

REVIEW:
SCOTTISH ART IN THE 20TH CENTURY

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Duncan Macmillan, **Scottish Art in the 20th Century**, Edinburgh: Mainstream, £20, hb, 1994, ISBN 1 85158 630 X, 192pp.

Art takes on particular meanings at particular historical moments. Its 'essence' and import change according to who is doing the 'reading', how, where and when. When the National Gallery of Scotland opened in 1859, and for a long time after, the collection was distributed among six rooms and ordered under the rudimentary categories of 'Ancient Masters' (foreigners of all periods) and 'British Artists', with no conception of different periods or a distinction between Scottish and English artists. Today, the distinction is made and Scottish art has never had such a high profile. In the 1980s, we witnessed the opening of a new wing downstairs in the National Gallery designed to house the 'Scottish School'; festival exhibitions in 1987, '89, '90 and '91 all explored aspects of Scottish painting; talk of a 'New Scottish Renaissance' in the visual arts was fuelled by the successful 'Vigorous Imagination' exhibition of 1987; the rise to fame of the associated Glasgow 'new image' painters was indexed by the market success of Howson and Campbell in London and New York; and a proliferation of texts, surveys, monographs and catalogues accompanied the comprehensive re-evaluation of the status and quality of Scottish art, generally.

In the 90s, this heightening of the visibility of Scottish art has continued unabated. Despite the negative appraisals of certain critics as to the 'real'

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quality of Scottish art (James Hall of the **Guardian** in a review in 1994 complained that Scottish art 'is, for the most part, uninspired, and that its value is more often historical than aesthetic'), the culture industry in Scotland (and England), has continued to churn out exhibitions, books and catalogues on the subject. A florid six part BBC TV series last year - 'The Bigger Picture', presented by Billy Connolly, surveyed the 'history of Scottish Art'. And the trustees of the National Galleries of Scotland have declared the desirability of a new 'National Gallery of Scottish Art', whose precise location in Glasgow is still to be decided.

Patently, Scottish art has now nudged its way onto the art world map, and the process by which it has 'arrived' is interesting in itself. It is, of course, in no way coincidental that recent claims to the validity and authenticity of Scottish art (as a general art historical category) have paralleled the rising intensity of Scottish self-confidence (beginning in the 1920s and 30s) in writing and music, the rise of the SNP in the 1960s, and a growing sensitivity to Scotland's identity and autonomy post 1979. Indeed, the referendum failure, paradoxically, says Macmillan, gave fuel to frustrated Scottish artists with a need for a defensive but distinctive voice in the visual arts - as registered in Glasgow's new image painters in the 80s.

But of equal interest has been the discursive production of 'instant art history', the packaging and re-writing of certain amorphous artistic currents and practices into a seamless and coherent category called 'Scottish art'. Here, the cultural activities of art world personnel and institutions - critics, dealers, catalogue writers, business sponsors, galleries and museums - tend to authenticate, legitimate and validate certain trends, styles and movements as neat commodities. This is not to say either that the category 'Scottish art' is 'false' or totally unprecedented (Caw's book **Scottish Painting** was published in 1908), but that its sharpened appearance from the 1980s is the part outcome of a set of historical urgencies which are negotiated in and through the operations of art world agents.

Duncan Macmillan's latest book **Scottish Art in the 20th Century** fits neatly into this moment. It is the most recent outcome of Macmillan's scholarly investigation (started, not surprisingly, in the early 1980s) into the distinctiveness of the 'Scottish tradition' in the visual arts from the middle ages through the Enlightenment to the present day. This particular book is a richly illustrated exposition of the evolution of Scottish 'modernism' over the last century. There are 193 colour plates - more plates than pages, in fact, which is good for a £20 book. Macmillan's aim is to treat 20th century

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Scottish art 'on its own terms' and trace the origin of a coherent and continuous tradition in Scottish modernism from the 1890s on.

The book's content falls under five main chapters which focus on key sets of decades in the 20th century. The first is an examination of the work of the 'early modernists' in Scotland - most visibly, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Phoebe Traquair, the Glasgow Boys, the 'Colourists' and Muirhead Bone. Macmillan sets out the thematic structure of the book from the start by establishing the link between these artists and a particular indigenous pattern of work traceable to Patrick Geddes and the Arts/craft movement. Although clearly swayed by stylistic movements in Paris (impressionism, post-impressionism, fauvism, cubism and so on), the likes of Mackintosh, Margaret and Frances Macdonald, J D Fergusson and Muirhead Bone, at the same time, remained faithful to a puissant local tradition based in Geddes' propositions regarding the need to conjoin artistic practice with a socially useful and integrated ethic. Hence, Bone's strength, says Macmillan, like that of Geddes, but also Baudelaire, lies with his visual commentary on the 'drama of ordinary urban reality' (p. 45) and the articulation, for the first time, of an industrial or social realist position with regard to human environment and social order.

