



# **FIVE CHALLENGES**

**A View of the Current State of the Visual Arts  
in the Highlands and Islands**

By Georgina Coburn

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## A View of the Current State of the Visual Arts in the Highlands and Islands

Cover Illustration: Paul Bloomer [Winter Beach](http://www.paulbloomer.com) Charcoal [www.paulbloomer.com](http://www.paulbloomer.com)

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## **PREFACE**

One of the values of experiencing works of art is openness to the possibility of change.

Contact with Visual Art can and does alter our perception.

This research has consistently challenged my thinking and exposed me to the creative energy and vision of some truly remarkable people.

My hope is that this report communicates as directly as possible their perceptions, ideas and concerns and that this will be directed into positive action by HI~Arts and its partners.

I would like to extend my deepest and most sincere thanks to everyone who took part in the interviews, shared their ideas and gave so generously of their time.

It has been a pleasure and a privilege to meet you and I wish you continued success in all your creative work.

My thanks also to Robert Livingston for choosing to ask artists, Marcus Wilson for his design assistance and to Andy for his infinite patience and support.

**Georgina Coburn**  
**October 2006**



**Gwen Black Remote Mixed Media**

[www.spanglefish.com/GwenBlack](http://www.spanglefish.com/GwenBlack)

## GLOSSARY

<b>AN</b>	Artists Network. The Artist information Co. UK agency for supporting Artists practice through website <a href="http://www.a-n.co.uk">www.a-n.co.uk</a> and AN Magazine.
<b>AXIS</b>	Website providing information for and about artists working in the UK <a href="http://www.axisweb.org">www.axisweb.org</a>
<b>ENGAGE</b>	The National Association for Gallery Education. <a href="http://www.engage.org">www.engage.org</a>
<b>HIE</b>	Highlands and Islands Enterprise. <a href="http://www.hie.co.uk">www.hie.co.uk</a>
<b>IAPMA</b>	The International Association of Hand Papermakers and Paper Artists. <a href="http://www.iapma.info">www.iapma.info</a>
<b>MAP</b>	International art magazine from Scotland launched in 2005. <a href="http://www.mapmagazine.co.uk">www.mapmagazine.co.uk</a>
<b>OWN ART</b>	Scottish Arts Council interest free loan scheme through selected Galleries and Art Centres that enables the purchase of contemporary Art and Craft to a wider public. <a href="http://www.scottisharts.org.uk">www.scottisharts.org.uk</a>
<b>SAC</b>	Scottish Arts Council (soon to be Creative Scotland and incorporating Scottish Screen)
<b>SAU</b>	Scottish Artists Union
<b>SNH</b>	Scottish Natural Heritage
<b>UHI</b>	University of the Highlands and Islands Millennium Institute
<b>VAGA</b>	The Visual Arts and Galleries Association <a href="http://www.vaga.co.uk">www.vaga.co.uk</a>
<b>WASPS</b>	Workshop and Artist Studio Provision Scotland Ltd are a charity and company limited by guarantee providing affordable studio space to support the work of artists in Scotland. <a href="http://www.waspsstudios.org.uk">www.waspsstudios.org.uk</a>

## INTRODUCTION

I was contracted by HI~Arts in June 2006 to research the current state of the Visual Arts in the Highlands and Islands. The area of study extended from Shetland to Arran (the HIE administration area) and consisted primarily of face to face interviews with artists, gallery owners, visual arts workers, educators and arts development officers.

This method had been successfully trialled in Deirdre Macmahon's study "*Na hEileanaich Elanta, Creative Islanders*" commissioned by HI~Arts in 2004. It is a direct and personal form of gathering information shaped by the attitudes, perceptions, ideas and concerns of those interviewed.

I did not use a "one size fits all" questionnaire but took my cues from conversations with practitioners and direct observations of their work. The questions raised by different geographic and local administrative regions including current cultural strategy (where this existed) also shaped my line of inquiry.

In this way every interview was individually structured by an awareness of a practitioner's work and by local issues identified by observation and prior research. Each interview in turn built upon the last to create a picture of the current state of play for Visual Artists within a wide geographic area. Issues consistently raised by practitioners throughout the process form the basis of this report.

Travelling to interview artists in their studios and homes, the distances between artists and access to materials or exhibition spaces became extremely apparent. The method allowed a greater breadth of research material and understanding than could ever be contained in a single questionnaire and ultimately a greater representative sample of responses from the whole region.

Interviews took place over roughly a three month period and were drawn from a cross section of Visual Arts practitioners. It was important that not only a variety of media be represented, but those at different stages of their careers and a geographic spread also be reflected in the study.

The research brief was initially broadcast online through the "Northings" HI~Arts Journal, sent via email to all HI~Arts contacts and local arts centres. In addition to those directly expressing their interest in contributing to the study, participation was actively sought through local advertising and by contacting artists through galleries, local arts development officers, local councils, online searches, word of mouth and on the ground enquiries. It should be noted that at this point in time no comprehensive data base exists listing Visual Artists in the Highlands and Islands.

Contact was also made with artists through groups such as Veer North (Shetland), Elemental Arts (Argyll), Highland Open Studios, Visual Arts Sutherland, Skye and Lochalsh Arts and Crafts Association, Uist Art Association, Inverness Arts Society and an talla solais (Ullapool). The directors of private Galleries also took part, some showing a mix of artists and others showcasing one artist's work.

Artists' opening their practice to the public through open studios or their own gallery spaces are increasing and this is reflected by the recent growth of studio trails in the Highlands and Islands. Highland Open Studio's first Open Doors Event in June 2006 included 69 artists' studios and galleries. The event generated approximately £30,800 in sales and attracted 13,300 visitors. In 1999 HI~Arts published its first gallery guide with 90 galleries listed. Currently these listings are online and contain over 150 galleries throughout the region.

Key organisations were identified at the outset including publicly funded galleries and organisations such as Bonhoga Gallery (Shetland), The Pier (Orkney), An Lanntair (Stornoway), Taigh Chearsabhagh (North Uist), Timespan (Sutherland), Highland Council Exhibition Service (Inverness), Highland Print Studio (Inverness), An Tobar (Isle of Mull), An Tuireann (Isle of Skye), Highland Visual Arts and Inverness, Lews Castle, Orkney, Shetland and Moray College Art and Design Departments. Interviews were requested with key staff during the research period.

The question of what constituted Visual Art in this study also evolved with the research process. Initially the parameters were set with Drawing, Painting, Sculpture, Printmaking, Photography, Installation, Digital and New Media but not explicitly with Film or Craft. It was felt that these already had established some representation via initiatives such as the Rural Cinema North Project in association with Scottish Screen and craftscotland. However it was understood from the outset that there would be overlap of disciplines within individual practice and that this would be reflected in responses.

To what degree Craft practice would be represented varied from area to area. To most artists interviewed there was no distinction made. If something is well made then it may be described as art. In contemporary practice the concepts of Art and Craft are incredibly fluid, only separated for marketing purposes or by funding bodies.

The separation for example of Orkney's Visual Arts and Craft trails seems at odds with Visual Arts practice in the Islands, but well in keeping with the idea of marketing a brand.

The Big Willow project's associated exhibition "*Pushing the Boundaries*" which toured Highland Council exhibition spaces this year was a clear indication of the merger of contemporary art and craft practice. It defied traditional expectations about basket making by drawing, sculpting and creating conceptual work from raw materials.

The work of Shetland's first Indigenous Crafts Officer Hazel Hughson is actively encouraging both excellence of design and craftsmanship through interaction between makers and different artistic disciplines. This is also an example of the benefits of a flexible attitude to notions of art and craft consistent with contemporary practice.

Since the study was primarily about the perception and experience of artists it dealt with concepts of art and craft as they revealed themselves within individual practice, current regional initiatives and cultural policy. The study has therefore included interviews with artists working in glass, ceramics, textiles and mixed media as well as the disciplines outlined by the original brief.

Though intensive in terms of time the face to face method of interviewing was essential especially when investigating an art form characterised by solitary practice. Whilst some artists and arts workers participated in a group discussion most were interviewed individually in their homes, studios, offices or galleries.

There was a conscious effort for a proportion of geographic representation from every region and also within regions. Response to the brief varied especially in areas such as Moray, Lochaber and Badenoch & Strathspey which proportionally would have expected wider representation based on population, but overall a representative sample of responses was achieved through personal visits and by telephone.

Despite time, budget and availability constraints 272 artists and arts workers took part in the research. 26 were interviewed by telephone but the majority of 246 were interviewed in person and in their own environment. Most interviews varied from one to three hours for face to face interviews with telephone interviews ranging from half an hour to an hour in length.

Most interviews (face to face) were recorded using a Dictaphone resulting in hundreds of hours of tape. It was necessary for my own assimilation of ideas and information that conversations be recorded. Notes were taken during telephone interviews.

Visual Art is for the most part solitary practice and does not have the group mind associated with the performing arts. It cannot be measured solely in terms of audience numbers. The effect of Visual Art is difficult to quantify and it is therefore a challenge for arts agencies locally and nationally to assist the development and profile of an art form whose practitioners are committed to individual practice and geographically scattered.

There is a safe tendency to support measurable outcomes or product rather than the development of practice itself. What has emerged resoundingly from this study is the need to support Visual Art **practice**. Where the value of this is understood, excellence in product is a natural outcome.

Within the five challenges on the following pages lies the integrated challenge of a more cohesive and consistent approach to Visual Arts development in areas of rural isolation and the responsibility of adequate provision and access to art in the Highlands and Islands. This will require leadership from artists and artist groups and the strategic long term vision of national, local government and arts development agencies in direct and continued consultation with artists.

The “*National Cultural Strategy*” in 2000, “*The Final Report of the Cultural Commission*” in 2005, the “*Scottish Executive’s Response to the Cultural Review*” in 2006 and The Scottish Arts Council’s “*Visual Arts Strategy 2002-2007*” give us a framework that affirms access to and development of Visual Arts as a core value and yet we have not yet seen this translated into budgets from the Executive level down.

The whole question of what constitutes cultural rights, inclusion and access not on a page but in our own lives and communities has yet to be defined. Individual artists, artists’ groups and arts workers are doing extraordinary work with a level of long term commitment that needs to be met halfway.

As Peter Hewitt Chief Executive of the Arts Council of England described in The Smith Institute Arts Lecture (July 2006), we have not yet seen the arts “*fully recognised by the government as an unquestionable core responsibility for the long term*”. Artists must take an active role in setting this agenda for development. “*It is far too easy to blame local government.*” Assisting government to make the connection between creative thinking and a healthy social, economic and cultural environment will define our region in the future.

This has already begun through the work of artists, studio trails, artists’ groups, arts centres and arts development officers. A greater capacity for positive change will be generated by increased communication between these individuals and government bodies to establish Visual Art practice equally with all art forms as a core value in our communities.

It is my hope that these five challenges of Communication, Education, Professional Practice, Infrastructure and Vision will provide a stimulus for discussion and debate but more directly for action.

