



Lighting up the skies

City Art Centre is host to spectacular Scottish landscapes, while Andrew Cranston shows the delicacy of his touch at Ingleby Gallery, writes **Duncan Macmillan**

The opening panel for **A New Generation**, an exhibition at Dovecot Studios of work by recent graduates loosely identified as engaged with landscape, declares a little tendentiously that “in the 1600s, the Scottish landscape was generally painted for lairds and lords who saw a barren land occupied by rural savages.” I don’t think our forebears were really ‘rural savages’, but the more substantial point is that the Scottish landscape was scarcely portrayed at all before the pioneering *Theatrum Scotiae*, John Slezer’s collection of engraved views published in 1693. In the early 18th century landscape was fashionable as decorative painting, however, and by mid-century had become a distinct art form. I’ll return to the New Generation in a moment, but **Shifting Vistas: 250 years of Scottish Landscape**, at the Edinburgh City Art Centre, explores its subsequent history from William Delacour’s magnificent painting of Edinburgh down, for example, to Thomas Joshua Cooper’s *Dreaming the Old Man*, a striking image of broken rocks on the cliffs of Hoy.

Delacour’s painting done in 1759 is big, impressive and full of detail. Taken apparently from what is now Abbey Hill, it shows the abbey before its roof fell in just nine years later in 1768. There is also a small, but

Shifting Vistas, 250 years of Scottish Landscape

City Art Centre, Edinburgh

★★★★

A New Generation

Dovecot Studios, Edinburgh

★★★★

Elemental

RSA, Edinburgh

★★★★

Andrew Cranston: Never a Joiner

Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh

★★★★

intriguing painting of Edinburgh from the Water of Leith by Alexander Nasmyth, but then the show moves briskly to the later 19th century. A painting from 1866 of Beinn a’Bheithir above Loch Leven by James Lawton Wingate is an exciting new acquisition. An early work, he skips the misty clichés of the Highland landscape to paint the mountain in full sunshine. Robert Burns skips the Highland clichés in the opposite direction to paint Loch Coruisk as a dramatic wall of looming darkness and with a gloomy, biblical reference, he titles it the Valley of the Shadow. A lithograph of trees by James Cadenhead continues the shadowy mood.

Delacour’s view looking up to the castle is matched by a painting by Lavery looking down from there across the city. A slight haze, beautifully rendered, seems to be more morning mist than the reek of Auld Reekie. There is plenty of smoke, however, and the street and the people are also wet, in a view down the steps of an Edinburgh close by ES Lumsden. The close is identified as Greenside Lane, but that is much shorter than the one in this view and it has no steps. Charles Halkerston’s *View of Princes Street from the Mound* is an altogether more cheerful vision the city. Painted before the National Gallery was built, it shows several temporary buildings,



View of Edinburgh, 1759 by William Delacour, main and Threatening Storm, 1936, by William Gillies, top right, from Shifting Vistas at City Art Centre, Edinburgh; Why Have We Stopped Here?, 2023, by Andrew Cranston from Never a Joiner at Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh, above; Rachel McClure by her work, part of A New Generation at Dovecot Studios, Edinburgh, top left

while an elephant surrounded by an eager crowd is evidently from a circus installed behind the RSA. An equally unusual view is a painting by Francis McCracken of the great hole that was Craighleith Quarry. Filled in, it is now a shopping centre.

Macrihanish was William McTaggart’s home and is recorded here in a lively painting of the sea on a June day. Early in his career William Gillies also painted on the west coast and did some of his finest pictures there. *Threatening Storm* is a good example. While Gillies’s watercolour is intensely atmospheric, William

Wilson’s contemporary etching, *North Highland Landscape*, is a masterpiece of pictorial structure. Joan Eardley painted the east coast, not the west. Her pictures of the sea there are usually subdued in colour, but one of the most striking pictures here, simply titled *Seascape*, is really fiery. It is described as an evening view of Catterline harbour from the artist’s cottage. Catterline faces south east, however, and it seems more likely to be a vivid winter sunrise.

To return to the recent graduates in *A New Generation*, the framing concept of the show is landscape, but very loosely interpreted. The link to landscape for Brandon Logan’s beautiful, abstract compositions made by weaving geometric patterns with coloured string, for instance, is a reference in his choice of colours to the flora of his native Orkney. Stella Rooney documents the history of the independent-minded workforce of the jute and Timex factories in Dundee. It seems to be place alone here that stands for landscape. Sinead Hargan moves out of the visual into the aural, indeed the musical, to make a very tangential, although intriguing connection to landscape through keening, the traditional musical form of Gaelic lament. It seems to be a reflection on the melancholy of the now deserted, once populous Highland landscape.

I particularly liked Rachel McClure’s work, however, which does inhabit the landscape and in an interesting way. She reflects on a usually unnoticed feature of our streets, the cast iron manhole covers

beneath our feet. She then develops poetic observations from them and from other things that generally pass unremarked as she walks the streets of what by the street names she records seems to be Elgin. All this is rendered in words in relief in plaster as though cast from the writing on the iron man-hole covers. Siobhan McLaughlin also walks and reflects, not through the streets, but the mountains. Her aim she says is a non-traditional landscape using local pigments and recycled material, represented here, for instance, by a collage with a poetic account of her walking stitched into it.

Siobhan McLaughlin is also showing concurrently in **Elemental** at the RSA along with several other recent recipients of RSA grants. Her grant took her to the Back Isle and she is showing a small group of pictures of its landscapes, all made with earth pigments. Among the others in the show, Victoria Crowe has been working on Orkney and has produced a beautiful series of studies. Especially notable are those she has made of the northern skies.

There is very good painting, too, in **Never a Joiner**, Andrew Cranston’s show at Ingleby Gallery. Indeed his light touch and the rich but gentle key of his colour recall Bonnard. Think *Thin*, for instance, is a still life on a table against a tiled floor. The title seems to be an injunction to himself and the whole is rendered in lightly brushed, close-toned pinks and ochres with a flash of green fruit, or perhaps peas, in a bowl. It is poetic. So too is a lovely painting of goldfish seen above the mosaic floor of their pool.

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Aberdeen Studio (my blue period) is another beautiful example of the delicacy of his touch. There is a lot in the picture — chairs tables, pots and pans, and paintings on the easel — but he manages a kind of democracy of objects so that they all coexist happily without any jostling in a gentle but delightful harmony. *Walled Garden* (after Paul Klee) achieves the same effect. Indeed a dog, a cat and what seems to be a cockatoo all seem to

hang out together quite happily. These are large paintings, but he also achieves the same thing in a selection of pictures on a small, even tiny scale.

Shifting Vistas: 250 years of Scottish Landscape until 2 June 2024; A New Generation until 7 October; Andrew Cranston: Never a Joiner until 16 September; Elemental, Recent RSA Residencies for Scotland Artists until 23 July

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