

At the Foot o' Yon Excellin' Brae

Helen MacAlister

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An Lanntair

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Roddy Murray

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-Saoir, 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.

An Lanntair is pleased indeed to present this exhibition when Scottish and Gaelic culture is more examined and threatened yet also more valued and relevant than ever.

Ruairidh Moireach

Air a leabachadh ann an cultar na h-Alba, tha a' Ghàidhlig a' glèidheadh cainnt aosmhoir, dualchais agus tradaiseanan mar gur ann an doimhneachd a' phuill-mhòine. Aig a' cheart àm sàmhach is socair ach fhathast gu tur beòthail na dòigh tha an obair aig Eilidh NicAlasdair air a bogadh anns a' pholl shaoibhir seo is air a cuairteachadh leis an dualchas luachmhor aig Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir, Burns, MacDiarmid, Neil Gunn, Hamish Henderson, Iain MacAonghais is eile.

Tha an taisbeanadh seo a' drùidheadh gu domhainn air cànan. Agus leis a sin tha e a' cruthachadh meadhain ùir dha fhèin a leumas beàrn is ginealaich a leaghas beachdan 's gan treòrachadh is a' toirt bàrr orra, agus gam fuasgladh is gan ath-rèiteachadh. Tha na h-eileamaidean aig cridhe "bardachd choncrete" agus na rudan riatanach airson bhoillsigidhean diomhair ann: tionnsgalachd, seòltachd, mac-meanmna, crìontachd agus dubh-fhacal is iad gar treòrachadh a dh'ionnsaigh ath-fhuasglaidh, taisbeanaidh agus diolaidh: am facal nochdte.

Tha an Lanntair air leth toilichte an obair seo a thaisbeanadh aig àm nuair a tha cultar na h-Alba agus nan Gàidheal fon phrosbaig 's fo bhagairt, ach fhathast cho prìseil is iomchaidh 's a bha iad riamh.

Duncan Macmillan

There are beaches around Scotland where those in the know can pick up rough pebbles, take them home to tumble in carborundum for hours, or even days and finally reveal in them the beautiful layering of agate, the rich red of jasper, or the warm, transparent gold of carnelian. Helen MacAlister's art is like that; precious and highly polished by long tumbling of ideas in her mind and slow and careful execution. The final result is always elegantly simple. They are not easy pictures, however. Indeed, their complexity is in inverse proportion to their apparent simplicity. Each work has a layered richness, which like the agate pebbles, emerges for the spectator too as it is polished by long reflection. She herself remarks in an early draft of her notes to the works, 'with irony', she says, (but I feel aptly nevertheless) that the Gaelic word '*taisbeanadh*' is used for 'exhibition' but also for 'revelation'.

The object of the artist's own reflection is, in the very broadest sense, language. Words in many different ways are her subject. She is not a poet manqué, however. Far from it. She sees words and images as two, closely analogous modes of perception. In this, she follows the Enlightenment philosopher Thomas Reid. She does this intuitively, picking up on themes in art that stretch back to Reid. She is not dependent directly on the philosopher in any way, although she does indeed quote him in a different context in her note on the drawing *Standard Habbie*.

This is what Reid wrote in a key passage on perception in his *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*:

When someone speaks to us in a familiar language we hear certain sounds, and that is the only effect that his discourse has on us by nature; but by custom we understand the meaning of these sounds, and so we fix our attention not on the sounds but on the things signified by

them. Similarly, by nature we see only the visible appearance of objects, but we learn by custom to interpret these appearances and to understand their meaning. And when we have learned this visual language and it has become familiar to us, we attend only to the things signified and find it very difficult to attend to the signs by which they are presented. The mind passes from one to the other so rapidly, and so familiarly, that no trace of the sign is left in our memory, and we seem to perceive the signified thing immediately and without the intervention of any sign.¹

Thus, incidentally also coining the phrase, Reid identified what he called 'visual language'. We tend to think of the visual and the linguistic as two very different modes of perception belonging to two quite different faculties of the mind. He however proposes a direct analogy between this language of visual signs and the more familiar language of words, whether spoken or written. With both, he argues, we read intuitively a set of signs which have no coherence in themselves and to whose actual form we pay no attention, but from which we have learnt to select and interpret the information that we need and thus proceed from raw sensation to perception, from confusion to meaning. In her notes to her pictures, the artist also quotes Robert Louis Stevenson expressing a very similar sentiment, if less philosophically: "Man's one method, whether he reasons or creates, is to half-shut his eyes against the dazzle and confusion of reality."

In explaining how he sees this process, Thomas Reid uses the painter as an example. "The painter has a need for an abstraction regarding visible objects somewhat similar to what we need here, and this is indeed the most difficult part of his art. For it is obvious that if

he could fix in his imagination the visible appearance of objects, not confusing it with the things it signifies, it would be as easy for him to paint from the life.. as to paint from a copy."²

The influence Reid's argument had on the future of painting was profound. I cannot discuss it here beyond saying that, because of his influence in France, it stands at the very heart of the project that has become modern art. The fact that Reid was so influential does, however, indirectly also locate Helen MacAlister's own remarkable work, not in some obscure backwater, but in an inquiry that extends back into the Enlightenment and remains central even now. Indeed the relation between the sign and the signified is still a crucial area of discussion. 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.

Bealach nam Ba – The Pass of the Cattle is one of her principal landscape paintings and so perhaps offers a key to her whole project. It is of the mountain pass at the watershed between Kishorn and Applecross, but symbolically it is also the pass between language and painting. For she paints these two things as though indeed they were one, linked in their uplands at the headwaters of the rivers that flow down from them. Her painting *Ben Dorain* is a homage to Donnchadh Bàn MacIntyre's long poem *In Praise of Ben Dorain*. In the poem, drawing on the rich and ancient visual tradition of Gaelic poetry, the poet himself makes the same link. His poem is a landscape.

The languages that concern Helen MacAlister are Gaelic and Scots. Exploring the peculiar complexities of the way they overlay each other, she also demonstrates how that overlay can illuminate what it means to be Scots; how too Gaelic is a great unseen presence in all this. We may not acknowledge it, but it is there nevertheless. In this quest, for her, painting and language elide; words become painting; painting becomes words. There is no difference; her paintings of words are as visual as are her paintings of landscapes. Following Reid's analysis, she paints the signs of our verbal language, the letters and the words that represent them, just as she paints the signs of our visual language. In her drawings, if you look closely, too, words are embedded in the image, hidden in the marks of the pencil. But words are equally her subject when not actually present. 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.