*“We have all seen communities built with soul and those built without soul. You don’t have to look particularly hard to see the difference. Water is essential to survival. Culture is essential to living”*

**Peter Hewitt**

**The Smith Institute Arts Lecture (July 2006)**



**Steve Dilworth Navel**

**Landwork**

[www.stevedilworth.com](http://www.stevedilworth.com)

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- HI~Arts in partnership with HIE, AN, SAC (Creative Scotland) and locally based artist groups initiate an annual mixed programme of gatherings including international networking opportunities on a quarterly basis. These events should be hosted in different areas to maximise coverage. This ongoing commitment should begin with The Visual Arts Gathering in Ullapool on 13<sup>th</sup> & 14<sup>th</sup> November 2006. All conferencing should be recorded for download on the Northings HI~Arts website and / or video linkup initiated through the UHI network for wider access to isolated areas
- Consistent access to opportunities for professional development by rural artists such as networking, discussion and practical workshop events are essential to isolated practice and should be seen as a priority.
- Artists in partnership with artists' groups, Highlands and Islands Enterprise Network, Arts Development Officers and Arts Centres create a central database of artists working in the Highlands and Islands as an international resource. This should not just be a list but contain images and links to artists' individual sites and incorporate gallery and arts development listings much in the same way as the Scottish Film Industry produces an annual directory.
- The idea of a printed Visual Arts / Gallery guide should be revisited. The continued growth of Scottish Arts Council's Own Art scheme bears a direct relationship to public information about where to see and purchase work. Greater awareness can be raised in terms of individuals collecting work and supporting the work of local artists and galleries through sales.
- A new pan Highland annual competition should be initiated to replace the Highland Open with a selection panel drawn from professional artists, galleries and arts administrators. The potential touring capability of such and exhibition beyond Highland Council exhibition spaces should be investigated.
- Highland Arts should be reconstituted to showcase work at art fairs and expand its activities internationally. It is acknowledged that cost of transport for individuals in rural areas is prohibitive and is a direct barrier to professional development through lack of exposure. Collective measures to promote the work and raise the profile of Visual Artists must be developed on an ongoing basis.

- The issue of provision for Visual Arts Education and Outreach is facilitated through active involvement with national agencies and the establishment of codes of professional practice. The development of a Highlands and Islands professional body or register of teaching artists should be explored and a national commitment and programme of artist residencies in schools be developed.
- Full time education teams working as part of galleries or art centres develop programmes of lifelong learning to address the issues of audience development and adequate provision. Clear pathways of access to Visual Arts learning be established through further development of the existing UHI and College networks, artists residencies in schools and adequate provision for arts activity from the earliest age.
- Discussion be initiated between artists groups, studio trails and local press organisations to encourage writing about art at a local level. This could perhaps be in partnership with local and national newsgroups, local UHI and College Art and Design departments and /or the Scottish Arts Council's New Projects programme and be initiated by a discussion forum between all parties to find practical ways of encouraging Visual Arts coverage in the press, television and radio. Opportunities for publishing including use of new technology be explored through the SAC's New Projects Programme.
- Partnerships between local authority planning departments, artists and artist groups be facilitated for greater creative input into new builds and an active policy of engagement with creative process. The support for a public art coordinator should continue beyond the initial three year plan as part of an ongoing commitment to Visual Art as a core value. An annual forum could focus on ways that local planning can engage with Visual Arts provision. Exploration of involvement from the SAC, private sector companies and architects should also be sought in establishing a natural expectation of percentage for art at a national level through the Scottish Executive to address the issues of access, adequate provision and cultural rights.
- Local arts groups in partnership with artists, galleries, PAN, Visit Scotland and local tourist boards develop a programme of induction training for all tourist information staff in relation to local cultural activity. This could be a multidiscipline approach including galleries, studios and trails, music and performing arts venues. Partnerships between artists, artist groups, art centres, The National Trust, Historic Scotland and The Society for Antiquities to provide interpretive opportunities for the wider public be explored.
- Highland and Argyll Councils conduct an audit of council art collections and create a loan scheme to local institutions. Local enterprise companies across the region encourage professional practice by creating an acquisition fund for new work so that collections can be circulated and exchanged between regions.

- WASPS in partnership with the SAC and the Scottish Executive invest in a Highlands and Islands portfolio of studio spaces. Provision of public exhibition spaces in centres such as Oban, Ullapool, Wick and Inverness also be examined as part of the Executive's commitment to adequate provision.
- UHI Art & Design Departments and Colleges in connection with local Enterprise Companies, private Galleries, the Scottish Artists Union and Cultural Enterprise Office develop modules in association with professional practice issues such as pricing and promoting work, approaching galleries, approaching funding bodies and completing funding applications. Modules could be part of established courses or offered separately as courses for existing artists.
- In connection with this approach to consistently deliver access to a range of practical skills through the UHI network, local mentoring schemes administered through a combination of arts development posts, arts centres and local enterprise companies would provide contact for emerging artists with more established practitioners.
- Access to web design modules through the UHI and College Art and Design Departments Highlands and Islands wide be developed as part of an ongoing commitment to professional practice in the Visual Arts. This is in direct response to the needs of artists and the industry and should be part of a more integrated approach to teaching professional practice as it applies specifically to the Visual Arts.
- Appropriate training be offered to Arts Development Officers through local and national organisations and a team approach be adopted to develop arts activity and support creative industries locally. The current provision of one arts officer covering all art forms over huge geographic area does not represent a long term commitment to the health, wealth and stability of rural communities. A dedicated team can build year upon year, develop infrastructure, confidence and cohesion in communities threatened by depopulation and the decline of traditional industries. The development of contemporary craft and the active engagement between Art and Craft practices be encouraged and the regional promotion and presentation of this work be made a priority.
- HI~Arts and its partners develop an active policy of advocacy and support for professional artists and arts workers through distribution of information, facilitation of networking and training opportunities.

## COMMUNICATION

Our geography makes solitary practice further isolated from vital sources of professional support and communication. Greater cohesion is needed between individuals and artist groups, sharing expertise, ideas and experiences both within the region and in an international context. The ongoing challenge of communicating in an area that reads very much like a map of different countries dictates a range of creative solutions.

An artist I interviewed in Caithness shared an interesting model of communication through her membership of IAPMA. The association has 450 members in 41 countries and actively encourages sharing of skills, information and ideas through four main strands of communication. Their website includes a members gallery which individual artists can update, a directory published annually listing all practitioners, four newsletters a year online (also available by post on request) and two bulletins or catalogues designed and created by members including professional commentary, techniques and features. The presentation of these bulletins is outstanding successfully communicating the status of the association as a professional body. Catalogues are kept by the artist as a permanent resource.

In a similar way no one form of communication will provide an adequate solution to the challenges of artists scattered throughout a huge geographic area. Suggestions during interviews included: A mixture of regular face to face gatherings hosted by different areas for maximum coverage, constant contact through a paper copy Visual Artists newsletter or e-bulletin specific to the area (but not exclusive of it), the creation of an image based online directory of artists or a printed industry directory of galleries and practitioners updated annually. It will take no less than a combination of these approaches to address the issue of communication in the Highlands and Islands and ensure that not only are we communicating with each other but actively with the rest of the world.



Eugenia Vronskaya Dynamic Jest 6' x7.5'

[www.kilmorackgallery.co.uk](http://www.kilmorackgallery.co.uk)

Visual Art communicates by being seen. Original work has to be viewed by a client for future contact to be made to commission work or promote sales of existing work. For art forms such as sculpture, textiles, ceramics or even painting the texture, scale and true nature of a piece of art can rarely be communicated by photography alone. Art is about human contact and this is reflected in all facets of Visual Art as a creative industry. For artists living in rural isolation travel to form important connections with galleries, clients or institutions is costly financially and in terms of time and distance. A personal relationship must be formed between an artist and client, between an artist and gallery or between a client and a piece of work. This cannot be effectively done at a distance or via electronic media alone (in most cases) and it is rare that an artist will have another person act on their behalf. Whilst the idea of an agent is popular and domestic partnerships do exist that support the promotion of individual artists, these are an extreme minority. For financial reasons most artists must take charge of how they promote themselves to a wider audience and communicate the nature of their practice as an immediate visual first impression.

The design of an artist's website is crucial as a first point of contact for galleries or potential clients. In this way artist websites and images on disc have replaced paper reproduction of works or CV's sent to prospective galleries or clients. Many artists expressed the need for learning more practical skills to enable them to represent their work in a way that truly reflects the nature of their practice to a global audience. In visual and design terms artists felt they were capable of creating a site but lack the skills in relation to new technology or in linking their site to others on the web in order to make it an effective promotional tool. It is widely accepted that the best website in the world will not maximise its potential if it remains unconnected to the right networks.

In most cases creating a website or improving an existing one was a priority often delayed by cost or lack of technical skills.

Artist groups are starting to tackle this issue through collective sites but individual representation in a professional capacity is still essential.

Most artists interviewed agreed that whilst the internet is a portal for information and a valuable research and promotional tool, it is not a preferred method of communication.

Face to face meetings were preferred with paper copy forms of communication being favoured over the internet. The internet is used by artists in the Highlands and Islands primarily for research, a point of reference for their work via individual websites, emailing, but rarely for direct sales.

Communication between artists has emerged as a major concern for practitioners based in rural areas. Opportunities for networking events to share good practice, raise the

professional profile of Visual Artists and communicate what creative thinking can achieve are extremely important, especially in an area where cost and geography do not naturally assist ease of travel. The sporadic or complete absence of provision for such gatherings and events has contributed greatly to a perceived lack of opportunity. There are pockets of extraordinary Visual Arts activity currently being created that are not written about, covered by local or national media or openly discussed and celebrated.

One of the positive outcomes of the “*Na hEileanaich Ealanta Creative Islanders*” study was the creation by HI~Arts of the “*Go and Meet Fund*” to encourage exchange and professional support to those involved in arts activity isolated by island environments. Greater communication with areas such as the Western Isles and Argyll will increase awareness of this fund and facilitate valuable exchange between artists, art centres, galleries and other institutions. The HI~Arts Visual Arts Awards scheme initiated in partnership with the SAC began in a similar way and now provides assistance to artists at significant stages of their careers.

One of the greatest values of art is that it engages our imagination. We can see possibilities within our own practice, within our culture and society. For years the entire region has had limited means of seeing an overview of Visual Arts practice, its value to our economy, its significant contribution to the quality of life in the Highlands and Islands or gauging its growth. We have not taken stock of how Visual Arts awareness and activity has grown. With the leadership of artist’s group initiatives now is the time to assess, address and debate the issues that contribute to the difficult and dynamic nature of creating and supporting diverse Visual Art in the area. In addition to existing artists groups and trails such as Veer North, Elemental Arts, Highland Open Studios, Visual Arts Sutherland, Skye and Lochalsh Arts and Crafts Association, Uist Art On the Map, and an talla solais other collective approaches have emerged during the research period.



Caroline Hewat [Curve/Invert](#)

Mixed Media/ Collage on canvas

[www.carolinehewat.com](http://www.carolinehewat.com)

*“Highland Artists”* as a group promote the work of members; Michael Forbes, Denise Davis, James Hawkins, Pat Hay, Gerald Laing, Alan MacDonald, Rosie Newman, Leon Patchett, Linda Smith, Erlend Tait, Pamela Tait, Caroline Hewat and Eugenia Vronskaya online. Artists are based in the Inverness shire and Ross shire areas and meet regularly to discuss promotion of work and exchange ideas.

A focus group of Visual Artists and individuals in the Kishorn / Strathcarron area has emerged working towards provision for an eco build arts centre for their community.

On South Ronaldsay in Orkney a group of artists are meeting to work towards provision of studio space within their local area.

On Skye a group of established artists are meeting informally to discuss and critique each other’s work as peers.

Meeting at Gallimaufry Gallery near Dunoon in Argyll a group of local artists are proposing a studio trail to actively address the problem of lack of representation of Visual Arts within local tourist offices and publications.

All of these artist-led initiatives are significant in their active capacity for communication, peer support and creating a network of future creative and collective possibilities.



