital imaging onto silver.

The artist's use of this technique has its origins in her exploration of photo etching at Glasgow Print Studio, use of liquid light and more recent experimentation with digital relief etching used in contemporary jewellery design. Etching plates as part of the printmaking process have long held a fascination for the artist together with texturing, patination and mark making techniques developed in the art of silversmithing. In this new work digital editing of drawings, photographs and text are introduced to the process directed by the artist's skill and sensitivity in relation to tonality, colouration, oxidisation and finishing of the metal plate. Accidental marks become part of the imaging process, the reaction of materials contributing to the creation of unique one off images and providing an exciting stimulus for the artist. Like the earliest form of photography, the daugerrotype, the delicacy of the plate and the magical, transformative nature of the process create a living patina.

Consistently pushing the boundaries of her technique Mhairi Killin's work can be seen as part of a wider process of cultural re-evaluation in the region. Defined by continuity and innovation her extraordinary work encourages us to ask the most fundamental of questions, of who we are and what we leave behind.