The second chapter - 'Between the Wars' - continues to pack out the global contexts/local productions theme with reference to certain Scottish artists who were coming to terms with the horrors of war, the machine age and the milieu of Paris. Macmillan praises James Cowie's conjunction of symbolism and surrealism as an exemplification of the way in which 'the native tradition remained vital and was able to absorb outside influences' (p. 55). The formulation of a 'Scots Renaissance', inspired by the work of Geddes and of MacDiarmid, found its visual expression, says Macmillan, through the painting of Fergusson, William McCance and William Johnstone. This kept alive a Celtic revival and the resonant themes and idioms which informed this tradition - landscape, loss, primeval memory, nostalgia and the Highlands. As the subjective turn hit Scotland with the ascendancy of German expressionism and the aesthetics of interiorism, it is these themes and subjects, asserts Macmillan, which remain residual. Hence the landscapes of Gillies, Redpath and MacTaggart are read as 'belonging in the northern tradition, and on this basis they created something that was worthy of the ideals of the Scottish Renaissance' (p. 66).

Chapter three focuses on the 1940s and 50s and deals with a host of important Scottish painters and sculptors - from Joan Eardley the

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'outstanding artist to emerge from 1940s Glasgow' (p. 82) - through the two Roberts - MacBryde and Colquhoun and the influence of cubism, nihilism and existentialism in the latter - to the three artists who Macmillan sees as practicing at the 'cutting edge of British modernism in the 1950s' (p. 96) - Turnbull, Paolozzi and Davie. Again, it is the adherence to a 'native Scottish imaginative tradition' (p. 92) which forms the continuity in Scottish painting, for Macmillan. In this era, the Scots are said to play a key role in moving British art away from an 'introspective pessimism' which had dogged it in the post-war period, 'towards something more positive, social and outward-looking' (p. 96).

The 1960s and 70s were decades of intense innovation and expansion in the arts in Scotland. Macmillan's fourth chapter deals with the variety of ways in which Scottish artists were coming to terms with the acceleration of (mainly abstract) styles from across the Atlantic in an environment where indigenous artists were at last able to stay in Scotland and live by their own brushes. Macmillan's claim, here, is that while some native artists like Elizabeth Blackadder, John Mclean, Fred Pollock and Alan Gouk followed the road to abstraction, the overwhelming majority of Scottish artists still kept to the figure or to the landscape idiom. Further, Macmillan makes the claim that the core tradition of the Scottish Renaissance was developed in a critique of the Romantic/painterly discourse in art via the work of Bellany and Moffat in Edinburgh, and Alasdair Gray, Alan Fletcher and Carole Gibbons in Glasgow. Bellany and Moffat are portrayed as rebels of the art world who rile against the academic tradition whilst keeping to a socially based aesthetic (a form of social realism). Bruce Mclean and Mark Boyle are praised for mocking formalism and sticking to the quotidian and experiential. Davie and Paolozzi are presented as continuing to develop 'along lines that conformed with the ideas of the original Scottish Renaissance' (p. 116). And Will Maclean is heralded as the visual spokesman for the Scottish Gaelic tradition through his 'constructions' which explore the themes of fishing, community and symbolic memory.

'Old Themes and New Beginnings' is Macmillan's final chapter which looks at the continued effort amongst artists coming of age in the 1980s to avoid introspection and aestheticism and provide a serious engagement with the social. Unsurprisingly, it is the Glasgow 'new image' painters who form the primary focus here, most particularly Campbell, Howson, Currie and Wiszniewski. For Macmillan, the success of these artists hinges on their 'singular creativeness and independence', their 'turning towards the public' (p. 143), and their capacity to utilise the human figure 'as an active agent in a

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narrative drama' (p. 157). Currie's 1986-7 murals of Scottish labour history for the People's Palace are discussed, as are Howson's brutal, fatalistic scenes of post-industrial destruction and decadence, which Macmillan finds self-defeating and over caricatured (they lack 'subtlety' he opines (p. 149)). The works of Gwen Hardie, June Redfern, Fiona Carlisle and Caroline McNairn are held up as evidence for the fact that women artists were encouraged at an early stage to become fine artists in Scotland (as opposed to decorative artists). And George Wyllie's 'Scul?ture' finds its historical location, for Macmillan, in the tradition of Geddes and the idea that 'art can challenge society in its complacency' (p. 167). Finally, the continued trace of Scottish modernism is found in the visual conversation between Maclean and MacTaggart. Maclean, says Macmillan, looks back to the landscapes and seascapes of MacTaggart and develops the latter's themes - the Highland tragedy, the clearances and 'man's' inhumanity to 'man'.

What is useful in Macmillan's account is the loyalty to a view of modernism which remains sensitive to the particularities of place - that takes seriously the claim that modernism or modernity is quite a different issue when viewed, say, in Berlin, Vienna, St Petersburg or Glasgow. It not only has a different chronological profile and set of representative figures, but also a different set of origins. Clearly, any attempt to examine the cultural contours of Europe in the 20th century must recognise both the wider currents, movements and styles - the New York, London, Paris, Berlin axis - and be cognizant of the particulars of spatial location. For the most part, Macmillan achieves this with a good deal of success.