Eugenia Vronskaya  
Cornered  
Oil on Canvas



Eugenia Vronskaya Portrait of Artist as a Man  
Oil on Canvas 153x122 cm  
[www.kilmorackgallery.co.uk](http://www.kilmorackgallery.co.uk)

Regular AN networking events and quarterly gatherings of artists hosted in different areas across the Highlands and Islands would also be a huge step forward in linking existing groups and individuals. Consistency of delivery in terms of communication and networking opportunities are essential for the growth of professional practice in the region. Having one conference or gathering and then no follow up for years is useless and demoralising. Isolated events or project funding achieves nothing but expended energy, short term gain, and no lasting impact. Connections formed have to be recreated again and again instead of taking on a life and dynamism of their own.

The HI~Arts printed gallery guide proved very popular with many people commenting on having the guide as an on hand and in the hand resource. It is widely regarded that the Gallery Guide could be utilised by visitors and as a regional resource if more visible physically outside its current online location.

Professional artists seemed to regard HI~Arts “Northings” journal as a valuable source of information, but requested that the site be easier to navigate for those interested specifically in information relating to Visual Art and opportunities. It was generally felt that Visual Arts information on the site was not immediately obvious or user friendly to access.

There were areas lacking in knowledge about the function of HI~Arts as an agency or the “Northings” journal notably the Wester Ross, Argyll & Bute and Western Isles areas. Greater communication with these areas through the organisation of regular networking events and gatherings by HI~Arts (with a presence on the ground from the organisation) would address this issue.

Local media coverage of Visual Arts events varied from area to area but on the whole is limited to pay advertising or news based community interest cover. Raising the profile of Visual Art through locally printed forms of communication could be greatly increased and developed. Forming good relationships with local press through individuals or artist led groups and encouraging local writing about exhibitions, events or achievements such as overseas residencies would be important steps forward. In time such initiatives create greater awareness about the work being done by artists and are an indicator of their integral role in the community, economically, socially and culturally.

During my interviews on Skye I read a great example in the “West Highland Free Press”, the tenth article in a series about artists on Skye by Ola Wojtkiewicz titled *“Island of Artists - A Self Portrait”*. (18<sup>th</sup> August 2006) *“Helping to discover and understand the array of creative work around us”* this article conveyed the effect of seeing the work of selected Skye artists in an engaging and descriptive way. The language was no barrier to accessing the work and provided a window on the area’s most potent and undervalued resource. It was

a great celebration of Visual Art on Skye, profiling the work of individuals but also offering that creative energy as “a self portrait” of the island itself. It was an article for residents and visitors, taking great pride in the work being done by Visual Artists. We need many more articles like it.



Patricia Shone Detail Borreraig Ceramic (left);  
Installation Path:Towards the Iron Well (right)

An Tuireann

[www.patriciashone.co.uk](http://www.patriciashone.co.uk)

Writing about art can come from many sources. Frequently artists are uncomfortable about writing about themselves or their own work. Practical workshops in writing and presentation, the testimony of a fellow artist, a member of the local art society or local artist group may be able to communicate essential information about an artist's practice. Writing that encourages wider interest in seeing work without the alienation of jargon will assist in audience development and wider understanding of contemporary practice. The connections made within the Visual Arts trails and artist networks such as Visual Arts Sutherland can create writing about an artist's work or an exhibition which is an invaluable form of in kind support.

In an area without a strong tradition or expectation of looking at art as in other parts of Europe this kind of PR is extremely important. It creates a lead into what is for many people an unfamiliar experience and is part of creating access to art by breaking down prevailing negative perceptions about its elitist nature.

Recently “*Imagining the Centre*”, part of the new Public Art Programme in Inverness tackled this issue successfully in presenting the work of fourteen artists in the city with support on the ground by volunteers providing a means of further enquiry and engagement with the artists' work. Their role was not one of explanation but an open way of encouraging response, engagement and discussion from the wider public. Being the first local event of its kind this approach was intelligent and strategic in terms of understanding contemporary practice and assisting audience development.



Imagining the Centre 09/09/06 Inverness

Photographs courtesy of Matt Baker

Communication about what it feels like to stand in front of a piece of work is perhaps the most useful way of introducing a wider audience to art and developing an expectation within that audience via local press, television or radio coverage.

It is vital that an expectation be created in the press about Visual Arts coverage. An expectation about monthly or weekly reporting and coverage of art to a wider public audience needs to be created.

Artists and artist groups should be encouraged to maintain consistent contact with press and media. If a network of local writers exists within the local arts community, then coverage of Visual Art can increase in spite of the absence of Arts correspondents and Arts editors amongst local press. Good relationships formed with local press create less of a barrier to Visual Arts understanding and coverage, particularly in relation to contemporary practice.

There is more room too for criticism and comment about art in a more challenging way which can help develop a sense of peers and putting work into context for practising Visual Artists. This can take the form of active debate at gatherings, informal discussion face to face or online or in the form of more specialist publications. Most artists in the region use “Artwork” and “AN” magazine, with a small proportion reading “Map”. It was felt that although there was some coverage of work being done in the Highlands and Islands and listings of exhibitions throughout in Scotland in “Artwork”, something more specific was needed to actively aid communication between regions outside the central belt, highlight opportunities and creative possibilities.

The lack of representation of Highlands and Islands artists as part of UK online resources such as AXIS is partially a result of perception about the limited audience for

such a site, the cost of maintaining individual websites and national membership or representation and a lack of exposure in general of the work of Highlands and Islands artists that places their work in a national or international context.

There is a sense of exclusion prevalent in many central belt based publications online or in print that is due to lack of correspondents in the area and lack of exposure due to geography.

Lack of confidence due to poor levels of communication and infrastructure in the Highlands and Islands is a barrier to artists placing their work in a wider context. The perception of parochialism in relation to Visual Art in the region is also a product of lack of communication and awareness about the range and diversity of work being produced.

Association with a virtual body nationally through AXIS will become more relevant to Highlands and Islands artists once their work is more widely regarded as occupying the same stage.

Resoundingly paper copy was requested by artists as something they would be prepared to subscribe to. Options for a cheaply produced broadsheet such as “Artwork” or a specifically developed site linked to “Northings” should be investigated with writing from around the region being featured. News, opportunities, exhibitions, residencies, commentary, featured artists and calls for shared transport costs to send work to competitions out with the area could be facilitated by more open channels and consistent means of communication.

In relation to online discussion most practitioners agreed that they would need a strong overriding reason to down creative tools and engage with computer chat. There needed to be a real purpose and vision behind such discussion for it to have relevance to their practice.

The need for investment in Visual Art publications to archive and document work is significant. An exhibition only has a life for its duration if there is no catalogue or documentation to accompany it and active documentation and archiving of arts development work is essential for ongoing projects to continue. Equally the documentation of work through a series of Highlands and Islands artists’ books should be investigated. The purchase of ISBN numbers ensures that works are archived in our libraries for the future as a permanent human and cultural record of creative thought and production.

Exhibition catalogues provide us with a point of reference, a future resource and a reflection of our time and should be an integral part of commissioning new work.

Photographer Fin Macrae's documentation of the Big Willow project was in itself a new work, interpreting the environment and project through the lens in a way that adds depth to our experience of the original work. These images have lasting power and are as creative and interpretative as they are documentary. Most of all they communicate and interpret ideas generated by the original work and extend its visual life.



Fin Macrae [Big Willow](#)

Photography

[www.finmacrae.com](http://www.finmacrae.com)

An active policy of documenting work is illustrated by Marc Yeats' installation "*Stillness in Movement*" October 2004 commissioned by An Tuireann Arts Centre on Skye. The accompanying CD and booklet create a lasting record of his series of oil on board paintings combined with sound and music which can be experienced beyond the boundaries of the original installation. We are lastingly brought into contact with the concepts and intent behind the work in an engaging, personal and accessible way through text, image and sound on CD.

"*An Leabhar Mor*" (The Great Book Of Gaelic) is a collaborative work involving two hundred artists, poets and calligraphers from Scotland and Ireland. Contributing artists included Will MacLean, Olwen Shone, Frances Walker, Craig MacKay, Steven Dilworth, John Byrne, Mhairi Killin and Neil Macpherson

Conceived as a modern day "*Book of Kells*" this one bound volume anthology also spawned an ongoing international touring exhibition of one hundred art works, a book publication, a schools pack, a television documentary and series of BBC radio programmes, a website and music CD. All of these initiatives extend the life and impact of the original work.

The creation and distribution of such material and the exploration of Visual Art as part of a multimedia approach to publishing has yet to be fully explored. New technology can expand our contact with a wider audience in synergy with the artist's intent or process.

Publishing is currently only in connection with isolated projects with not enough provision for documentation and interpretation of ongoing creative activity. Creative documentation of Visual Arts projects in Outreach Education can also provide an archive and support advocacy for adequate provision.

Open channels of communication must be actively facilitated, especially between networks of artist led groups that have formed organically. Consistency and expectation created by regular networking events, web based and published means of communication will enable the sector to achieve sustained growth and raise the profile of Visual Arts as never before.



Marc Yeats Stillness in Movement No 8 Oil on canvas;

Installation Stillness in Movement

An Tuireann Isle of Skye

[www.marc-yeats.co.uk](http://www.marc-yeats.co.uk)

## PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE



Paul Bloomer Nightfish

Charcoal

[www.paulbloomer.com](http://www.paulbloomer.com)

One of the greatest challenges facing Visual Art practice is simply being regarded as a profession. In an area with a distinct lack of arts infrastructure the work of professional artists becomes blurred with more recreational forms of practice to the point where artists are widely viewed as hobbyists. This influences issues such as pricing, promotion and perceived quality of work, topics currently under scrutiny by studio trail networks, art centres and artists.

Whilst the hobbyist profile is also consistent with national attitudes, the distinct lack and range of spaces and opportunities to see Visual Art across the Highlands and Islands makes this even more acute. Positive representation of the work of professional artists in terms of exhibiting, media coverage and advocacy are extremely rare. National media coverage is usually negative and focused on issues of celebrity not art. This does the image of working artists no favours and trivialises important work.

In a more populated environment where a range of different spaces and exposure exist work is more easily seen in some kind of professional context. Where a community has only one space or no space there is pressure for that space or potential development to be all things to all people. The concepts of a centre of professional excellence or an open community resource are not mutually exclusive where a spectrum of activity is actively supported. Currently there is tension between a dominant Open Exhibition culture and the demands of professional artists for avenues of selection that clearly define and separate them from recreational practice. Current consensus is that our field of vision about art is too narrow.

Where basic access to seeing a range of practice and the teaching of professional skills is not a priority, placing Visual Art into a professional context becomes incredibly difficult and presents an actual barrier to career development, audience development and acceptance of diverse creative work.

The difference between recreational practice and professional practice is a contentious issue but having interviewed a cross section of practitioners I think the distinction lies with the intent of the artist and their need to create.

For Visual Arts and Creative Industry to thrive we need all types of practice from research and conceptually based work to applied work right across the spectrum. The support of locally based arts societies and groups is extremely important in supporting Visual Arts events, tuition, exhibitions and encouraging exchange between artists at varying stages of development. However a completely Open Exhibition culture whilst valuable to the community in the wider sense does not support professional practice on its own. The intent of participants may be to learn a new skill, provide a partial income or create for leisure but not be the primary focus of their life or their sole income.

The kind of peer support or professional context artists need is defined by selection which is an accepted part of professional practice, as is the potential for rejection. The need for curatorial support and selected shows has been strongly articulated by professional artists throughout the interview process. In many areas there is currently the perception that there are more supports for recreational practice than there are for the career paths of professional artists. This is an imbalance that must be addressed. Where benchmarks of professional practice are set, standards are raised and everyone from a complete beginner to the established professional benefits. In the context of arts centres where the aim is to promote professional practice by being a centre of excellence the bridge to recreational practice is the work itself.