Crucially of course, a pass such as *Bealach nam Ba [sic]* sits on a watershed, but if the waters divide, the pass unites. It is a place of joining, even if at the top of an arduous slope and Helen MacAlister certainly does not flinch when faced with a steep climb. Indeed, her chosen title, *At the Foot o' Yon Excellin' Brae*, (also the subject of one of her word pictures) nicely encapsulates this process of mental mountaineering. As she links painting and language in a common pursuit and situates them meeting on a mountain pass, she also mirrors the Scots literary and poetic traditions in which, in the same way, the two languages of Scots and Gaelic coexist, two sides of the same pass as it were. In this she is following Hamish Henderson. *At the Foot o' Yon Excellin' Brae* is the title of an essay on the language of Scots folksong by Henderson in

which he observes that these two languages demonstrate 'a curious bilingualism in one language.'

Several of her works make a play on the linguistic consequences of this peculiar characteristic of the Scots mental landscape, though they do not always reflect deep mutual understanding between the two linguistic communities that have shaped it. *Nonsense Vocables*, for instance, the words almost dissolved in deep blue, is a reflection on the Scots usage for nonsense of the syllables of the *canntaireachd*, the hidorum-hodorum of verbalised pibroch, or Gaelic mouth music. *Don't give a tinker's curse*, the words in black on flat grey, reflects a similar inversion, but in a way that is typical of all her work, one that opens out into a much wider reflection on the nature of tradition. The tinkers and travelling people were a major source of traditional Scots song. Murdo Macdonald commented twenty years ago how it was Hamish Henderson who demonstrated this fact and how it inverts conventional social values:

*Henderson has shown over the years, the finest sources of Scottish tradition are found among the berry pickers and the travelling folk. At a stroke the previously peripheral is recognised as culturally central, and when that happens, what of the so-called centre? What we see here is a complete disjunction between what is culturally central and what is politically central. What Henderson presents us with is a very clear example of this anomaly. When on the basis of this we ask ourselves the simple question 'who is more important to Scotland, the ballad-singer or the Secretary of State' there is really no contest.'*³

The tinkers may curse, but they come out on top. To return to Thomas Reid, however, what he suggests in his analogy between language and painting is that both are ways of setting a grid of signs, a legible, transparent screen of location and meaning over the incoherence of experience, over 'the dazzle and confusion of reality,' to allow us to make sense of it. Helen's own painting suggests exactly that grid, or indeed Stevenson's half-closed eyes. Her pictures of landscapes are monochrome in a range of muted colours. *Bealach nam Ba* is a rich brown, for instance. *The Lido, Campbeltown bay* is yellow, in this case the colour is a compound of translingual and verbal-visual pun playing on 'bay', the Gaelic *buidhe*, yellow, and *buidheachas*, gratitude.

The paintings themselves consist of a layer of binary marks, of signs, light and dark, and in detail chaotic, but which, overlaid on the raw image which sits behind them, reveal its outlines. The drawings, which frequently relate directly to the paintings, work the same way with a mass of pencil marks from whose confusion the image emerges. In both cases, her process is one of formalising and refining and here she refers back to Hamish Henderson again. She quotes from the same essay that has given her her title where he comments on the formality of the language of folksong. 'It is in the great songs, licked into shape like pebbles by the waves of countless tongues, that this sense of formality is most marked.' That, we feel, is exactly how she paints, licking her image into shape with countless marks and infinite care. She herself refers to this obliquely in *Mol, shingle praise* where the image is the sea-smooth, piled up stones of a raised beach on the Isle of Rum. The stones are like her thoughts, polished with reflection, but also massed and, in the mass, potent. In an earlier work she used shingle as an image taken from Hugh MacDiarmid, 'the roar o' human shingle': the power and

coherence of the mass of humanity, of countless individuals moving together as one. Here she extends that idea by another translingual pun, from 'mol' the Gaelic noun for beach, or 'shingle', the stuff of which a beach, or at least this beach, is made, to 'mol', the Gaelic verb to praise, or celebrate. But then the shingle moving with the tide is also like language itself, at once both solid and fluid, moving with the tide of history. It seems the tide of Gaelic is going out, however. The bald figures of the screenprint *Monoglots* are the year, 1971, and 477, the number of monoglot Gaelic speakers who then still lived in Scotland. The artist contemplates these figures with delicate irony in her note where she records that the blue background is also numbered. It is pantone 300, the precise blue of the Saltire as approved by the Scottish Parliament.

Several of her prints and glass pieces are as terse as this one, but with them likewise, economy does not limit their meaning. *Newly minted coins*, for instance, is just three words sandblasted onto pale green glass. The words are a quotation from John MacInnes on the poetry of Sorley MacLean. Her point is Gaelic itself might be like the raised beach of Rum left high and dry, not by the tide but by sea level change which is much more permanent, were it not for the poets and especially Sorley MacLean. MacInnes describes how even against the decline of Gaelic, MacLean added to the richness of the language with words that are like 'newly minted coins.'

The transparent simplicity of these glass pieces is wonderfully telling. *Cold air in the nostrils* is an eloquent, poetic metaphor, indivisibly word and image. The wavy surface of ice-blue glass embodies the words. *Sainte Chapelle* is a homage to one of the greatest of all compositions of stained glass, but by reversing it, she suggests it is as though we were seeing it from the outside and how little sense that would make. Perhaps the most

beautiful of them, however, is *Bàn: Dearg*, in English, White: Red. It consists of two equal, contiguous sheets of glass. One, to the left, with *Bàn* engraved in it, is a translucent, slightly wavy white. The other, to the right, engraved with *Dearg*, is a rich, glowing red. In Gaelic, these colour adjectives also name the sides of the plough's furrow. As the ploughshare cuts through the fallow ground, the *dearg*, or red side, which is on the right with a right-handed plough, is the dark, turned earth of the tilled, and potentially productive side. The *bàn*, or white side is the still untilled and thus empty ground. In form, side by side, red and white, light and dark, the glass echoes this. Thus she turns the work into a metaphor for the whole business of making images.