The book is lucidly written, well structured and beautifully illustrated - a book which sits easily on the coffee table! As such, its descriptive purview is necessarily wide but also schematic and selective. Hence, whilst the book is titled 'Scottish Art in the 20th Century' it should really have been called 'Scottish Painting and a bit of sculpture in the 20th Century!' The most problematic omissions - photography, site-specific work and time-based art - become increasingly so as Macmillan discusses the 80s. Here, it is as if neo-expressionist figuration and 'postmodern' sculpture constitute the very limits to the type of artistic practice which attempts to engage with and challenge certain aspects of the social order. Forms other than painting and sculpture fall outside the painterly discourse - but surely this is the point that makes their incursions against the hermetic, formalist and aestheticist tradition in painting more pertinent.

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After the surfeit of descriptive paragraphs on known and lesser known artists in the book, the precious space that is used for an analytical stance is taken up with the 'national tradition' argument. The problem, here, apart from the over-smooth, linear narrative which sucks each artist's work into a grander continuity, is that, for the argument to be pulled off, Macmillan has to establish that each individual discussed shares the same uniform cultural history. This becomes particularly fuzzy once it is admitted that some of the biggest names mentioned spent most of their lives abroad, or that some, like Paolozzi (a Leith born Scots-Italian), actually identify less with their 'native roots' than with a broader European based identity. Macmillan gets round this problem by attributing certain influences and characteristics as essentially 'Scottish' in their import. Hence, Turnbull, who was born in Dundee, but trained in London, then Italy, then France and who kept 'few artistic links with his country', is written into the tradition because 'his independence and his refusal to accept the prevailing standards of the English establishment in the 1950s marked him for a Scot' (p. 96). The strains in the argument are manifest.

Macmillan's biggest explanatory tool is the college system, the passing down of the national tradition through certain key teachers in Scotland's four art colleges. Yet, given that many of the artists trained abroad, would it be just as valid to look for corollary influences in other national educational systems and the trace of a national tradition elsewhere in the work of these artists? In a broader sense, is it really that useful, in a universe of plural and multi-cultural influences, to circumscribe contemporary cultural practice by the essences of nationhood? And would it not be more productive to look at material culture (like landscape painting, for instance) less as reflecting or fitting into an absolute national 'presence' and more as actively shaping, producing and reproducing that presence, particularly in times when this is politically and historically pressing?

Agreed or not, by concentrating merely on this aspect of Scottish modernism, some of the more valuable analytical questions and 'ways in' to the subject are precluded, such as:-

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- In what ways do the key components and techniques of *modernism* in Scotland - self consciousness and reflexivity; simultaneity, juxtaposition and montage; paradox and ambiguity; dehumanisation and the demise of the integrated subject - interject and feed off *modernity* as a broad set of urban social and economic forces (Lunn 1982)? How do individuals experience space and time in *fin de siècle* Glasgow or Edinburgh and how is it articulated or dealt with in their material culture? Macmillan mentions the French philosopher Bergson's ideas regarding *durée* and time fragmentation but fails to look at the underlying social changes which made that philosophy intelligible and critical.
- Why, given that modernity is such an urban-centred condition, do bourgeois artists (in Scotland, but also in other parts of Europe) continually return to the landscape idiom? Can we relate such a retreat into the rural to rapid social change and uncertainty?
- Taken as a distinct constituency that goes beyond the modernist assault on traditional genres and techniques, to attack the entire bourgeois 'Institution of Art itself' (Bürger 1984), why is there no coherent and politically formed avant-garde in Scotland? What is in place instead?
- In relation to the 1980s, why, beyond the malleability of their work with a burgeoning art market, did the Glasgow new image painters emerge when and where they did? How did they fit into the moment which saw *nouvelle Glasgow* become a valid target for cultural regeneration, which saw the rise of Mackintosh's reputation, the success of the Burrell collection and the permeation of Glasgow with 'Nineteen Ninety speak' (Calder 1994)? Finally, and relatedly, why, out of 17 artists, were there only four women exhibitors at the Vigorous Imagination exhibition? The image of the noble male dossier; the big canvases; the romantic male artist as audacious genius (Stephen Campbell); the 'vigorous' imagination; strenuous, heroic nationalism - how do all these work to exclude women artists? And is photography a more adept medium for dealing with women's expression (Baird 1991).

Despite his fidelity to Geddes' propositions regarding the link between art and society, then, we learn little of the material, concrete social context in which Scottish artists practice in this book. Many of the now accepted tenets of 'New Art History' (Rees and Borzello 1986) appear to have by-passed Macmillan's theoretical horizons. By failing to address some of the more basic but pertinent questions on the relationship between modern art and the

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society in which it is situated, Macmillan leaves a thorough and adequate book on Scottish modernism still to be written.

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