Access to workshop space, equipment and contact with working artists helps answer the question of who a particular space is for, a question that was frequently asked during interviews. Within an open studio or workshop environment established artists or complete beginners focus solely on the creative process itself. This is a hugely productive environment and can allow significant crossover between professional artists and those beginning to learn their craft either recreationally or professionally. Highland Print Studio and Taigh Chearsabhagh are good examples of such spaces. Frequently this mutual space to explore creative process rather than outcome is all too absent in art centre planning.

During the research many professional artists spoke of the evolutionary aspect of their work and of a lifelong commitment to create. The actual process of creating work is central to Visual Art practice and the intent behind the work may be the idea, not

necessarily creating an easily boxed and marketed product. This can be at odds with the idea of professional practice supported by local councils and enterprise companies who are more comfortable investing in a designated outcome.

Residential opportunities such as those offered at Cove Park in Argyll emphasise the value of the process involved in creating a work of art and provide artists with the time and space to develop projects and ideas in a supported environment. It is up to members of the Visual Arts community, commissioning bodies and local government agencies to make a sustained connection between the health and wealth of their communities and artists providing leadership as professionals.



Residential pods, Cove Park, Argyll

[www.covepark.org](http://www.covepark.org)

There is currently a significant gap in professional skills amongst artists living and working in the Highlands and Islands. These include pricing, presenting and promoting work, approaching galleries and dealing with funding applications. Whilst some more established artists are confident in this respect this has more to do with trial and error experience than any form of training. Dialogue with gallery owners about being approached by artists and testimony from artists themselves would seem to indicate a great need for professional training opportunities in the region which can already be accessed in urban centres. The standard and success of funding applications would be raised by greater agency feedback and access to practical workshops.

Whilst Art Colleges are starting to engage their students with the idea of professional practice and life beyond Art College, confidence remains relatively low with a high rate of graduates not being able to sustain their practice for many years after graduation and having to work in other fields. Significantly in North Uist, Orkney and Shetland there was a greater expectation about a supportive creative environment and more optimism about the potential for Visual Artists to play an active role as part of the community.

Professional practice modules are a relatively recent development and there are many artists across the whole region that graduated from Art College with little (or any) advice or are simply not Art School trained.

The current support for Creative Industry is mixed within the study area but on the whole Enterprise companies lack the expertise to advise artists about the specific issues relating to their business. *“Have you tried selling it on Ebay?”* hardly qualifies as professional advice nor does the single act of sending someone in from a business background to show an artist how to do their books. There is a basic lack of understanding about the issues facing working artists including sale and return, health, safety and insurance issues for workshops, copyright, taxation and VAT, the cost and process behind creating works and health and safety issues raised in the use of different media such as glass or ceramics.

Orkney’s recent artist mentoring scheme matching more established practitioners with emerging ones is one way of providing support for returning graduates and addressing issues relating specifically to living and working as an artist in a specific rural environment.



Lizzie Rose Shorelines  
Mixed media



Lizzie Rose Storm Jura  
Mixed media

With Art and Design Departments, artists and galleries all agreeing on a lack of skills it is time for bodies such as local artist groups, the Cultural Enterprise Office, HIE, UHI and local Colleges to form partnerships that will deliver training in these essential skills on an ongoing basis, assist economic growth of creative industries and provide sound practical skills for new and mature aged students to fulfil their potential as practising Visual Artists. Access to learning professional skills outside urban areas is patchy at best and a stronger broader based approach to learning opportunities coupled with local mentoring could raise standards regionally whilst providing much needed local insight and support locally.

The issue of a business based approach to Visual Art was raised on several occasions with achieving the correct balance between administrative or promotional time and time spent in the studio creating work a challenge for most artists. Development of professional skills to make that administrative time more efficient and less intrusive on creative energy would be of benefit to most artists interviewed throughout the region. This would also give a greater sense of confidence in presenting work to galleries or funding bodies and promote best practice.

Presentation of work in a professional manner using new technology and filling out grant applications were also areas of concern for those interviewed, with feedback on the application process being rare. Whilst feedback is delivered through some local Arts Centres this is perhaps an area that can be further developed through this existing network. One or two week exchanges between staff at different art centres would encourage awareness of good practice and exchange professional expertise.

Woman and Loch Alison Bell  
Digital Print on Silk  
[www.alisonbell.co.uk](http://www.alisonbell.co.uk)



The belief in the value of one's own work is essential in being able to communicate with a client, gallery or funding body and professional training of practical skills is an excellent way of assisting artists to be self sufficient and ultimately independent.

Funding which generates self sustainability is an investment in quality, professional standards of practice and in time will reflect positively upon the whole community. Short term investment in creating product will not create the same sustainability or standard of excellence.

Many artists work at a variety of jobs; this is especially true of island environments where flexibility and adaptation are a necessary part of life. Currently for Visual Art to be visible at all a substantial amount of voluntary work is undertaken by artists, arts groups and their supporters setting up exhibitions, studio trails and promoting awareness of Visual Art in their region to the economic and social benefit of that region.

There is a low expectation of pay for production of work through community projects, educational and workshop tuition and a lack of professional context. Awareness and adherence to hourly and session rates of pay outlined by the SAU is generally very low. Pay for workshops vary across the region according to employer attitude and there was not a sense or expectation in my conversations with artists that a professional benchmark of pay and conditions exists.

Many artists had experienced being approached to do work in local schools or for community groups with the expectation that they would be pleased to do “something they enjoy” for nothing or be content with a token reward. They were not approached at the outset as professionals. Consistent pricing of work by artists covering basic time and material costs is essential. This is particularly the case in an area with the added cost of transport to actively seek opportunities to work and maintain a basic level of income.

During my research I attended a Teaching Artists meeting in Inverness who were discussing many of these issues in relation to different artistic disciplines. In the same way that the Feis movement facilitates the teaching of traditional music as an organisation, it was suggested that a collective approach to provision of Visual Arts Outreach and Education could be explored through the work of a professional body. A potential pool of qualified arts workers prepared to work as tutors or workshop leaders with recognised levels of pay would help address expectations of professional practice.

Additional training through Engage Scotland in partnership with such an organisation could develop the specialist skills of artists in relation to working with vulnerable groups in the community as part of lifelong learning. The capacity for artists/tutors to work with museums, galleries and within a range of sectors including schools or other institutions could be enhanced by greater professional development opportunities and links with national organisations.

**Untitled Ian Westacott**  
Etching  
No 19 Cataibh Studio, Dornoch



Curatorial process directly engages with a benchmark of professional practice through selection. Currently the only region wide selected art show is the biannual Highland Open which instead of being a celebrated event continues to lack investment. The interpretation of its title can be contradictory in an area where recreational and professional practices are blurred. Part of the aim would seem to be the support of emerging talent and showcasing the best work in the Highlands and Islands. It is the only regional opportunity to participate in a selected show and this year in particular was presented at its opening in Inverness with no pride, publicity or celebration.

There was no catalogue, no opening, no information about the artists and it was badly hung in a dingy room annexed to the city's museum. This is currently the only public art space in *"the fastest growing city in Europe"*. Those artists who were selected to take part felt that they were not professionally represented in a manner that reflected their own commitment to their practice.

The professional curatorial support for such a potentially important and strategic exhibition will only be achieved by a full time team ensuring that the Highland Council Exhibitions Unit or other body can fulfil its potential to show a range of work with the highest standards of presentation possible. The potential to tour such a show beyond the bounds of the Highland Council Exhibition spaces is considerable. It is hoped that the current Exhibitions Unit be granted the resources to meet the expectation of Visual Arts provision for exhibitions, education and outreach in an area that now demands it.

The idea of professional development also needs to extend to the posts of Arts Development Officers and Cultural Coordinators, many of whom work within local council structures whose remit is extremely broad. The definition of Culture, Sport and Leisure ensures that Visual Arts are subsumed within a massive administrative structure.

There is a feeling throughout the research that, although under resourced, performing arts such as music attracted stronger support simply because they are considered "traditional", easier to engage with and more measured in terms of audience.

Whilst there are general council training opportunities for arts development staff these are not specific to arts development issues and there is resistance from line managers for attendance at arts specific events, training or conferences because of a lack of provision in their budget and lack of cohesive cultural strategy.

Arts Development Officers usually work alone covering all art forms in a wide geographic area and do a high proportion of voluntary work. A team approach such as that which exists in Moray Council, Shetland-where the Visual Arts Officer is a specific post based at Bonhoga Gallery are much better models for sustained development.

In order to attract energetic, creative facilitators to such posts and retain this talent, local councils need to invest in long term positions with pay scales in line with professional status and provide opportunities for personal development in partnership with external agencies with the expertise to deliver this. Arts Development Officers may have no background or training in relation to Visual Arts (or conversely other art forms) and posts which are too general and dependent on unseen and unpaid voluntary work will soon burn talented and much needed facilitators out. Individuals can and do make a significant difference in an area where no previous post or posts existed however it is widely regarded that one post for all art forms covering a huge geographic area does not represent adequate provision.



John Brown Turbines Sue Jane Taylor

Coloured Etching

No 19 Cataibh Studio, Dornoch

The idea of professional practice is strongly linked to how an individual artist feels about their own work, their level of confidence and their capacity to actively source opportunities for creating and promoting new work. Being able to see your own work in a regional, national or international context is dependent on work being seen in those arenas. To overcome the difficulties and prohibitive costs of transporting work a collective and more organised approach is necessary. Many artists commented upon being discouraged to enter shows or competitions simply due to the cost of preparing and framing work, transporting it to competition in the central belt and then potentially transporting back again if not selected or sold. This is a huge outlay for most artists in rural areas with potentially no return and directly affects opportunities for professional development through lack of exposure.

It is possible that a collective approach to transport of work to competitions or exhibitions out with an artist's local area through existing arts group or studio trail networks could be facilitated. Lack of exposure of work, geographical barriers to exhibit work in the right context, high cost and lack of reliability from transport firms are major concerns for artists working in rural isolation. All of these factors have an impact on professional development.

The idea of Highland Arts which has selected and transported work by Highland Artists to Art Fairs including the Glasgow Art Fair in 2006, is highly supported by artists and needs to be expanded to include more opportunities to show work nationally and internationally. Having a consistent presence at selected Art Fairs is crucial, raises artists' profile and creates expectation about the quality of work being presented. It is widely felt that criteria for selection need to be clearly defined for artists to submit work for consideration and the engagement of annual professional panels to select work involving professional artists, private gallery directors and public arts representatives would ensure that a standard of excellence and equity is maintained.

The same governing principles could be applied to an annual exhibition of work to replace the Highland Open as a prestigious opportunity to showcase work and potentially tour to other regions nationally and internationally. These are examples of curatorial support vital for the professional development of Visual Artists working in the Highlands and Islands. Setting standards of practice through training and selective exhibiting opportunities will assist in professional career development and indirectly assist the progressive development of recreational practice. Currently there are too few measures of professional practice creating a significant barrier to the development of Visual Arts in the region.

## INFRASTRUCTURE

Infrastructure can be defined in many ways. Those taking part in the research have described it as networks of artist groups or studio trails, equipment that is purchased for a project and retained as a resource for making new work, regular networking events, touring between art centres, regional or national galleries, collaboration between educational institutions, the creation of public art and collections, professional development training for artists and arts development workers or bricks and mortar in the form of art centres, workshop and gallery spaces. Infrastructure in all forms must be connected in some way in order to be an effective support for sustained creative work. Investment in a concept of infrastructure adapted to reflect the unique qualities and needs of a specific area create expectation and support for Visual Arts from within our communities, embedding the Visual Arts as part of life.