Her approach to landscape is not so very different from such eloquent word pieces. She treats the landscapes she chooses with great formality, but she also finds a formality that is there in them as though in sympathy with the poetry they inspire. Ben Dorain, for instance, represented in the work referred to above, is itself a peculiarly formal mountain. Its profile is remarkably symmetrical and even in plan its ridges resemble a rather neat three pointed star. *Glen Roy* and *Glen Urquhart* are two works which continue this theme. For the artist, the parallel roads of Glen Roy, which is what the Ice Age layers of the glen were once thought to be, and the field bank that became an extended gallery for the Glen Urquhart Free Kirk, both also seem to echo the formal shape that poetry needs. She does not stop there, however, but links these things back to language by different routes. In *Glen Roy*, "The work," she writes, "is metaphorically giving location to 'bilingualism' framing the running of the Gaelic and the Scots line. A parallel implicit in the landscape." The drawing *Standard Habbie* extends this notion of line and form to the poetic tradition itself, its line of descent

and the vivid form handed down, as she records, in the poems 'Christ's Kirk', 'The Cherrie and the Slae' and 'Montmerie's Stanza'. Thus the poetry itself becomes a historical landscape. In this particular symbiosis between poetry and landscape, she comes close to David Herd in his *Scots Songs* of 1769. (Before Burns, Herd was a pioneer collector of Scots ballads.) In the introduction to his first collection, Herd argued that the richness of the tradition of popular song in Scotland was itself symbiotic. As though part of nature, it sprang from 'the romantic face of the country and the pastoral life of the great part of the inhabitants.'

In *Glen Urquhart and Glen Moriston*, the link between language and landscape is different. It was because of the size of the congregation in Glen Urquhart that an outdoor extension to a large kirk already equipped with a gallery was necessary when all the congregation gathered for communion. Those numbers in turn reflected the fact that, uniquely, these two glens were spared the Clearances. Like the last fragment of the old Caledonian forest that survived hidden out of reach in nearby Glen Affric, until the First World War Glen Urquhart and Glen Moriston remained a viable fragment of the old *Gàidhealtachd*. Indeed, the bank behind the kirk was still in use in living memory and the benches until recently still stood stacked in a little stone-built hut nearby. The outdoor gathering of this Gaelic community was therefore a monument to a different, more sombre exchange between language and landscape: the tragic correlation between the Clearances and the geography of the *Gàidhealtachd*, their ethnic and therefore linguistic parameters. Situated in the Great Glen and at the midpoint between Strathnaver and Argyll to north and south and Strathspey and Skye to east and west, Glen Urquhart and Glen Moriston are geographically just about at the centre of the Highlands.

Thus the little bank behind the kirk in Glen Urquhart reaching out to embrace the overflow of its congregation only makes more poignant the emptiness of all the other glens in that wide compass.

Poetry and song are a subtext in all this, but they do also surface directly, in the title of the show itself, for instance, and in the references to Hamish Henderson's collecting and the tinkers who were for him the conduit of so much music. Poetry is there directly in *Standard Habbie* and in *Ben Dorain*, too, but it is at its most immediate in the drawing *And I bleer my een wi' greetin*. Poetry and song have enjoyed the dualism of words and music, their symbiosis indeed, since the time before writing. Reid's analogy of verbal and visual language suggests a similar symbiosis of the aural and the seen. In her work, Helen MacAlister takes the example of that symbiosis and extends it in a new direction. In *And I bleer my een wi' greetin*, she makes this explicit. She refers the line from the song to a remark of John Purser's on the achievement of Burns uniting words and music in his songs, 'for it was a new thing, to enter so deeply into the feeling and inner mood of a tune and realize it in language.'

The line in the drawing is from "Ay Waukin' O," the sad song of a girl who cannot sleep for the absence of her lover,

*Lanely night comes on,
A' the lave are sleepin,
I think on my bonie lad,
And I bleer my een wi' greetin.*

Helen MacAlister renders the sadness with the words set against blank white, in Gaelic against *bàn*, perhaps, the word for fair-haired as in Donnchadh Bàn MacIntyre himself, but, as she remarks, also the word for

blank, empty and pale; pale as an unploughed field, the white in her beautiful glass piece, or here as pale and empty as the girl's sleepless nights. Though he is called *bonie*, there is no hint in the song that the girl's love is fair-haired, but fair is after all frequently a poetic synonym of bonny, so you could well imagine that he might be. If so, that white, empty ground in the picture would be both the dream of his presence and the fact of his absence, all summarised in a few words on a blank field. But that is how her art works. It is, as she admits understated, but it resonates all the more for that.

¹ <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/pdf/reidinqu.pdf>, p101

² Reid, 51

³ Reflections on Reading Hamish Henderson's *Alias MacAlias*, *Scottish Affairs*, no.6, winter 1994

Donnchadh MacGilleMhaolain

Tha tràighean ann air feadh Alba far am faod daoine, an fheadhainn a tha eòlach orra co-dhiù, clachan beaga garbh fhaighinn agus às dèidh dhaibh an toirt dhachaigh is an tionndadh an 'carborundum' airson uairean neo fiù 's làithean a thide thèid na fillidhean brèagha agait, an dearg saobhair air iasper air neo òr trid-shoilleir blàth sardius a thaisbeanadh aig a' cheann thall. 'S ann mar sin a tha an obair aig Eilidh NicAlasdair; luachmhor agus Ìomhaidh le fad-tionndadh bheachdan na h-inntinn 's air a dèanamh gu mall, mionaideach. 'S e toradh grinn simplidh a bhios ann daonnan. Chan e dealbhan 'furasta' a th' anna ged-tà, gu dearbh tha iom-fhillteachd nam broinn nach fhaicear leis a' chiad ghrad-shealladh. Tha beairteas fillte ann a tha - mar na clachan beaga agait - a' nochdadh le dubh-shealladh an luchd-amhairc a-mhàin. Thug i fhèin iomradh air seo anns na notaichean aice airson a h-obrach, 'le ìorantas' ars' ise (ach gu buailteach saoilidh mise) gu bheil am facal Gàidhlig 'taisbeanadh' a' ciallachadh an dà rud 'exhibition' agus 'revelation' sa Bheurla.

'S e cànan an rud air a bheil i a' cnuasachadh anns an dòigh as fharsainghe. 'S iad briathran an cuspair aice. Chan eil i na bana-bhàrd 'manqué' ged-tà. Fada bhuaithe. Tha i a' coimhead air facail is ìomhaighean mar dhà mhodh mothalachd dlùth-ceangailte ri chèile. Anns an dòigh sin tha i a' leantainn feallsanaiche an t-Soillsachaidh Thomas Reid. Tha i a' dèanamh seo gu imfhiosach, a' togail chuspairean ann an ealan a tha a' sìneadh air ais gu àm Reid. Chan eil a h-ealan a' crochadh air an fheallsanaiche ann an dòigh sam bith ged a tha i a' toirt iomradh airsan ann an co-theacs eadar-dhealaichte anns an nota aice air an dealbh *Standard Habbie*.

