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Unboarding Sorley's Window

GEORGINA COBURN puts the pertinent questions to MURDO MACDONALD, Professor of History of Scottish Art at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and leader of the Window to the West research team

WINDOW to the West – Towards a redefinition of the visual within Gaelic Scotland is a five year project (2005-2010) funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. It is a collaboration between the Visual Research Centre of Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art (University of Dundee) and Sabhal Mòr Ostaig (University of the Highlands and Islands Millennium Institute).

It is driven by three strands of activity: exploration of the visual in Gaelic language; rethinking of the history of visual art in the Highlands and Islands; and the making of contemporary art in a Highlands and Islands related context.

GEORGINA COBURN: The creative, academic and political scope of the Window to the West project is fascinating and could not have come at a better time in terms of redefining Scotland. How was the project initiated?

MURDO MACDONALD: The initial idea came from the artist Will Maclean, who has close links with Sabhal Mòr Ostaig. Issues of Highland culture – loss of language, skills and land, in particular – have been at the heart of his work throughout his career. Will is a research professor at the Visual Research Centre of Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art at the University of Dundee, and early on in the project planning he asked me to get involved.

I was only too pleased to do so, because, as a historian of Scottish Art, I was well aware that visual art relating to the Highlands is one of the key currents of Scottish art. This is true whether one looks back to prehistoric rock art – which has inspired so many of our contemporary artists – or to major works of the Scottish Gaidhealtachd such as the Book of Kells and the great crosses of Iona and Islay, or to the West Highland school of sculpture of the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, or to William McTaggart, the Gaelic speaker who pioneered modern art in Scotland.

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It took several years to develop the project and obtain funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council. This was only possible thanks to colleagues at the Visual Research Centre, not least VRC manager Jane Cumberlidge. For the final bid we entered into a formal collaboration with Sabhal Mòr Ostaig (Norman Gillies, Meg Bateman, John Purser and Donnie Munro in particular).

So the project had a development period of several years, and – although there is no formal relationship – can be thought of in a way as paralleling the development of Fàs – The Centre for Creative and Cultural Studies at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig. Indeed the proposal for Fàs was noted in our own proposal.

GC: One of the most exciting aspects of the project is the potential to make the research and its investigations visible through the creation of new work and the legacy of Fàs. The strong creative component of this research makes it quite unique I think.

MM: That it is something that you get the chance to do in an art school that in many ways you can't do in conventional academia – as I've noted, the project development was driven by the artist Will Maclean. Another aspect of the project is the acceptance that some of us, including myself, do not have Gaelic. We tend to think about Gaelic culture in terms of people who speak Gaelic but of course there are a large number of people who don't speak Gaelic but are close to it through relatives; and they are important because they have the experience of cultural and linguistic loss.

That loss is an issue for myself, Norman Shaw and Will Maclean all of whom who are part of the research team. Will's involvement also has a significance from a historical point of view, because he is a fellow of the Society of Antiquities of Scotland, as am I. We are both keenly aware of the areas of visual culture in the Gaidhealtachd, such as the West Highland school of sculpture, that people tend to forget because they are classed as archaeology. In any other country they would be considered part of the art history.

GC: So why not here? Why do we have an art history which is hidden? – Although it is certainly there if you go looking.

MM: Yes it is there if you go looking. I think it really has to come down, to a significant degree, to cultural trashing after the Jacobite uprisings. It is difficult to see it in any other way, although you could date it to earlier than that – there was pressure on clan chiefs to educate their children in English from the early17th century onwards.

But I think in terms of active cultural suppression and destruction Culloden is the significant moment. There were Gaels and non-Gaels on both sides, but that made no difference to the subsequent treatment of the Gaidhealtachd. After that you get issues of land ownership, entitlement to use of land, linguistic and educational issues; essentially Gaelic speakers being written out of ownership and Gaelic being written out of the education system.

When you have that many pressures on a cultural group it's not really surprising that you don't get a coherent art history written, although it was sitting there to be written from the Book of Kells and before to the present. Obviously you have gaps but that is true of any art history.

It's certainly true of the whole history of Scottish art with respect to the Reformation. Paradoxically the Highlands have an excellent set of pre- Reformation survivals. So if you want a coherent history of Scottish Art you have to bring in the Highlands, if you don't you miss out a large section of the most important work.

