

HELEN MACALISTER: *The Glamour of Backwardness*

8 September – 18 October.

At the Foot o' Yon Excellin' Brae (2012) was Helen MacAlister's previous solo exhibition, at An Lanntair in Stornoway, on the Isle of Lewis in the Western Hebrides. It toured to Art First in London the following year. Her works ranged from four magnificent monochrome landscape canvases each measuring 148 x 210 cm: *Ben Dorain*, *Bealach nam Ba*, *Glen Roy*, and *Mol, shingle praise*, to tiny post card size pieces in sand blasted coloured glass. The accompanying catalogue has an essay by Duncan Macmillan, with an introduction by Roddy Murray, who had originally commissioned the exhibition. His summary below applies equally to the new work which followed:

'Embedded in Scotland's culture, Gaelic preserves ancient idioms, ideas and traditions as if in some fathomless peat bank. Serene and still, yet intensely alive, Helen MacAlister's work has its roots in this rich loam that comprises the priceless bequests of Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saor, Burns, MacDiarmid, Neil Gunn, Hamish Henderson, John MacInnes and others.

This exhibition penetrates deep into language. In so doing, it creates a new medium of itself that leaps gaps and generations, fuses ideas and influences and transcends, resolves and reconciles them. There are core elements of concrete poetry and the choice essentials of cryptic clues: creativity, ingenuity, imagination, economy and enigma that lead to re-solution, revelation and reward: the word revealed. '

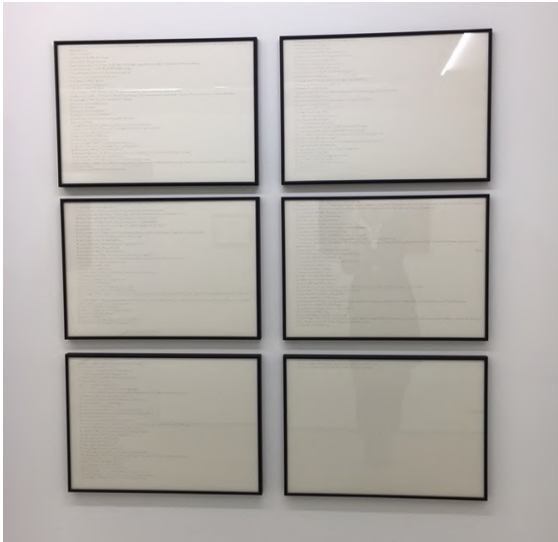


Installation view with *Ben Dorain* in the exhibition *At the Foot o' Yon Excellin' Brae*, at An Lanntair in Stornoway.

Of course, titles are significant in MacAlister's work. Their source is a wide range of literary references as well as newspaper columns and articles, offering us 'a culture's grand pattern'.

Open Canon, 2013, is one example. MacAlister entered a dialogue with Alan Riach, Professor of Scottish Literature, Glasgow University, and went on to give visual expression to his article, *'What Good is a Canon? The Case of Scottish Literature'*. *Open Canon* is a set of six pencil drawings of lists, 'drawn up' as it were. Riach applauds MacAlister's creation of this visual-verbal experience of works and authors of Scottish literature across millennia, from pre-Christian times to now. In his words:

"It is a work of art arising from Scotland, created by a single artist in Scotland, and as a list of works arising from Scotland, representing and enquiring into the lives of people in the various geographies of Scotland across all history, it is a lasting challenge to the priorities of standardization, conformity, commodification, and dependency, what we might call the ethos of Westminster rule. It is a reminder, and now a demonstration, that the arts give us essential information about what it is to be human."