'S e seo an rud a sgrìobh Reid ann am pìos cudthromach ceangailte ri mothalachd anns a' chruinneachadh de dh'aistean aige *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*:

When someone speaks to us in a familiar language we hear certain sounds, and that is the only effect that his discourse has on us by nature; but by custom we understand the meaning of these sounds, and so we fix our attention not on the sounds but on the things signified by them. Similarly, by nature we see only the visible appearance of objects, but we learn by custom to interpret these appearances and to understand their meaning. And when we have learned this visual language and it has become familiar to us, we attend only to the things signified and find it very difficult to attend to the signs by which they are presented. The mind passes from one to the other so rapidly, and so familiarly, that no trace of the sign is left in our memory, and we seem to perceive the signified thing immediately and without the intervention of any sign.¹

Agus leis a sin, dh'ainmich e na bhriathran fhèin, 'cànan lèirsinneach' 's e a' cruthachadh an abairt aig an aon àm. Mar as trice nì sinn sgaradh eadar lèirsinn is cànan is bidh sinn gam faicinn mar dhà mhodh mothalachd ceangailte ri àitean diofraichte nar n-inntinn. Tha e fhèin ged-tà a' tairgsinn ceangail dhìrich eadar an cànan seo de shamhlaichean lèirsinneach agus an cànan àbhaisteach againn le facail is briathran, sgrìobhte is labhairte. Leis an dà rud, na bheachd-sa, leughaidh sinn samhlaichean - aig nach eil ciall anna fhèin agus gun aire a thoirt dha an cruth - gu h-imfhiosach, tha sinn air ionnsachadh mar thà gu dè am fiosrachadh a tha dhith oirnn agus leis a sin thèid sinn bho fhàireachdainn do mhothalachd, à buaireas gu cèill. Anns na notaichean aice mu dheidhinn nan dealbh tha an neach-ealain cuideachd a' còmhachadh Robert Louis

Stevenson is e fhèin a' cur an aon bheachd an cèill ach ann an dòigh nach eil cho 'feallsanachail' ma dh'fhaoidte: "Man's one method, whether he reasons or creates, is to half-shut his eyes against the dazzle and confusion of reality."

Airson an rud seo a mhineachadh tha Thomas Reid a' cleachdadh an neach-ealain mar eisimpleir. "The painter has a need for an abstraction regarding visible objects somewhat similar to what we need here, and this is indeed the most difficult part of his art. For it is obvious that if he could fix in his imagination the visible appearance of objects, not confusing it with the things it signifies, it would be as easy for him to paint from the life.. as to paint from a copy."²

Bha buaidh mhòr aig beachdan Thomas Reid air peantadh. Chan eil rùm gu leòr ann an seo airson barrachd mineachaidh a dhèanamh seach a bhith ag ràdh air sgath na buaidh a bh' aige san Fhraing chaidh a bheachdan gu cridhe pròiseict a chruthaicheadh 'ealan an latha an-diugh'. Chan eil an ceangal seo, eadar feallsanachd Reid agus an obair shònraichte aig Eilidh NicAlasdair, a' cur an neach-ealain ann an àite air cùl a' ghnòthaich, fada bhuaithe, tha e ga cur ann an teismeachdan saoghal ceasnachaidh a shineas air ais dhan t-Soillseachadh is a tha glè chudthromach chun an latha an-diugh. Tha an ceangal eadar an samhla agus an rud a tha air a shamhlachadh fhathast na chuspair ceasnachaidh cudthromach. Smaoinich air an sgrìobhadh le Jacques Derrida agus Michel Foucault agus an deasbad aca air trìd-dhoilleireachd is taobhachd cànan agus am bearn eadar samhla is an rud a tha air a shamhlachadh. Anns a' gheur-innleachd aig a ceasnachadh fhèin tha Eilidh NicAlasdair air an aon ràmh, ach chan eil i gan leantainn chun na h-ìre far an cailleadh i a h-earbsa ann an cànan fhèin. 'S e cruth-tìre saoi bhir, làn eòlais cho-roinnte a th' ann dhithse, is mar

chruth-tìre, tha e a' tàladh rùrachadh is rannsachadh an neach-ealain.

'S e *Bealach nam Bà – The Pass of the Cattle [sic]* aon de na prìomh dhealbhan cruth-tìre aice agus mar sin tha e ag obair mar sheòrsa de iuchair chun na pròiseict aice. 'S e bealach a th' ann eadar Ciseorna agus a' Chomraich ach dh'fhaodadh e cuideachd obair mar shamhla airson a' cheangail eadar cànan is peantadh agus i a' peantadh an dà rud mar aon, ceangailte anns na bràigheachan aca aig cinn nan aibhnichean a' sruthadh sìos bhuapa. Tha an dealbh aice *Ben Dorain* ag obair mar homage dhan dàn '*Moladh Beinn Dòbhrain*' le Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir. Tha am bàrd a' cleachdadh seann traidisein 'lèirsinnich' ann am bàrdachd Ghàidhlig anns an dàn aige cuideachd, a' cruthachadh an aon cheangail. 'S e cruth-tìre an dàn aige.

'S iad a' Ghàidhlig is Albais na cànanan aig cnag na cùise airson Eilidh NicAlasdair. Tha i a' rùrachadh an dòigh anns a bheil iad a' còmhachadh a chèile agus a' sealltainn dè mar as urrainn dhan chòmhachadh seo solas a thoirt air dè th' ann an Albais agus leis a' Ghàidhlig ann cuideachd na seasamh mar neach-fianais mòr fàillidh, cha toirear iomradh oirre ach 's i a tha an làthair co-dhiù. Anns an sgrùdadh seo tha peantadh agus cànan a' co-mheasgachadh ri chèile, thèid facail a thionndadh gu peantadh; thèid peantadh a thionndadh gu facail. Chan eil diofar ann, tha na dealbhan de fhacail aice a cheart cho 'lèirsinneach' 's a tha na dealbhan cruth-tìre aice. Is a' leantainn sgrùdadh Reid tha i a' peantadh samhlaichean cànan labhairte, na litrichean agus na facail a tha gan riochdachadh, san aon dòigh anns a bheil i a' peantadh nan samhlaichean nar 'cànan lèirsinneach'. Tha facail am broinn nan dealbhan-peansail aice cuideachd, falaichte am measg nan comharran ma bheir thu sùil mionaideach orra. Ach 's e facail an cuspair aice cuideachd, fiù 's nuair

nach eil facail ann. Tha iad an sàs anns a' chèill iom-fhillte ceangailte ri a beachdan air cànan, air an iomlaid eadar a' Ghàidhlig is Albais, air bàrdachd agus na bàird agus an iomradairan, is ris a seo tha i a' cur nam briathran aice fhèin anns na notaichean a tha a' stiùireadh a h-obrach.