A creative approach to where we might expect to see works of art is extremely valuable as demonstrated by artist Claudia Zeiske and her work with Deveron Arts and international residencies at Glenfiddich Distillery. Seeing the town as the gallery and investment in public works of art are creative solutions to the lack of public art spaces and infrastructure in rural areas. Unique difficulties call for uniquely creative solutions.

The Peedie Gallery where artists create site specific works contained in a shoebox size space touring public buildings in Orkney is an interesting comment and response to the idea and conventions of a gallery space.

Exhibition "Coupling" by Christil Trumpet  
(Matilda Tumim and Christopher Prendergast)

[www.christiltrumpet.co.uk](http://www.christiltrumpet.co.uk)

Peedie Gallery

[www.peediegallery.co.uk](http://www.peediegallery.co.uk)



The JIBP Cube Gallery, an international collaboration between France, Japan, Denmark and An Tuireann in Portree, is another example of work created in particular dimensions to facilitate touring internationally. Greater collaboration between art centres in the Highlands and Islands and venues internationally to encourage exchange will be an important addition to the region's infrastructure.

To expand the idea of the JIPB Cube a database of venues' or galleries' dimensions and specifications for displaying work could assist with touring shows locally, nationally or internationally. Galleries of a certain size could be partnered with other like venues or spaces to facilitate more opportunities to show work from outside the area and tour local work to a wider audience. In this way the cube is the gallery and the exhibition as a whole the site specific work.

The success of the PAN promoter's network in relation to the performing arts provides a good Highlands and Islands wide organisational model for support, communication and infrastructure.

**JIPB Cube Exhibition**  
**Lisa O'Brien Disturbance (Storm Cube)**  
**Sound Installation An Tuireann Isle of Skye**



A policy of involving artists in the actual design process ensures a natural *“percentage for art”* as creative thinking is present at the conception of a building project and in the architect's plans rather than a limited decorative approach.

The current public art programme in Inverness includes work on the Centre for Health Science at Raigmore. This project is a significant step in integration of creative thinking into the design of a public building from the ground up. Opportunities for this approach exist every time a school, college, hospital, office, estate or bus shelter is built but are only currently developed by isolated projects. There is a lack of joined up strategy between the Scottish Executive, local government, arts agencies and artists. Partnerships between artists and town planning departments, the NHS, SNH and Forestry Commission Scotland will reap benefits for the whole community and create an expectation that Visual Art is an integral part of our unique environment.

One of the concerns discussed during interviews is the limited interpretation of the Cultural Commission Report to directly address issues of access, inclusion and cultural rights. Instead of actively supporting a range of Visual Art practice, creative thinking and a broad development of infrastructure this language is currently being channelled into a narrower definition of support via community based art projects. A local council may for example cut their arts budget but deliver a programme through the social work department using Visual Artists to deliver the programme.

Standing alone these programmes do little to support long term development and sustainability of the Visual Arts. There is a great difference between community based art and public art, although both are essential for a healthy art scene. Artists commented on calls for “*socially engaged practice*” in order to attract necessary funding and whilst no one would dispute the value of such practice it is currently a reflection of a political agenda, not a reflection of a society that values art practice enough to represent it as a consistent core value in its budgets. Further more when the political wind blows in another direction no lasting infrastructure has been created by these isolated events, we are left to rebuild a platform all over again.

Overall it is felt that we have a history of lack of public investment in the arts in the Highlands and Islands and an emphasis on project funding with no follow up.

More energy is expended on events than long term programming defined by continuity and commitment, resulting in widespread battle fatigue from a sector already carrying out significant amounts of voluntary work. SAC foundation or core funding has been limited primarily to Island Art Centres and whilst this is a hugely positive step it does not reach the centres of highest population. This “*inverted development*” was noted by several practitioners during interviews.

Artist led initiatives such as studio trails are significant. They are an organic groundswell of support for Visual Arts by Visual Artists and show strong, committed leadership and advocacy. They are a vital resource for all Highlands and Islands communities and for artists working in rural isolation. The support artists give to each other through these networks is a hugely positive outcome raising awareness about the work of Visual Artists and the contribution they make to Highlands and Islands life. Currently Highland Open Studios, Visual Arts Sutherland, Uist Art On the Map, Skye and Lochalsh Arts and Crafts Society and Orkney’s Craft Trail all have a strong presence and economic impact.

Greater communication between trails to share expertise with groups considering establishing such networks in regions such as Argyll, Caithness, Harris and Shetland would ensure that best practice in promotion of local work is shared. Printed brochures listing studios and galleries are a wonderful resource and have the potential to be used year round. Such infrastructure generated by artists is invaluable but greater awareness of their value needs to be reflected in kind by the work of local councils, Visit Scotland and local tourist information offices.



John Bathgate Three Day Song

Collage and mixed media

[www.dunstudio.com](http://www.dunstudio.com)

Experiences on the road of going into Tourist Information Centres and asking about Visual Art ranged from being handed a local trail map to a blank expression. Sadly in many areas you could be forgiven for thinking that there were no practising artists even though I had multiple appointments for interviews with them in studios and galleries! There is little reference to culture in many of our information centres and you have to look very hard for evidence of Visual Arts even though they are actively pursued in every county. A visitor does not care if the information they seek has netted a fee or not. They have come to experience what is unique about our land and culture and a significant part of that unique experience encompasses the work of Visual Artists.

The Uist Sculpture trail is a creative approach to infrastructure and provides a pathway for exploration via a series of commissioned works by artists working with local communities. The journeys to these sculptures and their interaction with the landscape are a perfect example of adding layers of interpretation to the experience, appreciation and interpretation of a unique environment.



Uist Sculpture Trail

Hut of the Shadows Chris Drury, Lochmaddy; Sanctuary Roddy Mathieson, Lochport North Uist;

Mosaic Mackerel Rosalind Wates, Taigh Chearsabhagh Lochmaddy North Uist

Photographs by Georgina Coburn

If Visual Arts and Crafts represented a corporate identity it would be one of the largest employers within Island environments, if part time, fulltime and self employed work were taken into account in relation to combined income through tourism.

Initiatives to actively develop contemporary craft in Shetland and the Isle of Lewis are indicators that local councils and arts organisations are recognising the economic benefits of combining excellence in design with the skill of traditional craftsmanship and local pride in heritage. The Western Isles Council's recent launch of its Cultural Industries Strategy follows on from investigation into the positive economic and social benefits of arts based activity including addressing the issue of depopulation.

A significant amount of spend per visitor is attributed to Art and Craft in Orkney which actively and successfully promotes itself as an arts destination. Visual Arts play a significant role in the perception of the Island's quality of life for residents and visitors with a high proportion of the population involved in Arts activity. The setting of goals through active arts and cultural strategy in Orkney has assisted in a more coherent and sustained approach to arts development with a drive and optimism that is tangible and proactive. There is a great deal of pride in that creative energy, also evident in the Shetland Isles through the team work of an organisation like Shetland Arts, the presence of Veer North and the dynamism of individual artists' work.

The link between individual practice, artist groups, (or representation through a body such as the Orkney Arts Forum) local enterprise, local council and Scottish Executive cultural strategy is clearly demonstrated in Orkney's latest cultural document: *"Developing Orkney through the Arts- An Arts Development Plan For Orkney 2007-2010"* (A draft for consultation) by Arts Development Officer Clare Gee. Many artists referred with envy to the outward promotion of Art and Craft in Orkney which was lacking in their own areas. In Highland Council region or Argyll and Bute no equivalent document of developing the area *"through the arts"* exists. Such an idea is also a form of infrastructure, especially when it is translated into active policy and the setting of short and long term goals.

The belief that Tourist Information Centres are failing in presenting the best of what the Highlands and Islands have to offer is widespread with a lack of pride reflected by the lack of information to celebrate and promote the work of Visual Artists.

A group such as Creative Cairngorms, the Arts and Crafts Association of the Cairngorms National Park actively acknowledges and promotes the regions two greatest assets, the natural environment and the work of artists and arts related businesses. At the time of compiling this report the Aviemore and the Cairngorm Mountain area announced a private initiative by local business to better promote the area to visitors. Perhaps this model is an opportunity for other regions, creative industries and businesses such as studios and galleries to gain better representation.

The training of information centre staff on the location and content of galleries, studios, museums, music venues and festivals (whether or not these are members of tourist associations) are an integral part of presenting the best of the Highlands and Islands and of Scotland to the rest of the world.

One of the most significant comments throughout the Highlands and Islands is a lack of public spaces to see a range of Art. Just as there is a blurring between recreational and professional practices so too is there is a merger between the perceived role of public and private exhibition spaces. Art Centres, important focal points for working artists, exist as *“the necklace”* on Islands from Shetland (Bonhoga Gallery) and Orkney (Pier Arts Centre) through to Isle of Lewis (An Lanntair), North Uist (Taigh Chearsabhagh), Skye (An Tuireann) and the Isle of Mull (An Tobar). Their support role especially for emerging talent is pivotal.



An Tobar Arts Centre Tobermory Isle of Mull

Photograph by Georgina Coburn

[www.antobar.co.uk](http://www.antobar.co.uk)

In the whole of the mainland Highland area there are only two public art centres one is Lyth in Caithness, primarily viewed as a performing arts space but with accommodation provision and able to house exhibitions. The other, Timespan in Helmsdale, Sutherland, provides a link between Heritage and Visual Arts and has become an important focus through its exhibition and education programmes. In connection with this year's studio trail by Visual Arts Sutherland an excellent showcase exhibition of the association's work was staged at the centre for arts and heritage.

The need for provision for exhibition space and studio spaces in towns such as Wick, Oban, Ullapool and in the City of Inverness were referred to throughout the study. Such a network would create employment, education opportunities, and much needed spaces to view a range of works. The current development of Moray Arts Centre at Findhorn Park and the work of artist group an talla solais in Ullapool to encourage investment in a creative hub in their area are positive steps in the support of local Visual Arts infrastructure.

Alison Weightman  
Ceramics with 12 Bore Shotgun Residue  
[www.scoraig.com](http://www.scoraig.com)



The four Highland Council galleries in the Inverness Museum and Art Gallery, Iona Gallery Kingussie, St Fergus Gallery Wick and Swanson Gallery Thurso are not purpose built spaces but primarily rooms annexed to buildings as a secondary function. \*

The Swanson Gallery Thurso reveals an important aspect of infrastructure. The knowledge, enthusiasm and professionalism of staff as a lead in to sometimes challenging and unfamiliar work can do more to create access than simply building a white cube gallery space. A warm environment is created by the staff at the Swanson Gallery with access to the latest Art and Craft magazines, art books and the informality of coffee. The presence of friendly knowledgeable staff creates an atmosphere that is open and welcoming, words not usually connected to gallery spaces.

Problems of physical access and security in Highland Council exhibition spaces, libraries and other local venues make touring from the National Galleries of Scotland and elsewhere largely prohibitive. The small scale exhibition “*Venus Rising*” at Inverness Museum and Art Gallery on tour from the National Galleries of Scotland was poorly publicised but attracted hugely positive responses through the museum’s visitors book.\*\*

An audit of council art collections and an active system of loaning work to educational institutions as well as the acquisition of new works should also have provision. Currently there are stores of uncatalogued work which could be utilised for education or exhibition and no consistent or active policy of acquisition by regional councils.