GC: I read a quote recently in relation to the music of Martyn Bennett "Only when we recognise that we are heirs can we truly be pioneers". As an artist Martyn Bennett really pushed boundaries, connecting very strongly with tradition and extending into new territory. Do you feel that this is fundamentally what Window to the West is about?

MM: That's exactly it. Martyn was a wonderful person and if we can help in the process of rethinking the visual tradition to anything like the degree that he helped to rethink the musical tradition, then I'll be happy. Martyn was, of course, inspired by Sorley MacLean, as are we.

Indeed, just as Martyn used Hallaig in his CD Bothy Culture, we adapt that poem in our title. This was Will Maclean's suggestion. We adapt early lines of Hallaig 'Tha bùird is tàirnean air an uinneig / triomh 'm faca mi an Aird an Iar': The window is nailed and boarded through which I saw the West'. In a sense the project is about unboarding Sorley MacLean's window.

GC: Art History in the Highlands is a contentious and dynamic issue due to historical conceptions of cultural ownership which I would argue have resonance not just in our region but throughout Scotland. How do you see this changing positively both in relation to the project's investigations and as part of a wider movement?

MM: People make art and people live in particular places. The places usually influence the art they make. If that is acknowledged, art falls into place as an essential aspect not only of human life but of place. Art isn't created in auction rooms, it's created by you and me and it is created where we are. 'Contentious' issues normally reflect some kind of unstated or even unconscious agenda.

I think one of these unconscious agendas is an unwillingness to fully accept the degree to which Gaelic culture has been suppressed by colonial techniques ranging from military intervention to the appropriation of land to education policies. No one likes to accept complicity in acts of cultural destruction, but most of us are indeed complicit. So particularly with respect to indigenous cultures – and this applies throughout the world, not just to the Gaidhealtachd – it is easier to stereotype and deny than it is to work out one's relationship with what has been suppressed.

As you imply, the links to Scottish art as a whole are interesting here. It is only quite recently that Scottish art has become 'uncontentious'. One of my first acts when I was appointed professor of History of Scottish Art at Dundee was to write a brief and affordable introduction to Scottish art, to give wider access to that history.

I know that we can do something similar for Highland art, in due course. The point is obvious: if you have access to your history, you are in a position to be confident about it. You can defend it and critique it. If you do not have that access, then it remains contentious, prone to stereotypying, and the 'possession' of someone else. So one of the project's aims is to enable that access.

GC: One of the issues that emerged from last year's Five Challenges research was the idea of a "cultural centre" or point of orientation and what this actually means to visual artists based in the Highlands and Islands but working in an international context. Do you feel that there is a danger of further marginalisation in labelling work as Gaelic or Highland?

MM: I tend to think of things in terms of networks, and a strong network is clearly desirable. If that network has aspects which can serve as 'centres' all the better. The idea that work might be marginalised by labelling it as Gaelic or Highland, I find absurd. The implication seems to be that having international presence and local identity are somehow in conflict. How could they be?

Perhaps this reveals another of those unconscious agendas, in this case the notion that the Highlands are culturally inferior. That attitude might have been acceptable to 'Butcher' Cumberland in 1746 but it should not be acceptable to anyone in the twenty-first century. All art – and all artists – have multiple identities. Just because a work of art is part of the visual culture of the Gaidhealtachd doesn't stop it being any number of other things.

Consider a great work from Iona like the Book of Kells: its local, Gaidhealtachd, identity is a key part of its international identity. Multiple identity is important in another way too: with few exceptions, art depends on bringing different influences together. The Book of Kells would have been a non-starter without influences from Gaels, Northumbrians, Britons, and Picts, not to mention from the Mediterranean.

So a local identity, if it means anything, is likely to be a pluralistic identity. This is as true of the Gaidhealtachd today as it was in the year 800. Perhaps the problem is that we have got out of the habit of thinking of Highland art as having the potential to lead internationally. But all art has that potential.

If you emphasise your locality anywhere in the world then it enhances, rather than detracts from, the international quality of the work. It betrays a horrific lack of confidence, to not want to declare where you're from. It's like not wanting to say who you are.

GC: Do you think that Scotland suffers from that culturally?

MM: I do think there have been various events that have made it difficult to operate culturally in Scotland – the two world wars didn't help, because of political functions being centralised and then not properly devolved back again. These things have to be accepted and seen as real. But we've moved on from that. The notion that Scots are somehow inherently lacking in cultural confidence is absurd. It's a lack of opportunities for cultural education that's the issue.