Gu cinnteach, agus gu cudthromach, tha àite mar Bhealach na Bà a' suidhe air druim-uisge, ach ma tha na h-uisgeachan a' sgaradh, tha am bealach ag aonachadh. 'S e àite aonachaidh a th' ann, fiù 's mas e aig mullach leathaid chruaidh chais a gheibh thu e agus cha chuireadh sin bacadh air Eilidh NicAlasdair. Gu dearbh, tha tìotal an taisbeanaidh (agus cuideachd prìomh chuspair aon de na dealbhan-fhacal aice) Aig Bonn a' Bhraghadh Bharraicht' ud *At the Foot o' Yon Excellin' Brae* a' comharrachadh a' phròiseis 'sreap inntinneil' seo ann an dòigh fhreagarrach. Direach mar a tha i a' ceangal peantadh agus cànan is gan suidheachadh air bealach tha i cuideachd a' togail sgàthain dha traidiseanan litreachas is bàrdachd na h-Alba anns a bheil an dà chànan - a' Ghàidhlig is Albais – a' fuireach taobh ri taobh, dà aghaidh air an aon bhealach mar gum biodh. Anns an dòigh seo tha i a' leantainn Hamish Henderson. 'S e tìotal aiste le Henderson a th' ann an *At the Foot o' Yon Excellin' Brae* anns a bheil e a' beachdachadh air cànan òrain traidiseanta na h-Albaise 's e ag ràdh gu bheil an dà chànan a' dearbhadh 'a curious bilingualism in one language.'

Tha cuid de na pìosan aice a' cluich ris na toraidhean cànanach ceangailte ris an fheart shònraichte seo ann an cruth-tìre inntinneil na h-Alba, ged nach eil sin daonnan a' ciallachadh gu bheil tuigse dhomhain eadar an dà choimhearsnachd chànanaich a chruthaich e. Tha *Nonsense Vocables*, mar eisimpleir, leis na facail air am bogadh ann an dubh-ghorm a' cnuasachadh air na drannan gu chiall ann an canntaireachd agus puirt-a-

beul. Tha *don't give a tinker's curse*, leis na facail ann an dubh air liath ag obair ann an dòigh gu math coltach ris, ach le sealladh, gu math cumanta na cuid obrach, a tha a' fosgladh a-mach a dh'ionnsaigh cnuasachaidh fada nas fharsainge air nàdar traidisein. B' e tobar cudthromach airson òran traidiseanta a bh' anns na ceàrdaich agus na daoine-siùbhail. Thug Murchadh MacDhòmhnaill iomradh air seo bho cionn fichead bliadhna 's e ag ràdh gum b' e Hamish Henderson a bh' ann a dhearbhaich seo agus dè mar a tha iad a' cur beachdan àbhaisteach na coimhearsnachd bun os cionn:

Henderson has shown over the years, the finest sources of Scottish tradition are found among the berry pickers and the traveling folk. At a stroke the previously peripheral is recognised as culturally central, and when that happens, what of the so-called centre? What we see here is a complete disjunction between what is culturally central and what is politically central. What Henderson presents us with is a very clear example of this anomaly. When on the basis of this we ask ourselves the simple question 'who is more important to Scotland, the ballad-singer or the Secretary of State' there is really no contest."³

Ged a mhionnaicheadh na ceàrdaich, gheibheadh iad làmh an uachdair aig a' cheann thall. Ach a thilleadh chun na tha Reid ag ràdh ged-tà, tha esan a' cur mun aire leinn anns an t-samhlachas aige eadar cànan is peantadh gu bheil an dà rud a' cruthachadh structairean de shamhlaidhean, sgàilean ciallach trid-shoillear de dh'àite agus ciall thairis air gnàth-eòlas mì-chiallach agus 'the dazzle and confusion of reality' gus cothrom a thoirt dhuinn ciall a dhèanamh dheth. Tha am peantadh aig

Eilidh NicAlasdair a' cur nan dearbh structairean, neo 's dòcha na sùilean leth-fhosgailte aig Stevenson, mun aire leinn. Tha na dealbhan cruth-tìre aice aon-dathach ach ann an iomadh dath maoth. 'S e donn saoi-bhir an dath a th' air *Bealach nam Bà*, mar eisimpleir. Tha *The Lido, Campbeltown bay* buidhe agus anns a' chùis seo tha i a' cluich (ann an dòigh labhairte-lèirsinneach) leis na facail 'bay', buidhe agus buidheachas.

Tha na dealbhan fhèin air an dèanamh le fillidhean de chomharran, de shamhlaidhean, dubh dorch is soilleir agus an àitean gu math coimeasgach, ach le an cur air an iomhaigh a tha air an cùlaibh, thèid an oir-loidhne fhoillseachadh. Tha na dealbhan-peantsail, a tha gu tric ag aithris dìreach air na dealbhan-peantaidh, ag obair anns an aon dòigh le tòrr chomharran-peantsail coimeasgach às an tig an iomhaigh fhèin am follais. Anns an dà chùis 's e pròiseas foirmealachd agus grinneachaidh a th' air cùl a' gnothaich dhithse agus anns an dòigh seo tha i a' toirt tarraing air Henderson a-rithist. Thug i iomradh air an dearbh aiste às an tàinig tiotal an taisbeanaidh far a bheil e a' beachdachadh air foirmealachd cànan ann an òrain traidiseanta. 'It is in the great songs, licked into shape like pebbles by the waves of countless tongues, that this sense of formality is most marked.' Agus, nar beachd-sa, 's e sin dìreach mar a tha i a' peantadh, a' cur na h-iomhaigh na cruth le comharran gun àireamh agus le faiceall neo-chrìochnaichte. Tha i fhèin a' tarraing air a seo gu h-ìre ann am *Mol, shingle praise* far am faicear càirn morghain air cladach Eilean Ruma. Tha na clachan caran coltach ris na smaointean aice, liomhte le cnuasachadh ach cuideachd ann an càrn agus leis a sin, làidir. Ann am pìos eile a rinn i na bu tràithe chleachd i morghan mar iomhaigh a thàinig bho Hugh MacDiarmid, 'the roar o' human shingle': cumhachd is co-thàthadh daonnachd, 's iomadh duine a' gluasad còmhla. Tha i a' cleachdadh an aon seòrsa

pun thar-cànanach an seo leis an ainmear mol (cladach, morghan) agus an gnìomhair mol (moladh, luaidh). Ach tha gluasad a' mhoil leis an t-seòl-mhara rud beag coltach ri cànan fhèin, cruaidh is lionn aig a' cheart àm, a' teannadh le seòl-mara eachdraidh. Tha a' Ghàidhlig, tha e coltach, air an t-sruth-tràghaidh ged-tà. Tha na h-àireamhan air an dealbh-sgàilein *Monoglots* a' riochdachadh na bliadhna 1971 agus an àireamh de dhaoine aig an robh a' Ghàidhlig a-mhàin aig an àm sin an Alba, 477. Tha an neach-ealain a' meòmrachadh nan àireamh seo le ìorantas sèimh anns an nòta aice far an do sgrìobh i gu bheil àireamh air dath an deilbh cuideachd. 'S e pantone 300 a th' ann, an dearbh ghorm a th' air a' bhritaich, ùghdarraichte le Pàrlamaid na h-Alba.