Within Highland Council exhibition spaces the scope of what can be exhibited is currently extremely narrow, new technology based work, large scale paintings or sculpture are not seen as a result. The practical handling of work in a building not designed for the purpose also makes seeing a range of different practice extremely difficult. Though ground breaking work is being done by multidiscipline artists such as John McGeoch of Arts In Motion (Evanton), sound and video artist Lisa O’Brien (Wester Ross), installation work by Roxane Permar (Shetland) and Highland Print Studio (Inverness) in its provision for new equipment including a digital editing suite, new media growth in the region overall is hampered by lack of spaces to be exposed to such work and actively engage with technology.

\* Highland Council has pledged a capital investment of £5 million pounds towards the provision of a new Inverness Art Gallery and Museum but no details or plans were available at the time of research.

\*\*The Inverness Museum and Art Gallery closed for refurbishment in July 2006 and is due to reopen in January 2007. The impact this will have directly in terms of Visual Arts exhibition space and provision is uncertain.

Lisa O'Brien Swing  
Sound and Video  
[www.lisaobrien.co.uk](http://www.lisaobrien.co.uk)



*“Imagining the Centre”* a series of public art events that took place in Inverness is an excellent example of the possibility of accessing a range of Visual Art practice including installation, new media and sculpture at street level. It brought art to the city on its own terms creating a model of reflection and potential development that can assist local artists and planners to move forward with confidence. How the city views and defines itself will not necessarily evolve through the creation of one central space. In the absence of an art centre, public gallery spaces or studio spaces the city is actually free to uniquely define itself unlike any other. The dialogue between artists and the public during *“Imagining the Centre”* was characterised by the insight, humour and the understanding of the fourteen Highland artists who created work that encouraged viewing the city in a new way.

The development of a range of temporary and permanent public works of art and direct consultation with artists through this programme is already generating a climate of greater creative confidence and self determination. Local authorities can match this vision by providing ongoing opportunities for partnership with artists in matters of planning and development to the long term benefit of all.



Imagining the Centre 09/09/06 Inverness  
Photographs courtesy of Matt Baker

Currently the only two purpose built public gallery spaces in the Highlands are Timespan in Sutherland and the newly opened Lime Tree Gallery in Fort William which was created with private determination, vision and finance. In the absence of any places to see touring shows and local work publicly, artist David Wilson created the Lime Tree Gallery to accommodate world class touring, provide an education programme involving local schools and the community and a potential performance space for music and film.

Like many individuals in the absence of leadership and long term commitment from local government he did what artists do so well. He imagined a space and created it.

It is a sign of maturity when an area such as Fort William famed for its natural environment but not promoted at all as an arts destination stages an exhibition of Goya or Hockney alongside local work. The creation of the Lime Tree Gallery as a unique solution to a local problem raises the question of greater collaboration between private and public sectors to provide adequate Visual Arts provision.

The demand for affordable studio space is significant with WASPS currently estimating one fifth of their enquiries coming from the Highlands and Islands. In an area of relative sparse population this represents increased demand. When interviewing current Art College students with roots in the Highlands and Islands about the viability of returning to the area to live and work two key issues emerged; access to affordable studio space and maintaining representation for their work out with the area. Many established artists cite their relationships with galleries in Edinburgh, Glasgow and London as a lifeline, external representation and sales of their work is essential.

As awareness grows about the SAC Own Art scheme an infrastructure of support for artists and galleries through individual members of the public buying and collecting work will also be created. Greater publicity about the scheme in the Highlands and Islands together with a review of promotional material would be beneficial.

The desire for bold statements or a Highland equivalent of Anthony Gormley's *"Angel Of The North"* and the creation of social spaces around works of art were also discussed during the study. The need for local "centres of gravity" for creative discussion and cultural focus are often provided by café spaces such as those found in An Lanntair, Taigh Chearsabhagh, An Tobar and An Tuireann. The informality of such spaces creates a natural place for networking and the creation of infrastructure through artist interaction.

The theme of a natural or organic form of infrastructure was a strong one. Whilst models of development in other places such as Dumfries and Galloway were keenly observed, simply importing a model of development from elsewhere would not necessarily create lasting infrastructure.

Many saw the need for a centrally located space, a “*Highland Tate Modern*” with an active Education and Outreach Department as part of redrawing a cultural map of the area. Others saw a more traditional lead in with gallery provision for a representation of Highlands and Islands Artists, Scottish and UK work and International and touring shows all being presented under one roof. The presentation of traditional and more challenging contemporary work together in the one exhibition or the one gallery space was seen as a positive way of introducing the wider public to a diverse range of work. Though closed for refurbishment during the research period The Pier Arts Centre in Stromness with its collection of British Twentieth Century Art is an example of the international draw of a collection.

Overall the need for local “*centres of gravity*” to provide a focal point for Visual Arts activity, a meeting place for artists and a visible public expression of the importance of Visual Arts to Highland and Island life were a priority to the majority of artists and arts workers involved in the study. There is a profound need for joined up cultural policy and creative thinking at every level to facilitate positive change and lay the foundations for development of Visual Arts infrastructure to support both artists and rural communities.

## EDUCATION



Artist in residence Julian Meredith  
Timespan Education Programme  
Helmsdale, Sutherland

Most artists, educators and arts workers within the study stressed the importance of developing visual literacy and creative thinking from the earliest starting point and share this belief as a core value. The broader issue of Visual Arts education through lifelong learning featured strongly. Many artists interviewed are also involved in outreach education projects in communities, working privately as tutors, teaching in schools and providing leadership through workshops.

In addition to direct Visual Art education opportunities the application of creative thinking to other areas of learning were highlighted. The formal curriculum does not encourage independent thinking or creative problem solving, techniques artists use everyday in their practice that have multiple applications in daily life. The application of Visual Art to teach a range of subjects and life skills, increase confidence and self esteem is of enormous value to our society as a whole. Some artists stressed the importance of a cross discipline approach to education combining creative thinking with science or other subjects to facilitate innovation and learning opportunities. Lifelong education practices are absolutely essential to the development of Visual Art practice and healthy sustainable communities.

It is beyond the scope of this research to fully investigate Visual Arts in our education system at every level. Visual Arts and the potential role it has to play in education is a whole area of investigation in itself. However many artists interviewed were involved in

Education and Outreach work at all levels and key staff from institutions providing higher education opportunities were also consulted. Currently Highland Print Studio (Inverness), Bridge House Art (Ullapool) Jam Studios (Stornoway), Taigh Chearsabhagh and several Colleges within the UHI network offer portfolio preparation opportunities and a bridge to further study. Courses such as these fill a significant gap in the formal curriculum and assist establishing clear pathways for students of all ages from rural areas wanting to pursue a career in Art and Design.

Many questioned why there was no Art College within the Highlands and Islands both for residents and international students and that development of such an institution would be a logical development. Resources such as the Gerald Laing Foundation which gives access to the creative, technical and engineering processes involved in public sculpture, Black Isle Bronze Ltd at Nairn as a world class facility for casting and the wealth of talent and expertise artists such as Gerald Laing, Leonie Gibbs (Inverness-shire), Frances Pelly, Sam MacDonald (Orkney), Sam Barlow, Norman Gibson (Sutherland) and Steven Dilworth (Harris) bring to their art are examples in the field of sculpture alone.



Steve Dilworth Barb 1 (Harris Stone)

The loss of local training facilities in ceramics including kiln access at Craft Point in Beaulieu (Made in Scotland and now House of Beaulieu) was cited as an example of lack of educational and cultural priority. The unique potential for hands on training utilising the expertise that currently resides in the Highlands and Islands has yet to be realised and many see the chance to specialise or train in different media working in synergy with our natural environment. Northlands Creative Glass in Caithness is an example of an internationally recognised facility for master classes, conferences and courses in the Art of glass. Where such focus on training in a particular medium exists it attracts world attention and leaders in the field to exchange ideas, skills and creative expertise.

Art Centres such as An Tobar, An Lanntair, An Tuireann, Bonhoga Gallery, The Pier Arts Centre, Taigh Chearsabhagh and Timespan actively promote Visual Arts through

Education and outreach activity as part of their programme but it is important to see what other means of educational link up exists throughout the area. Lack of consistency in exposure to Visual Art and the sense that clear pathways of progressive learning exist are areas of concern for Visual Artists, Tutors and Teachers.

It was disappointing that while the research was being carried out the Highland Council made the decision to axe specialist teachers (Art, Music and PE) in primary one to three. This act directly affects employment for artists working in schools and their income,

denies access to art specialists in rural areas with little provision for art and places a question mark over future commitment to specialist teaching in the Highlands at higher levels. This reflects the “marginalised” status of Visual Art and the widespread belief that it is an optional extra in the education system (and in life) not a vital tool for understanding and human endeavour.

For many artists the decision also calls into question the Council’s Highland 2007 pledge to youth regarding access to culture and the idea of legacy. At a time when there should be insistence on retaining access to specialist teachers in schools and the positive development of artists residencies, such as the year long Christil Trumpet residency at Papdale Primary School in Orkney, we again return to a state of having to argue for basic access to visual literacy and quality of education Highland wide.



Christil Trumpet Residency Papdale Primary School Orkney

[www.papdaletrumpets.co.uk](http://www.papdaletrumpets.co.uk)

The commitment, benefits and scope of long term artist residencies in schools such as Papdale Primary and Sleat Primary on Skye through the “*An Dealbh Mor Big Picture*” project are clear examples of positive artist led activity that have an impact not just on pupils involved in art but on students’ work in other subjects, teachers, parents and the wider community. The consistency of delivery and the expectation that embedded practice over a year long programme can create is of infinite and lasting value.

A programme such as Room 13 based at Caol Primary School near Fort William is an example of an established model of Visual Arts practice which is defined by ownership of the programme by pupils, who run the studio and are led creatively by artists in residence. This programme of activity now sits adjacent to the school and those involved have a sense of continuity and expectation that the programme will continue to grow locally and internationally.

Following on from the Thirteen Hands Project, the three year programme “*Over The Hills and Far Away*” enables students in all eight areas of the Highlands and Islands to actively choose a craft maker in residence to work with them for a term. It is hoped that this programme could be expanded to develop a greater sense of integration between art, design and craft disciplines and present possibilities for career development through increased exposure to the Visual Arts and contemporary Craft practice.

This principal of ownership and responsibility was also extremely successful in the bilingual and multidiscipline project “*An Dealbh Mòr*” where artists Julie Brook and Kath Macleod led students at Sleat Primary on Skye in an exploration of their local environment. Every pupil was involved over the year long programme, teachers noted better performance in other subjects and many who did not feel themselves to be “*arty*” were introduced to the benefits of working creatively as a whole. On display at Sabhal Mor Ostaig during the Skye Festival in July and August this year a large scale charcoal drawing by students at Sleat Primary as part of the project revealed a sophistication in the handling of materials and a visibly high degree of visual literacy that was inspirational.



**An Dealbh Mòr** Charcoal Drawing  
Sleat Primary School, Isle of Skye

Artists and arts workers agree that long term artists’ residencies in schools and elsewhere must continue, to introduce students and the wider public to the positive role model of artist as creative leader, foster creative thinking in the broadest sense and increase community confidence. For students to see working artists in their communities sends a positive message about the profession, assists in audience development, visual literacy and well being. The study of local artists’ work through education packs and studio visits would also bring young people into contact with creative possibilities and the concept of imaginative vision needed to move forward in their lives. Exposure to the creative possibilities of Visual Art should not be a postcode lottery but a long term pledge of access for our youth across the entire region.

The exhibition “*Young Curators*” on show at Museum Nan Eilean at Sgoil Lionacleit in Benbecula during the research period is an inspiring example of a group of thirteen young people aged 15 to 18 making connections between their own environment and National collections in Scotland. The catalogue that accompanied the exhibition revealed the personal and social reasons for the objects and artworks chosen from the National Museums of Scotland and the National Galleries in Edinburgh. The participation by these young people in all aspects of choosing work and staging an exhibition gave hands on experience in curatorial process, transport and display of works of art and objects of historical significance.