134. George Mackay Brown (1921-96), *Greenvae, Magnus, Poems*
135. Derick Thomson (1921-2012), *Poems*
136. William Neill (1922-2010), *Poems*
137. Alastair MacLean (1922-87), *When Eight Bells Toll*
138. Alexander Trocchi (1925-84), *Young Adam, Cain's Book*
139. Ian Hamilton Finlay (1925-2006), *Poems*
140. Archie Hind (1928-2008), *The Dear Green Place*
141. James Kennaway (1928-68), *Tunes of Glory*
142. Iain Crichton Smith (1928-98), *Consider the Lilies, Poems*
143. Neal Ascherson (b.1932), *Stone Voices: The Search for Scotland*
144. George Macbeth (1932-92), *My Scotland: Fragments of a State of Mind*
145. Bill Douglas (1934-91), *The Trilogy* (films)
146. Alasdair Gray (b.1934), *Lanark*

Open Canon forms a critical link between ***At the Foot o' Yon Excellin' Brae***, and a decade later, this new exhibition, ***The Glamour of Backwardness***. An individual text drawing lends its name to the show, with the artist's incisive notes tracking the underlying thought patterns, and offering vital clues. Here for example, we have:

"Glamour may comprise the Gaelic *glac* – to seize, to lay hold of, to fascinate + *mor* – great. "

'As for 'backwardness', this was until around the middle of the century the condition attributed by Her Majesty's subjects to most of the rest of the world. It meant those incapable of industry and democracy, or still on the long uphill road of modernisation. A summit or advance-party view, it looked back with inevitable condescension to the treacherous lower slopes of picturesque superstition and back-sliding ignorance. The glamour of this backwardness is its legitimation through icons of continuity and reassurance

(The Enchanted Glass – Tom Nairn, 'The Glamour of Backwardness') 1988.

A set of fifteen A4 paintings subtly reflects the layered process involved in their making - an individual work might take as long as 6 months to complete. Illustrated are two diptychs, demonstrating the exquisite workmanship within the built-up layers from a buried black ground, just detected at the raised edges, to the yellow/green of the diagrammatic Gorse flowers emerging through the final white surface. The look of it at first resembles some form of botanical lace. It is beautiful and beguiling but with the just-visible words you are briskly reminded of the purpose, the poetry, the pointed commentary on Scotland's cultural pattern, reflecting amongst a myriad of things, 'the glamour of backwardness'.

Below: *Banal Nationalism* 2018, and *Semantic Jiggery Pokery* 2019.





Other titles from this group of diptychs and triptychs include:

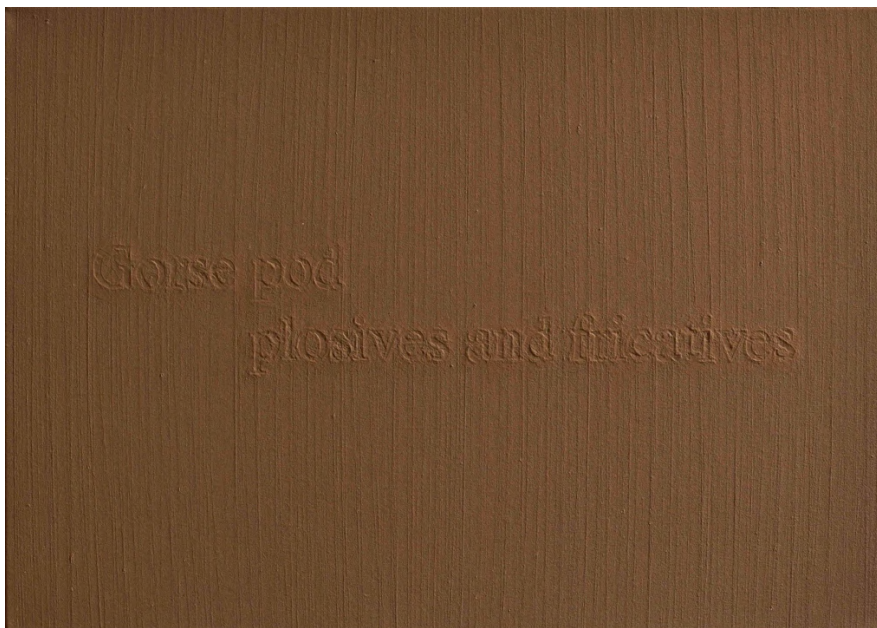
British state undergrowth, Established Order, The Illusion of the Nation State, The Wallpaper of Political Life, Imaginative Identification, The Seat of the Imaginative Faculty, The Rest and be Thankful, Distancing Effects, Sufficient Distance, Historical Imperatives, Holding Position, A Culture's Grand Pattern, The Binary Mindset of Imperialism.