Tha cuid eile dhe na dealbhan agus pìosan glainne a' cheart cho cuimhir ris an fhear seo, ach leothasan mar an ceudna cha chuir crìontachd crìoch air an cèill. 'S e dìreach trì facail snaidhte air glainne uaine a th' anns an *Newly minted coins*, mar eisimpleir. Thàinig na facail bho bhriathran lain MacAonghais 's e a' beachdachadh air bàrdachd Shomhairle MhicGillEain. 'S e a beachd-se gur dòcha gum biodh a' Ghàidhlig air fhàgail tioram tràighte air a' mhol mar mhorghan air cladach Eilean Ruma, chan ann leis an t-seòl-mhara ach le atharrachadh ìre na mara fhèin – rud a bhiodh fada na bu mhaireannaiche, mur biodh obair nam bàrd agus gu h-àraidh Somhairle MacGillEain ann. Fiù 's le suidheachadh crìonadh na Gàidhlig thug MacAonghais dealbh air dè mar a chuir MacGillEain ri beairteas a' chànan le facail a tha mar 'newly minted coins'.

Tha an t-simplidheachd trid-shoilleir anns na pìosan glainne mìorbhaileach cuideachd. 'S e samhladh deas-bhriathrach bàrdail a th' ann an *Cold air in the nostrils* – an dà chuid facal agus iomhaigh do-roinnt. Tha an t-uachdar tonnach deigh-ghorm a' cur nam facal an

cèill. 'S e homage a th' ann an *Sainte Chapelle* gu h-aon de na piosan glainne dathte as fheàrr riamh, ach le bhith ga cur ann an suidheachadh contrarra tha i a' cur mun aire leinn gur dòcha gu bheil sinn ga faicinn bhon taobh a-muigh agus gu dè cho mì-chiallach 's a bhiodh sin. 'S dòcha gur e *Bàn: Dearg* am fear as fheàrr aca ged-tà. Tha e air a dhèanamh le dà fhios glainne. Tha am pios air an taobh chli bàn trid-dhealach tonnach le Bàn snaidhte oirre. Tha am fear eile air an taobh dheis dearg caoir-gheal sòlasach le Dearg snaidhte oirre. Tha na buadhairean datha seo cuideachd ag ainmeachadh an dà thaobh air clais a' chrainn-treabhaich anns a' Ghàidhlig. Fhad 's a tha an crann a' treabhadh na talmhainn 's e an taobh dearg a nochdas air an taobh deas, sin an taobh torach. Cha d'fhuair an taobh clì, an taobh bàn, treabhadh 's mar sin dheth tha i falamh. Na cruth, taobh ri taobh, dearg is bàn, soilleir is dorch tha a' ghlainne a' dèanamh mac-talla air a seo. 'S mar sin tha i a' cur a h-obrach na samhachd air gu dè mar a nithear iomhaighean.

Chan eil an dòigh-obrach aice a thaobh crutha-tìre cho eadar-dhealaichte bho na piosan deas-bhriathrach ceangailte ri facail. Tha foirmealachd mhòr nan lùib, ach gheibh i cuideachd foirmealachd eile mar gur ann an co-fhaireachdainn ris a' bhàrdachd a bhrosnaicheas iad. 'S e beinn fhoirmeil àraidh a th' ann am Beinn Dobhrain, mar eisimpleir, air a riochdachadh anns a' fhios air an tug mi iomradh mar-thà. Tha rùithe na beinne gu math co-chothromaichte àraidh agus tha a dromannan fiù 's gu h-ìre a' samhachadh reul trì-rinnean. Tha an dà fhios *Glen Roy* agus *Glen Urquhart* a' leantainn a' chuspair seo. Dhan neach-ealain, tha na fillidhean co-shinte às an linn-deighe ann an Gleann Ruaidh agus a' bhruach a chaidh a chleachdadh mar ghailearaidh leis an eaglais shaor ann an Gleann Urchadain a' riochdachadh an crutha fhoirmeil ann am bàrdachd. Ann an *Glen Roy*, "The work,' ars' ise,

'is metaphorically giving location to 'bilingualism' framing the running of the Gaelic and the Scots line. A parallel implicit in the landscape." Tha an dealbh-peansail *Standard Habbie* a' leudachadh a' bheachd seo de loidhne is cruth dhan traidisean bhàrdail fhèin, a shinnsearachd is a chruth beòthail air an cur thar nan ginealach, mar a tha i fhèin ag ràdh, anns na dàin 'Christ's Kirk', 'The Cherrie and the Slae' agus 'Montgomerie's Stanza'. Agus mar sin, tha a' bhàrdachd fhèin a' fàs mar chruth-tìre. Anns a' cho-bhith shònraichte seo eadar bàrdachd agus cruth-tìre tha i a' tighinn faisg air na beachdan aig David Herd san leabhar *Scots Songs* a chaidh fhoillseachadh ann an 1769. (B' e sàr thruasaiche Òran Albannach a bh' ann ro Burns). Sgrìobh e fhèin anns an ro-ràdh aig a' chiad chruinneachadh de dh'òrain aige gun robh beairteas òran traidiseanta ann an Alba 'co-bhitheil'. Mar gur ann à nàdar, thàinig e às 'the romantic face of the country and the pastoral life of the great part of the inhabitants.'