GC: There's not an element of lack of acknowledgement or promotion about the value of our culture?

MM: In some ways that's true, and I think these are political issues. A lack of opportunities for cultural education inevitably applies to politicians too, through no fault of their own. Not having a parliament for almost 300 years did not help this situation. So the issue is not to do with individuals being self effacing it is to do with lack of awareness.

It's worth remembering how much of the campaign to restore the Scottish parliament was a culturally driven process. It's not a case of the parliament arrives and therefore you can be culturally confident, it's more the other way round. Perhaps we need more artists and writers in parliament to ensure acknowledgment of the value of our culture.

GC: When thinking about the whole concept of the Gaidhealtachd I think it is very much a case of seeing what Kenneth White describes as the "mindscape within the landscape". How might this be made more visible to an audience which is predominantly non-Gaelic speaking?

MM: That is a key question. Our project draws on a continuum from native speakers to non-speakers. As a non-Gaelic speaker myself one of my own starting points was to learn to pronounce my own name, instead of the English approximation of it I normally use. Why did I do that? It is not much use to me in everyday life –yet – but it began to tell me what I am missing. Literally missing. In that sense I am myself an example of cultural clearance and I am joined in that experience (whether they know it or not) by every non-Gaelic-speaking person throughout the world with a 'Mac' in their name, and many more without.

But identity is always a choice. Many people in the past, often responding to government policies which made them ashamed of their own culture, have chosen not to speak Gaelic. Many people today, regardless of Gaelic roots or otherwise, are choosing to speak it. But for myself, whether I speak it or not, this Gaelic language, this way of seeing, is inherent to me and my name tells me that.

What is more the relationship between my name and myself is quite different from that relationship in English. Not only is my name different (different enough to be a different name in English) according to how I am being addressed, but while English gives me the impression that I possess my name, it belongs to me, in Gaelic I seem to be in a less proprietorial relationship with it. It is on me, rather than owned by me.

This tendency to be 'in relation to' seems characteristic of the language. And that, of course, has visual consequences. Indeed I would speculate that it may have a lot to do with the way William McTaggart paints his figures as integral to, rather than separate from, the landscape. That kind of observation is clearly relevant to 'mindscape within landscape', but there are more general historical observations also.

For example, part of the 'mindscape within landscape' of the Gaidhealtachd is the arrival of St Columba from Ireland. This event not only inspired William McTaggart in the 1890s, but also Will Maclean and Aonghas Macneacail in their collaboration for *An Leabhar Mòr* in 2002. Subsequent to that Will Maclean continued the Columba reference when he collaborated with Arthur Watson (who is an advisor to the Window to the West project and a key figure in the project team for *An Leabhar Mòr*) on the powerful Crannghal sculpture overlo king the Sound of Sleat, at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig.

Other parts of the mindscape of the Gaidhealtachd also have extraordinary visual aspects: think for example of McTaggart's series of paintings responding to emigration. From a formal perspective an aspect that interests me greatly are the decorations by Mary Carmichael for her husband's outstanding collection, *Carmina Gadelica*,

which as well as being one of the most important of Gaelic texts is one of the finest examples of Arts and Crafts / Celtic revival book production in any language.

I gave a paper on this visual aspect to the Alexander Carmichael Conference in Benbecula last year, and I felt honoured when Ronald Black, writing in the West Highland Free Press, described it as 'a revelation'. That demonstrated what Window to the West is really about. As a project we can literally reveal things by drawing attention to the visual culture of the Gaidhealtachd which is so often passed over.

GC: What do you perceive as the barriers to engagement with Gaelic Arts in Scotland? How do you feel this relates to the wider issue of "cultural entitlements" and "access" being debated at present?

MM: I would say the main barrier is a failure to integrate Gaelic visual culture into higher education (and all education), as part of the intellectual tool kit that is needed by anyone who wishes to appreciate their own culture. This also applies to Scottish visual culture as a whole. The real cultural entitlement is the cultural entitlement to be properly visually educated, rather than – as is so often the case – to see the visual as merely some sort of illustration of a verbal text.

