

Features & Arts

Cellophane bows, crisp cabbage leaves and too many fake beards

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CHIEF ART CRITIC



Exhibition

Edinburgh Art Festival

Various venues

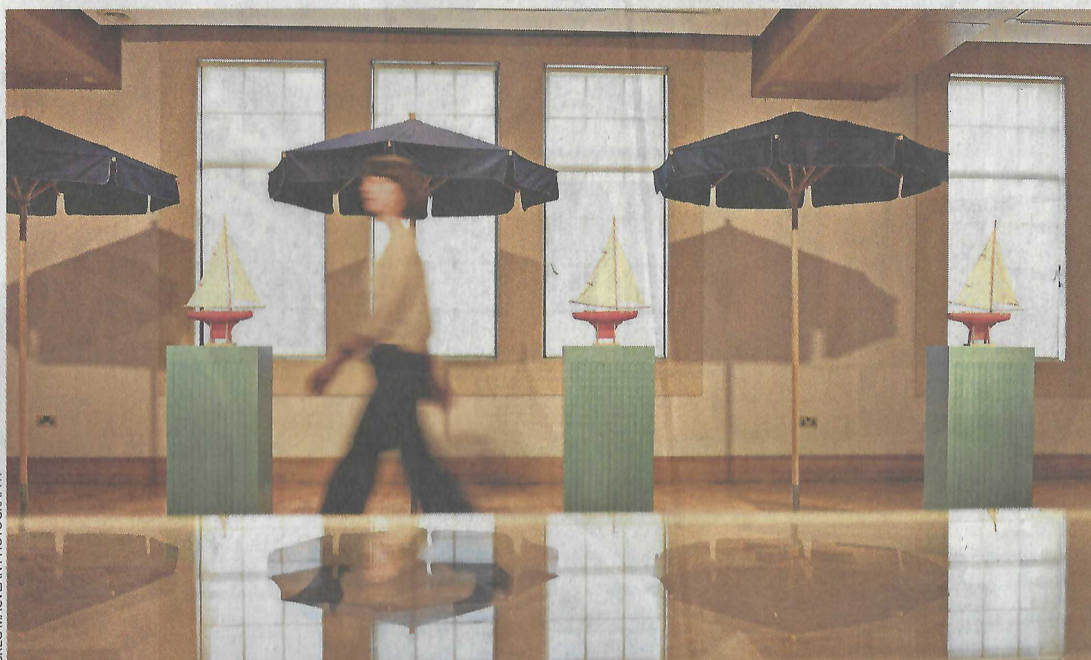


There are more than 35 exhibitions in this year's Edinburgh Art Festival, which is back following a one-year hiatus forced by the pandemic. But if, like me, you have only a day to explore the city, it's impossible to catch them all. Even with an itinerary as intricate as a Swiss watch, I managed just 12 shows across nine venues – which meant there was a ton of stuff I was sad to miss, not least a new film by the Barbadian-Scottish artist Alberta Whittle, a recipient of one of Tate's Turner bursaries last year, at Jupiter Artland, a time-gobbling half-hour's drive from the town centre.

In a sense, though, this doesn't matter, because the festival remains a bitty, inward-looking affair: a sort of pride-of-Scotland showcase, still lacking the cohesion and heft of the Edinburgh International Festival. Frankly, it could do with greater unity and ambition, and a few more stellar names, to make a proper splash.

Still, there's much to absorb and admire, such as City Art Centre's two-floor exhibition exploring maritime-themed works by the Scottish concrete poet Ian Hamilton Finlay, or Dovecot Studios' retrospective for his compatriot, the colour-blind tapestry weaver Archie Brennan, who always strove to elevate his medium.

The Fruitmarket gallery reopens following a £4.3million restoration, having transformed a former nightclub next door into a raw-brick, double-height, impressively moody exhibition space, clad with dark, stained boards from the dance floor. Inside, there's a mini-retrospective for the Scottish sculptor Karla Black, who embellishes abstract forms (Cellophane bows, sugar-paper



GREG MACVEAN PHOTOGRAPHY

Concrete ideas: City Arts Centre's exhibition celebrating the work of Ian Hamilton Finlay; a painting by Frank Walter, below

totems and topsoil ziggurats, scrunched-up swags of polythene like levitating tutus) with surprising materials, such as make-up, gels and over-the-counter medicines. Imagine pastel-coloured bath bombs fizzing on every side, and you've got the gist.

Elsewhere, Ingleby is showing 64 small, porthole-like paintings, as well as little wooden sculptures with the appearance of playthings, by Frank Walter, the eccentric Caribbean artist and self-styled 7th Prince of the West Indies, Lord of Follies and the Ding-a-Ding Nook. When he died, in 2009, Walter left behind 5,000 astonishing artworks, many produced in a remote shack on an Antiguan hillside without electricity or running water. Their new exhibition of "spools", as Walter called these rough-and-ready pictures of mangos, animals, the odd abstracted smokestack and landscapes with glowering grey skies that perhaps evoke his time in Europe, is enchanting.

Alison Watt's paintings, meanwhile, at the Scottish National Portrait

Gallery, are their antithesis: immaculate, minimalist studies of solitary objects – white feathers, lace handkerchiefs, cut flowers and, bizarrely, crisp cabbage leaves – responding to a pair of intimate portraits of his first and second wives by the 18th-century Scottish artist Allan Ramsay. If Edinburgh, at festival time, can feel frenetic, here is an opportunity for stillness, silence, contemplation.

Over at Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop, there's a new half-hour film-cum-shaggy dog story about our increasingly vexed relationship with contested civic monuments, by the Irish artist Sean Lynch, who was invited (I never got to the bottom of why) to reflect on the history of a mysterious 18th-century building material called "Coad stone". The wobbly camerawork is deliberately lousy, while the presentation and whimsical voice-over, by Irish actress Gina Moxley, lampoon creaky television documentaries: don't miss the arch paean to a random model of

Edinburgh's Scott Monument fashioned from tiny timber chip forks, which Lynch, who loves going off on tangents, discovered in the stores of a museum. It's all very droll, in a studenty kind of way, but far too meandering and slight to be the centrepiece of a festival.

By contrast, receiving its British premiere at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Isaac Julien's 10-screen film installation, *Lessons of the Hour*, a glossy "meditation" on the life and times of the 19th-century African-American abolitionist Frederick Douglass (an extraordinary historical figure who escaped slavery, and spent a couple of years in Scotland during the 1840s while campaigning against it), has the production values of an expensive feature film. Indeed, if Lynch is unduly shambolic, Julien goes too far the other way, tipping over into Merchant Ivory or primetime costume drama territory: there's a lot of soulful staring and swaggering about in beautifully cut garments, and too many fake beards.

Until Aug 29. Details:
edinburghartfestival.com