Tha an ceangal eadar cànan is cruth-tìre eadar-dhealaichte ann an *Glen Urquhart* agus *Glen Moriston*. Bha an co-thional ann an Gleann Urchadain feumach air àite a bharrachd a chionn 's gun do dh'fhàs e cho mòr. Tha meud cho-thional anns a' dhà gheann a' toirt fianais air an fhìrinn, na aonar an measg chàich, 's nach deach am fuadachadh. Dìreach mar fhios den t-Seann Choille Albannaich a bha fhathast ri fhaicinn faisg air làimh ann an Gleann Afraig, dh'fhan Gleann Urchadain is Gleann Moireasdain mar a bha iad riamh gu ruige àm a' Chiad Chogaidh. Gu dearbh, chaidh a' bhruach air cùl na h-eaglaise a chleachdadh leis a' cho-thional taobh a-staigh ginealaich 's na beingean air an cumail air muin a chèile ann am bothan faisg air làimh gus o chionn goirid. Bha an cruinneachadh a-muigh leis a' choimhearsnachd Ghaidhealaich seo ag obair mar chuimhneachan air iomlaid nas doilleire agus diofraichte eadar cànan is cruth-tìre: a'

cho-dhàimh bhrònach eadar na fuadaichean agus cruinne-eòlas na Gàidhealtachd, na paramadairean cinnidheach agus do bhrìgh sin na paramadairean cànanach. Air an suidheachadh anns a' Ghleann Mhòr agus anns an teismheadhan eadar Srath Nabhair gu tuath is Earra Ghàidheal gu deas, Srath Spè san ear is an t-Eilean Sgitheanach san iar tha Gleann Urchadain is Gleann Moireasdain cho mhòr san dearbh mheadhan na Gàidhealtachd. Chan urrainn dhan iomhaigh den cho-thional mhòr air bruaich air cùl na h-eaglaise ann an Gleann Urchadain ach cudthrom brònach a chur air gu dè cho bàn agus falamh 's a tha na glinn eile air feadh na Gàidhealtachd.

Ged a tha bàrdachd agus òrain daonnan ann mar fho-theacsa anns an taisbeanadh togaidh iad an cinn gu dìreach cuideachd, anns an tiotal mar eisimpleir agus anns na h-iomraidhean air a' chruinneachadh aig Hamish Henderson agus na daoine-siùbhail a bha cho cudthromach dha mar thobar òran. Tha bàrdachd rì fhaicinn ann an *Standard Habbie* agus *Ben Dorain* cuideachd, ach chithear aig a' char as fhollaisiche anns an dealbh *And I bleer my een wi' greetin*. Tha dlùth-cheangal air a bhith aig bàrdachd is òran, co-bhitheachd fhacal is ciùil, bhon àm ro sgrìobhadh. Tha an samhlachas aig Reid air cànan labhairte is cànan lèirsinneach a' cur mun aire leinn co-bhitheachd eile leis na tha rì chluinntinn is rì fhaicinn. Tha Eilidh NicAlasdair a' cluich leis a' cho-bhitheachd seo ga stiùireadh a dh'ionnsaigh taoibh ùir. Thàinig seo am follais ann an *And I bleer my een wi' greetin*. Tha i ag iomradh an loidhne às an òran air rud a thuirt John Purser mu dheidhinn an àrd-ghnìomh a bh' aig Burns airson ceòl is facail aonachadh, 'for it was a new thing, to enter so deeply into the feeling and inner mood of a tune and realise it in language.'

'S ann à "Ay Waukin' O," a tha an loidhne, òran brònach mu dheidhinn nighinn nach eil a' faighinn cadail às

aonais a leannain,

*Lanely night comes on,
A' the lave are sleepin,
I think on my bonie lad,
And I bleer my een wi' greetin.*

Tha Eilidh NicAlasdair a' taisbeanadh an truaighe leis na facail air an cur air àite geal, bàn 's dòcha mar a' ghruag aig Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir ach mar a thug i fhèin iomradh air, àite neo-sgeadaichte, falamh, glas, mar achadh nach deach a threabhadh, geal mar a' phios de ghlainne bhrèagha aice, neo mar na h-oidhcheannan gun chadal aig an nighinn anns an òran. Ged a tha i ag ràdh gu bheil a leannan *bonie* chan eil sgeul anns an òran a bheil gruag bhàn air, ach 's e co-fhacal a th' ann am bàn airson bonie 's mar sin dheth ma dh'fhaoidte gu bheil. Mas e gu bheil e bàn, tha an t-àite geal, bàn, falamh anns an dealbh a' samhlachadh a brudair airson a làthair-sa agus fìorachd a beatha às a aonais, is a h-uile sghath seo air a thoirt gu cruinn le beagan fhacal air raon bàn. Ach 's e seo dè mar a tha an obair aice ag oibreachadh. 'S e obair shimplidh a th' ann aig a' chiad ghrad-shealladh ach le iom-fhillteachd na broinn, agus tha i fada nas fhèarr air sàilleibh sin.

¹ <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/pdf/reidinqu.pdf>, p101

² Reid, 51

³ Reflections on Reading Hamish Henderson's *Alias MacAlias*, *Scottish Affairs*, no.6, winter 1994

Paintings



Mol, shingle praise
oil on canvas, 2008, 148 x 210cm, see pg 102



Bealach nam Ba – The Pass of the Cattle
oil on linen, 2009, 148 x 210cm, see pg 103