The most important thing for me is that people are culturally entitled to be visually educated. That's really what audience development is and it takes a long time. This is a wider question for Scotland – a wide misperception about the accessibility of the visual arts. We seem to have fallen out of the habit of using visual language well, somehow managing to forget our own history and our own visual history – which is never a good idea. That's really what the project is about.

I would never look at contemporary art in terms of access – it's usually not about that at the time it's created. Look at Van Gogh for example: hardly anyone rated his work during his lifetime. There is however immense scope for making visual art in general more accessible. Identification of important work isn't necessarily the problem: a lot of that research was actually done in the 19th century.

What's of concern is how we've forgotten to access it. The access has always been there for really committed researchers but wider access is crucial. We'll be creating a substantial companion to Highland visual culture and I hope that will act as a source and an impetus for affordable, easily available publications.

GC: A Highland presence at the Royal Scottish Academy summer show this year is an example of making the "significance of the Gaidhealtachd" visible publicly "both as context and inspiration". Has the research thus far identified actions that could be taken to acknowledge, redefine and re-educate at national level?

MM: The Royal Scottish Academy summer exhibition 2007 was of great importance. It included a beautifully-curated current of work 'Highland: Visual Responses to Highland Scotland' which gave the whole exhibition its identity. This was a gathering of responses to the Highlands in contemporary art, in a manner rooted rather than oppressive or stereotypical.

It was complemented by a fascinating display of historical work in the RSA library including work such as William Gillies' photo album and Alexander Runciman's Ossian illustrations. The latter interacted with a wall upstairs devoted to Calum Colvin's Ossian works. The whole building became infused with Highland references.

Window to the West was one of the Highland research projects invited to participate by the RSA. Our contribution included my DVD presentation 'selections from a visual notebook', drawings and a sound work by Norman Shaw based on Gaelic Psalms, and recordings selected by John Purser. Will Maclean exhibited a set of drawings based on his land struggle memorials in Lewis.

But that was only a tiny part of the Highland work in the exhibition as a whole: another element was the Demarco archive digitisation project, also based at the Visual Research Centre in Dundee, which includes much important Highland work, not least relating to the visits of Joseph Beuys. In addition – among so much more – there were major displays from Frances Walker and Marian Leven, both artists who have held the residency at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig.

The great William McTaggart stopped exhibiting at the Royal Scottish Academy in the late-nineteenth century when he felt it wasn't serving the needs of contemporary artists. I'm sure he would have been happy to exhibit again this year. There was real sense of closure there.

GC: Did you feel that Highland Art was more embedded?

MM: Yes exactly. Studio International commented that 'the RSA 2007 exhibition powerfully develops the Highlands and Islands theme in contemporary art and sits well within global aspirations and directions'. Of the same show Iain Gale in Scotland on Sunday wrote that 'the RSA has been born again as a serious platform for some of the best art in Scotland'. Similarly in The Scotsman, Duncan Macmillan's piece was headed 'Finding a sense of direction'. The West Highland Free Press headline was more specific, but very much to the point. It read 'RSA exhibition reflects visual arts presence at Sabhal Mòr'.

With respect to identifying actions that could be taken to acknowledge, redefine and re-educate at a national level: that is another interesting question. My intention is that everything we do and will do on the project are just such actions to acknowledge, redefine and re-educate. However I should emphasise that this is a research project, not an educational development project.

What we are doing is generating and disseminating material which enables perceptions to change. This then has the potential to be used for formal educational purposes. I very much hope that there will be just such uses in the context of Fàs at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig. We also assist other projects. For example, in different ways, we have helped to develop residences both at An Tuireann and Sabhal Mòr.

And in response to your request last year, I was very happy make my paper 'Art, Maps and Books: Visualising and Re-visualising the Highlands' available on the HI~Arts website prior to the artists meeting in Ullapool in November 2006. I will also be giving strong support to Kathryn Burnett's Island Cultural Archives project this September.

GC: Cultural oppression relates to both land and religion in the Highlands and Islands. How is the exploration of the visual in Gaelic language being explored in relation to the history of the Church in the region?

MM: A complex question which I'm not in a position to answer fully, but I'd note that the land question has been addressed, throughout his career, by Will Maclean, not least in his land struggle memorials in Lewis, which, as I've noted, were revisited in his Window to the West exhibits for RSA Highland 2007. That's the tip of the iceberg with respect to reflections on the Clearances, etc.