Many topical issues were raised and the choice of works gave valuable insight into the identity, concerns and aspirations of Western Isles communities. The field of vision of these young people actively expanded as a result of the process. This was in evidence in their choice of works and their written and video testimony. It is hoped that such programmes can be applied more widely and with regularity, especially in a region where curatorial support for the work of Visual Artists is an area of concern.

Workshop opportunities locally through Bonhoga Gallery's adjacent "*Hatchery*" building on Shetland and Taigh Chearsabhagh's response to an aging demographic through their "*Prime Time*" project are also examples of much needed opportunities for local learning within isolated communities. "*Prime Time*", aimed at isolated, vulnerable or older members of the community in North Uist, engaged participants in a mixture of art and traditional craft skills actively acknowledging their experiences through personal history and reminiscence. The direct response to the specific needs of an area is best achieved by this devolved approach to arts administration acknowledged by Taigh Chearsabhagh's foundation funding status through the Scottish Arts Council. The strength of Taigh Chearsabhagh lies in its foundation between the Uist Art Association and Heritage Society, its location and integration of different functions within the building but significantly through its education programme which lays the foundations for a career path in the Visual Arts in a supported environment.



**Bonhoga Gallery Shetland**

**Photograph by Georgina Coburn**

With an environmental focus of Higher Education delivered in partnership with Moray College Taigh Chearsabhagh sets itself apart. It incorporates the natural focus of the area and fosters international focus by being uniquely local. The facility offers portfolio preparation through a Diploma of Art and Design and BA Fine Art levels one (and soon) level two. What was tangible during my research in North Uist is the level of support, energy and enthusiasm of artists and individuals to build and sustain a creative focus in their community. This concentration of focus however does not extend throughout the Western Isles to Barra, South Uist and Benbecula which have more limited resources and access to Visual Arts outreach education.

Moray College has great potential for expansion through better access to equipment and increased use of the current gallery space. The scope for curatorial studies and practical training in staging exhibitions and events would add to aspects of professional practice currently being explored. Greater contact with established artists for students would also foster greater sense continuity between the college and students making their way in the world outside. The distances many students travel to attend their course are significant and this commitment was reflected at this year's BA Fine Art degree show which displayed a wide range of practice to an excellent standard.

For graduating students in the area the biggest challenges are access to affordable studio space, lack of exhibition space, cost of transporting work and maintaining consistent communication with galleries out with the area, particularly the central belt.

Inverness College Department of Art, Design and Media are feeling increasing pressure with plans for the College to move to a new build and the constant threat of downsizing.

The lack of advocacy for Visual Arts Higher Education is tangible in the morale of staff who face an uncertain future without positive steps being taken to carve out a role within the College's new development not based solely on income generating in relation to square footage. This is a battle Art and Design departments will continue to be at an institutional disadvantage in because Visual Arts practice requires more space than a computer terminal. Offering important preparation for study at degree level through courses such as National Qualification in Art and Design and Higher National Certificate in Fine Art, Inverness College offers bridging for students from all backgrounds into exploration of Art and Design in a high population density area.

The potential for the College to develop this department is substantial including the offering of modules of professional practice to already practising artists, but this will only be realised with a vision of development that places creative thinking as a core value and is forward thinking in its approach. Currently the relationship between Inverness and Moray Colleges is not clearly defined and it will be important to the future growth and sustainability of both that they define themselves in terms of the technical and visionary focus of their work within relative close proximity to each other.

Both Shetland and Orkney Colleges have developed an educational response to their environment with emphasis on established traditional Art and Craft skills and the predominance of local creative industries such as jewellery and textiles.

Extension to the Orkney campus has resulted in better provision of studio space, access to equipment and summer school classes present an opportunity for lifelong learning. This years Comic Strip Art Course proved especially popular with young people.

Shetland College stresses the importance of a combined approach to Design, Art and Craft principles to develop contemporary practice and equip students for working within creative industries.

The lack of capacity for current education and outreach through the Highland Council Exhibitions Unit was consistently referred to and must be addressed. Though some exhibitions provided education packs these were rare and often there was not enough notice to actively involve staff and students in opportunities to fully engage with work displayed.

A full time education and outreach department and active membership of Engage Scotland and VAGA to connect with educational and training opportunities nationally would help ensure that the responsibility of adequate provision is met. Training of gallery and museum staff in interacting with the public is also an important aspect of education in a wider sense and affects perceived accessibility of art in public spaces. When a new central gallery space is established in Inverness Education, Outreach and Lifelong Learning should be at its core.

Whilst the SAC Art Bus was well received in those areas visited it was felt that exhibitions did not occur with enough regularity to raise expectation and provide a consistent means of exposure to outside work to schools, institutions or rural communities. The need for mobile education and exhibition services in the absence of spaces to see Visual Arts was high, with many commenting on the need for the area to have its own Art Bus for education but also for transport of work to exhibitions out with the area.

Nathan Coley's exhibition at Mount Stuart on the Isle of Bute in 2006 set an international standard for engagement with contemporary practice in a heritage setting. The juxtaposition may be unexpected but it represents an introduction to the idea of wide ranging visual literacy. Mount Stuart is actively developing its education program but has much more scope to promote its programme nationally and internationally.

The Step Up programme in Rothesay works to tackle social and personal issues through the use of Visual and other Art forms in an area of rural deprivation. Here in Bute the juxtaposition of a centre of excellence with community regeneration projects and artist residencies is extremely interesting, raising important questions in a cultural/ historical context about inclusion and access.



Nathan Coley Camouflage Church, Camouflage Synagogue, Camouflage Mosque (left);  
There Will be No Miracles Here (right)  
 Mount Stuart, Isle of Bute  
 Photography by Keith Hunter

Like An Tuireann on Skye and other art centres Mount Stuart is actively engaged with practical bridging, communication and outreach between itself as an institution and the local population. Both are hubs of contemporary practice in areas that do not have a historical precedent of engagement with Visual Art. Provision for practical workshops, artist talks and outreach education will help create a new expectation and it will be extremely important for An Tuireann in particular to gain practical workshop space and equipment in the future to develop its audience locally.

Current artists' residencies in Mackay Country present an interesting and progressive model of how a small rural community has adopted the idea of development and education through the Visual Arts. Whilst in the 1970's the Balnakeil Craft Village was seen as being definitely on the fringe, Visual Arts have now become an integral part of the future of Durness, economically, socially and culturally. The attitude to Artists residencies by the Durness Development Group are extremely positive and the value in terms of quality of life, interpretation of local geology, history and heritage, economic growth and social activity combined with arts activity are reflective of a commitment to lifelong learning and proactive self determination.

Engagement with the whole community through resident artists' educational activity; creating and exhibiting work, working in schools, open workshops and artists giving talks about their work is a strong example of outreach education on many levels. Broad educational practice such as this creates expectation in the community about the presence of Visual Arts as part of a unique environment. It is also a positive example of embedding Visual Arts practice over time, active engagement with creative thinking in matters of regional planning and helps to address the future regeneration of an isolated rural community.



**Balnakeil Beach Bank Notes** (left) & **Message in a Bottle** (right)

Joanne Kaar Artist in Residence Mackay Country, Durness

[www.joannebkaar.com](http://www.joannebkaar.com)

The scope for education through exhibitions, workshops and artist talks at sites governed by Historic Scotland and the National Trust for Scotland should be explored. Currently the interpretative role that Visual Arts can play in areas of historical or archaeological significance has not reached its potential, even in more culturally aware areas such as Shetland and Orkney. Caithness and Argyll are areas considering studio trails in connection with sites of archaeological or historical interest to attract a broader based audience.

Donald Ferguson's exhibition over the summer at Kishmul Castle in Castlebay on the Isle of Barra is an example of utilising a site of historical interest to explore wider issues in regard to the natural environment and our place within it. The artist's technique led the viewer to contemplate the site more expansively adding layers of interpretation to experience of the area. It was the first time that this Historic Scotland site had been utilised in this way and attracted renewed interest locally and from visitors in a way that could be further developed.

Benmore Botanic Garden in Argyll with its Courtyard Gallery is another example of access to Visual Art in an unexpected setting. The situating of exhibitions in a different context can be an important educational tool through interpretation of the natural environment. There is also scope for greater depth of observation and experience for visitors and outreach education opportunities for artist lead activity such as creative workshops.



**Donald Ferguson Exhibition (left) Kishmul Castle, Castlebay Isle of Barra**

**Photograph by Georgina Coburn**

**Donald Ferguson Dun Scurabh (right)**

**Acrylic on paper photograph courtesy of Taigh Chearsabagh**

Kilmartin Glen in Argyll boasts an area with 350 monuments within a 6 mile radius of the village and has enormous potential for interpretation through Visual means. Art exhibitions are staged in a small space within the museum and the work of the Kilmartin House Trust is engaged with workshops and residencies. This work could be greatly expanded in an international context linking Visual Art and land based work of the past to that of the present.

Though there are many examples of encouraging educational practice through individual projects a predominant climate of hand to mouth funding of Visual Arts education is the norm with provision unequally distributed in the region and a feeling of instability and insecurity amongst those involved in art teaching in schools through to artists involved in Higher Education as tutors. The overall state of awareness and development of Visual arts within a given area had a tangible effect on the morale and attitude of local artists/tutors and the amount of support and funding for their work. In a broader sense there is a national and regional lack of engagement with what artists already know: that to find solutions individuals and communities must think creatively.

Providing access to Visual Art experiences from the earliest age through initiatives such as the production of a training DVD through HI~Arts' two year Artsplay programme of creativity in childcare to the work of specialist art teachers and artists in residence in Primary Schools is essential in developing visual literacy.

Equally working with older members of the community and vulnerable groups to build self esteem, confidence and learn new skills through self expression promotes a healthy society. Providing leadership through workshops and other learning opportunities it is agreed that artists have a vital role to play in the use of creative thinking for everyday problem solving and the fostering of life long learning as a core value in our communities.

## VISION

*“If this were your last project would you want to dilute it? Conceptual compromises are not acceptable.”*

**Artist Interview 30/06/06**

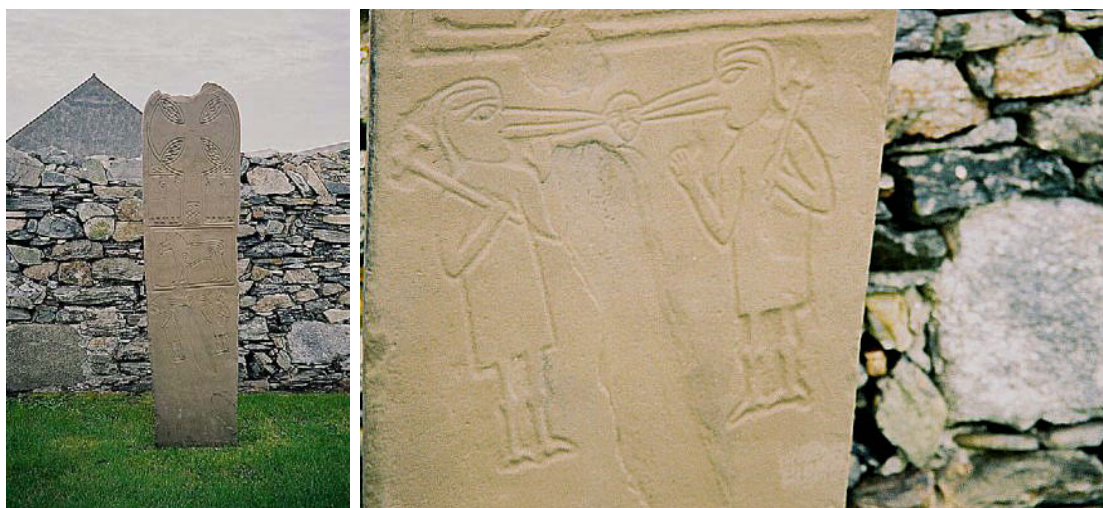


**Peat Stacks North Uist**

**Photograph by Georgina Coburn**

All the knowledge we have about ourselves and the world around us is through Art of one kind or another. There isn't an aspect of our daily lives that Art and Design do not touch. Innovation comes through investment of time, resources, creative imagination and requires a degree of personal and collective risk. In a powerful and thought provoking way the artist quoted above suggests how important the concept of vision is to a practitioner engaged in evolutionary, perhaps even revolutionary practice. She also made the point during our conversation, as did many others during the research, of the need to support the creative process. Supporting a healthy range of Visual Arts practice including the key role of education but not excluding the need for research based or experimental work will naturally have a positive outcome in terms of embedding creative thinking in our communities.