The paintings are reductive yet highly charged and lend themselves to further enquiry. That is sufficient in itself, but for the curious, accompanying notes are available to expand on the source, for example;

'What is at work is not so much nostalgia for empire as a throwback to the binary mindset of imperialism, in which there are only two possible states: dominant or submissive.'

Fintan O'Toole –Irish Times, Sat 14 sept.'19 (Yielding for MacAlister, *The Binary Mindset of Imperialism.*)

Below: from the group of A2 monochrome paintings is *Gorse pod / plosives and fricatives*, its words embedded in paint.



The Glamour of Backwardness then, might be seen as an exhibition of MacAlister's work spanning the 21st Century and its preceding decade in a continuous, evolving concept. Writing about her work, Dr Lindsay Blair speaks of the 'New Historicism' it represents, and how MacAlister is among a group of Highland artists dealing with a collective consciousness with the artist as witness, as a 'participant observer' (the title of one of her drawings from 2011).

Looking back at MacAlister's previous exhibitions confirms the central role language plays in her art. In 2009 *No Lack of Lamentation* introduced the monochrome landscapes that evolved into the 2013 paintings featured in the Stornoway show. Before that, in 2006 came *the roar o' human shingle*, an exhibition where drawings and paintings touch on ideas of cultural resilience and the resonance of language and place. With its own focus, *Petrified Gossip* was a small, intense exhibition held at Art First in 2004, while *Hutton's Rock* in 2002, with a catalogue written by Duncan Macmillan, comprised a body of work that incorporated the Scottish language itself, where MacAlister literally stitched words and laminated images onto brightly coloured canvases; - an old proverb, a quote from a poet, a phrase, a single word. As a father of geology, Hutton was an 18th Century figure of the Scottish Enlightenment whose book *Theory of the Earth* is based on a reading of the earth's history through rock sections on Salisbury Crags (Arthur's Seat), and his theory of permanent flux has remained a source of inspiration to artists and scientists alike.



Loch Lomond Readvance, 2008, pencil on paper, 42 x 59cm presented in 'No Lack of Lamentation' in 2009.

'Indeed the relation between the sign and the signified is still a crucial area of discussion' wrote Duncan Macmillan, naming Thomas Reid, another Enlightenment philosopher's compelling exploration of visual language. *'Just think of the writings of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault and the whole argument about the opacity and inescapable tendentiousness of language, of the insidious gap between sign and signified that they explore. In the subtlety of her own inquiry Helen MacAlister may match them, but she never follows them so far as to lose faith in language. For her instead it is a rich landscape of shared experience and, like a landscape, it invites the painter's exploration.....for her, painting and language elide; words become painting; painting becomes words. There is no difference; her paintings [and drawings] of words are as visual as are her paintings of landscapes.*

They are there in the unravelling of the layers of meaning of her reflections on language, on the exchanges between Gaelic and Scots, on poetry and on the poets and their commentators, to all of which she also adds her own words in the notes she writes as guidance to her work.' (Duncan Macmillan, 'Hutton's Rock' catalogue essay.)

The new work is urgent, it is vital, lucid and of its time, and now is a very good moment to see it.

Helen MacAlister trained in Fine Art at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art, Dundee. Subsequent awards and scholarships enabled her to work in Paris and Rome, with further residencies in Italy and the States, including Bellagio and MacDowell. She is represented by Art First and has work in public and private collections in the UK and the USA. She lives and works in Edinburgh.

For further enquires please contact Clare Cooper: clare@artfirst.co.uk and visit the gallery website.

The Forge, 15 St Mary's Walk, London, SE 11 4UA. T: +44 (0) 7711 945098 E: info@artfirst.co.uk www.artfirst.co.uk