As for the effect of religion and the church, it's a complicated area. The obvious exploration from my own point of view is the visual aspect of Carmina Gadelica, to which I have already referred, and how those designs are traditionally associated with Gaelic. Much of the material in Carmina Gadelica was preserved in the Roman Catholic tradition but it is interesting to note that the stereotype of Presbyterianism as being anti-visual *per se* is misleading.

It is possible that this belief in the anti-visual stereotype was more prevalent in the Gaidhealtachd, but the situation isn't simple. For example, one can note that a nineteenth century Gaelic translation of that key Puritan text, Pilgrim's Progress, is the heavily illustrated Mackenzie edition. Visual art was clearly not only acceptable but encouraged in that context. I found a copy of this in the library at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, which has a wonderful holding of Highland visual material.

GC: "Redefining the visual" in Scotland's culture has an enormous implication not only for cultural and political strategy but for how we see ourselves. What kind of role do you think contemporary visual art practice has to play in the future cultural life in the Highlands and Islands and how can audience development be encouraged in an area which has a historical precedent of hidden art?

MM: Any culture suffers if it doesn't recognise its artists, and doesn't recognise the potential of its people as artists. There is a major role for contemporary art in the Highlands: there always has been. The development of serious gallery space in the Highlands recognises this. Developing an audience is a slow process, and one wouldn't expect it to be anything else. In the end it depends on education over a long period.

The tendency to rate the success of a gallery by simple metrics like number of visitors should be firmly resisted. There are many galleries which I have only ever visited once, and yet that one visit may have been a life-changing experience for me. So the point is that visiting a gallery should change your perception. That's what matters and that's what good art – contemporary or otherwise – is about.

Having said that I also think that galleries should be significant meeting places with cafes, etc. That is a good way of bringing people into proximity with art they may not be used to. Cafés are also important thinking spaces and should be seen as such, rather than as bolt-on facilities. There are also other issues like when you build a place you want to build it to the highest possible standards with the best possible architecture. That's not something that is always available through the budget. But if you want your art centre to be as good as anyone else's anywhere in the world then there's no reason why it shouldn't be.

It depends on political will. The Highlands have made great strides in this regard in recent years. It comes back to how funds are distributed politically for cultural infrastructure. We have built a lot of roads: we should build, or expand, a lot of art centres – why not? Both roads and art centres have the potential to make an enormous difference to people who live in an area (not to mention visitors).

GC: What kind of public access will there be to the ongoing research until 2010 and how can people find out more about the work being created as part of the project?

MM: Our primary aim is public access to the material we generate at the end of the project rather than during it. For example we are working on a visual companion to the Gaidhealtachd, which is being structured at present, but that won't be ready until the end of the project. Having said that, we give insight into the project whenever we can.

On the exhibiting side the RSA involvement is a good example. My own contribution to the RSA exhibition, a visual notebook (presented on DVD) of 100 images, has already been requested for showing during the Scottish Storytelling Festival in October 2007. Another dissemination route is through lectures. For example I've presented public lectures at Deveron Arts, Dundee Contemporary Arts, and at the Royal Scottish Academy.

There are also the more focused environments of conferences or seminars, both national and international. I presented Window to the West material in seminars in Tokyo and Osaka in September 2006. (Some of this material is now printed in the magazine Metronome, in association with Documenta 12). Myself, John Purser and Meg Bateman are all active in the giving of conference papers. We were all involved in the Heritage and Environment conference, in June 2006, at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig.

My own paper there was on 5,000 years of Highland Art, while John's starting point was the exploration of images of musical instruments in Highland art (there was substantial coverage of it in the West Highland Free Press). Meg's was on landscape and the Gaelic imagination. That conference was also attended by our research fellow Lesley Lindsay who has excellent art history links, not least with the Fleming Collection of Scottish art in London, and Window to the West has been noted in their magazine, Scottish Art News, several times, again providing wider public awareness.

GC: I think it is very important for the arts and wider community to know that this research is taking place and to have a sense of its potential scope, locally, nationally and internationally. It is tapping into something which artists already know and validating it – validating what they see around them and experience as part of their everyday practice.

MM: I agree. It is important that the project research delivers something valuable to artists at its conclusion. What's really interesting is that the focus is shifting from the Central Belt. In a few years you could have leadership in visual studies coming from the Highlands. My aim is that everything that we do in this project will help that wider project of recognising the importance of visual language in our culture.