In many areas of the Highlands and Islands ideas about Visual Art have historical, social and religious resonance that explain at least in part why development over time has been problematic. This was most clearly observed in interviews in the Western Isles and Caithness where historically the influence of the church did not encourage creativity through the creation of Visual Art in the form of images. In rural communities with a history of fishing and crofting there is respect for craftsmanship and things well made. Skills such as boatbuilding, spinning and weaving are part of life, and not traditionally separated into buildings that display these creative skills or production as art objects. Activities such as painting which were seen to serve no practical purpose were viewed as frivolous, indulgent or the moral product of “*idle hands*”.



Papil Cross Slab, Shetland

Photograph Georgina Coburn

Whilst some artists made reference to the stone carving of the Picts as an indigenous visual tradition the oral tradition through music and language has more cohesion and continuity. In areas traditionally dominated by work on the land and at sea with a history of mass clearance and immigration, Visual Arts bear an interesting relationship to ideas of cultural identity. Historical reference to Visual Art is primarily through indigenous crafts that are traditionally not viewed as art because they are integral to everyday life or “high art” which was the property of the estate or landowning classes who had more leisure time and the economic means to commission work. Both language and music are easily identified as strong aspects of our cultural identity but Visual Arts are usually not mentioned in the same breath. It is only in recent times that Visual Arts have had a public presence in connection with music and Gaelic language, even though that language is incredibly visual in poetic terms.

The relationship between contemporary art, Gaelic language, culture and art history will be examined in detail through the study “*Window to the West*” conducted by Professor Murdo MacDonald at the University of Dundee and Professor Norman Gillies at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig on the Isle of Skye. Professor MacDonald described the five year project as; “*a wonderful opportunity to rethink imagery of the Highlands and Islands. It is high time we moved on from Landseer-type stereotypes.*”



Dollag 1

Anne Campbell

Photopolymer Etching

The development of a Visual Arts studio, archive and study facility within the Centre for Creative and Cultural Industries at Sabhal Mor Ostaig is an important step forward and part of seeing Visual Art as an integral part of our culture. The question of who culture belongs to is still played out today in the dynamics between art centres, artists and local populations. This was articulated at a meeting of Uist Craft Producers at Kildonan in South Uist who debated exhaustively the ideas of Visual Art and Craft and who those terms belonged to.

The Highlands and Islands have a long tradition of incoming imposition of one culture over another and sometimes it appears that access to Visual Art becomes clouded in this notion of cultural ownership based on previous historical and social models of expectation. Elitism and cultural ownership has a real historical and cultural resonance. Whilst this fact no longer produces a significant barrier to the individual production of work by Visual Artists, it certainly affects the reception of art, especially contemporary work, the level of base support for infrastructure and the cumulative expectation that Visual Arts are an integral part of Highland and Island life and Culture.



**Kildonan Museum South Uist**  
**Photograph by Georgina Coburn**

Visual Arts in connection with museums and heritage can also provide a more local solution to this problem of cultural ownership. The public art programme leading into the reopening of the Shetland Museum is a wonderful example of development of ownership over a space at planning level down to fixtures and fittings. In the café space tables will have pieces of textile work produced by artists and all sections of the community viewed through the table tops. This lead in of creative activity into a new space is extremely important. Visitor season in many parts of the Highlands and Islands is short and greater engagement with local audiences essential to the support of infrastructure in the form of new buildings.

The Seven Gates project in Pulteneytown, Wick in Caithness is an important example of the links between public art works, education and the role of Visual arts in regeneration. Artists Sue Jane Taylor, Liz O'Donnell and Shelagh Swanson worked with 160 pupils in Wick Schools and Master Craftsman Ian Sinclair to revitalise the old fishermans' stores in Wick Harbour and visually reinterpret the history and folklore of the area. The visionary role that art can play in how an area sees itself is significant, especially in areas of economic deprivation and depopulation.

The vision artists have of themselves and of their work will influence how they are regarded professionally, socially and culturally. Whilst currently artists are called upon to compromise through narrow means of delivery defined by current local government policy, we must not allow compromise over the need to support creative thinking, the actual process of creating visual work and support for a diverse range of practice.

Orkney Artist Matilda Tumim expressed this in her address to the Orkney Arts Forum:

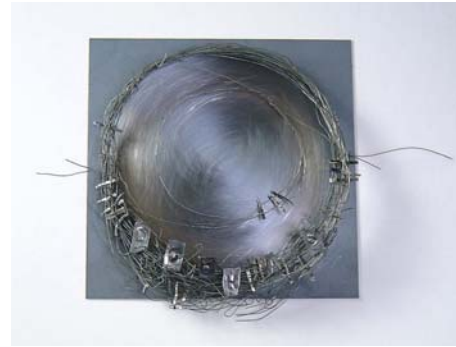
*"If an artist's intention is to be at the commercial end of the spectrum then that's great, especially if they are producing a beautifully made product that is much in demand, but to those in the business or enterprise sectors, advising and funding the arts, then please remember there is more to the vast spectrum of the visual arts than just making products. For some people the idea is the product."*

There is a tendency Highlands and Islands wide to see artistic production in terms of visitors, the predominance of landscape painting is one reflection of this. There is a pressure of nationally manufactured tartan culture, stags in mist, romantic sweeping vistas, or the small white cottage which does not adequately represent the dynamism of our natural environment and culture or the diverse creative talent throughout the area.

Having seen the content of hundreds of galleries and studios what is evident is that putting the right work in the right context is paramount rather than trying to adapt practice to a perceived local market.

Thinking beyond local reception of potentially challenging work is ultimately in the hands of the artist. How we facilitate that work reaching the right context, foster standards of professional practice, encourage communication and build infrastructure is a collective responsibility that active partnerships between artists, artist groups, art development workers, national and local authorities must begin to address.

There are other pressures on individual practice such as local government or enterprise assistance for easily defined Art & Craft product over and above research or conceptually based practice which is less easily understood. What is not widely valued is the contribution the Visual Arts make to our quality of life, promoting investment, greater economic prosperity and well being.



Mhairi Killin An Dochas Empty Nest, Silver

[www.aosdanaiona.com](http://www.aosdanaiona.com)

Isolation as an idea is a relative concept. Certainly there are practical considerations such as transporting work and access to exhibition space that will always be problematic due to geography but isolation is also a state of mind. Many artists acknowledged the importance and positive aspects of working in isolation, allowing them a greater sustained focus on development of work and individuality in terms of style and technique. Natural environment was one of the main sources of inspiration for artists in all areas but not necessarily manifest literally in subject matter. Simply having the space to think outside of an urban context, the natural stimulus of colour or light, contact with landforms, weather, the elements or the practical economics of real estate naturally draw artists to areas of natural beauty, power and ultimate isolation. The idea of isolation (as one Shetland artist pointed out) depends very much on your *“field of reference”*. It was in terms of professional development that isolation geographically became a significant barrier to Visual Art practice.

The question of regional promotion of art also emerged during the study. Central belt sources conveyed a limited perception of Highland and Island Visual Art work as using *“traditional media”*, *“parochial”* and far from *“cutting edge”*. Marketing of work as *“Highland”* or *“Highlands and Islands”* has a mixed response amongst artists and arts workers. Artists working in London for example do not market their work in terms of location of production. To an artist working on Shetland the term Highlands and Islands has more to do with a HIE administration area than with practical or ideological connections. Similarly in the Western Isles and Argyll there is more connection with Glasgow than with Inverness. Having a network of exhibition spaces, studio provision, arts centres and informal meeting places for artists with their own local centre of gravity will be important in creating a sense of optimism and direction for the groundswell of creative energy currently being experienced. Linking these centres of gravity through active communication, professional practice, infrastructure and education is in the interests of the entire region. It is only with a greater sense of collective vision that the difficulties of geography and perceived barriers to engagement with art will be gradually overcome.

The belief that the issue of where Visual Art comes from is irrelevant and that work of a sufficient standard will sit on a world stage comfortably is a view shared by many professional working artists, however the confidence and means required to place your work on that stage have yet to be fully realised. Commonly when I asked in interviews how artists saw themselves; Highland or Island, Scottish, UK, International or a combination of these, there were few artists that saw themselves as International. This has more to do with lack of exposure than with lack of vision or ambition within their own practice. The need for artists to work collectively as part of informal groups or as part of studio trails implies a greater insistence for advocacy and active promotion of their work.

Currently there are no regular showcases of local Art and Craft work presented to the public and many studio trails commented on the need for a presence centrally within their own area to generate interest, sales and raise artist profile. Currently the provision by local councils for such spaces and the presentation of work to the highest standard of excellence are not a priority.

Many artists also commented on the tendency for self deprecation and a sense of cultural cringe, *“not to blow one’s own trumpet”* too loudly. The creation of Art is both individual and personal by nature so the idea of promotion sits uncomfortably with many practitioners. Promotion of professional practice however puts individuals’ work in context and naturally develops a sense of healthy progression and achievement.

The confidence to make Visual Art visible is steadily developing through artist groups and studio trails and this movement can assist local government to be visionary in its approach to practical planning for the future. The idea that if an area is naturally local it will also be naturally global and that the unique qualities of environment, history, heritage and arts need to be both celebrated and promoted to a world audience are shared by many practitioners. Currently many areas lack the strategic cultural strategy and confidence to celebrate and actively promote the region’s best assets.

What Dr Kenneth White describes as a *“horizon of intention”* and identifying a cultural *“mindscape within a landscape”* are important means of realising a collective sense of vision about how creative processes can shape our lives. During a series of lectures in the Highlands and Islands as part of his Geopoetical Project in 2005 he stated that;

*“Culture starts from where you are. And if your base, your centre is right, you can move out from it in concentric circles. You don’t get embedded in regional couthiness. With a wider field of reference you expand.”*

Perceived lack of vision was often commented upon by artists in relation to engagement with creative thinking in a wider context. The possibilities of artists working with scientists or in connection to other fields of enquiry were explored in a number of interviews and the idea that experience of art belongs solely in a gallery or other narrowly defined context was consistently challenged.

Exhibitions and showcasing work in connection with other arts festivals such as the St Magnus in Orkney or the Hebridean Celtic Festival on the Isle of Lewis would raise the profile of Visual Arts in relation to other art forms such as traditional music.

The vision of Visual Arts as embedded practice through residencies, education, exhibition and acquisition represent a sustained long term commitment to arts provision. A belief in the value of Visual Art practice and creative process in daily life has yet to be fully recognised.



Steven Dilworth Heart of the Thief

Nails, Sand, Paper Money

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