countra wit

Countra Wit

oil on linen, 2009, A2, see pg 103



Glen Roy, parallel roads
oil on linen, 2009, 148 x 210cm, see pg 104

'bastard' affairs

'Bastard' affairs

oil on linen, 2009, A2, see pg 104



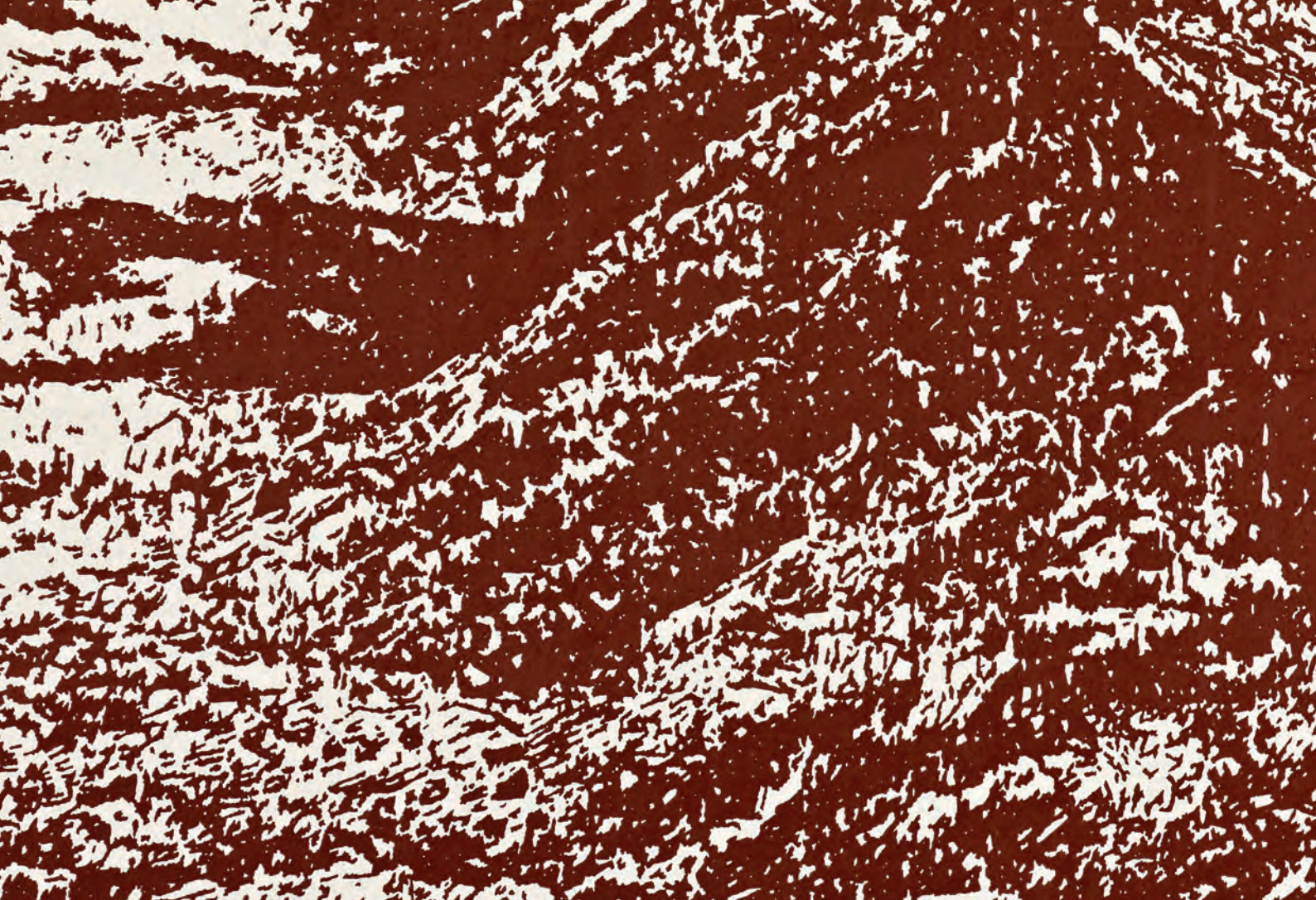
Ben Dorain

oil on linen, 2010, 148 x 210cm, see pg 105

At the Foot o' Yon Excellin' Brae

At the Foot o' Yon Excellin' Brae

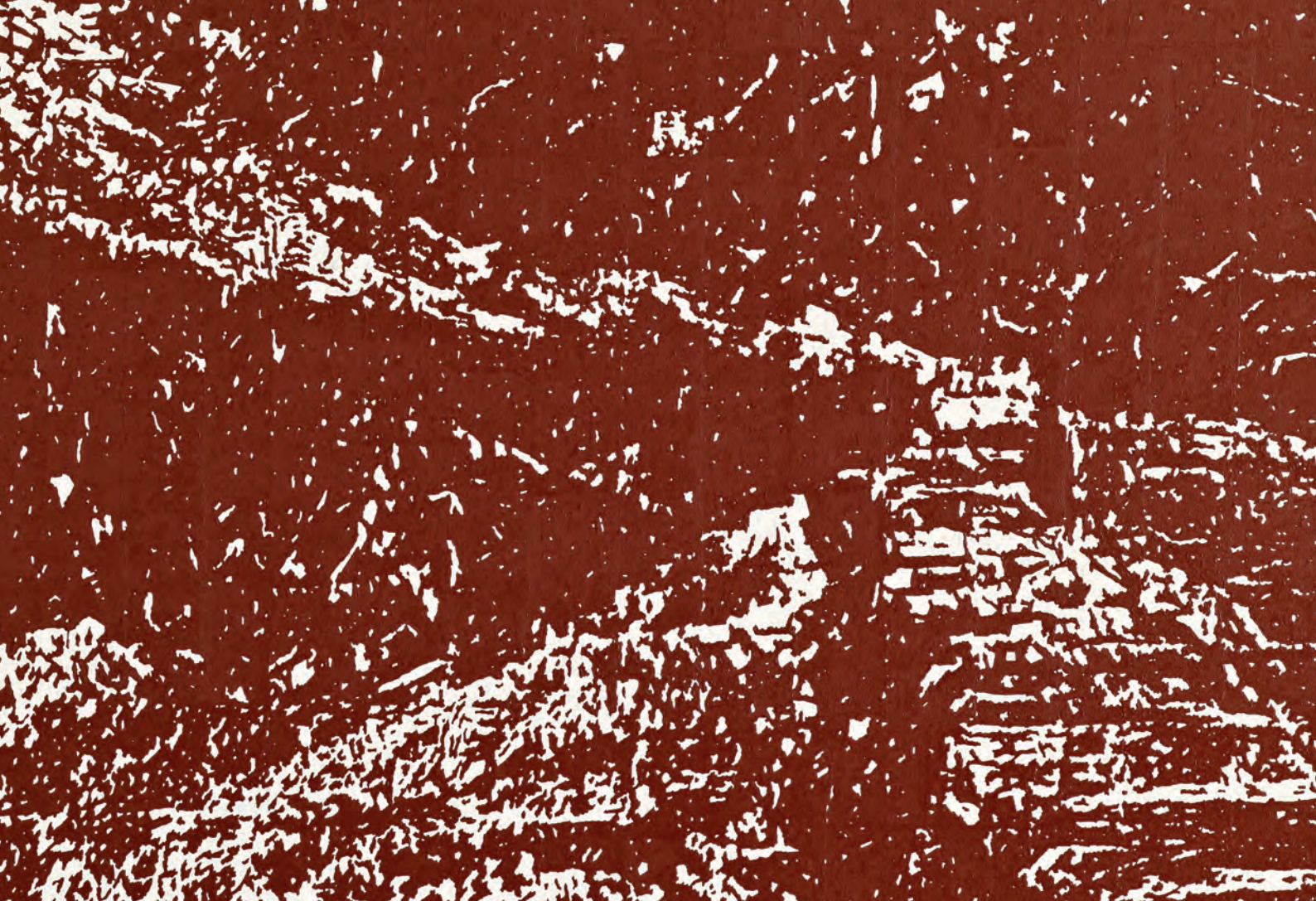
oil on linen, 2010, A2, see pg 105



Ben Dorain

detail

40



At the

At the Foot o' Yon Excellin' Brae

detail

Footed



The Lido, Campbeltown bay
oil on linen, 2011, 123 x 175cm, see pg 106



Glen Urquhart

oil on linen, 2012, 123 x 175cm, see pg 107

Nonsense Vocables

Nonsense Vocables

oil on linen, 2012, A2, see pg 108

don't give a tinker's curse

don't give a tinker's curse
oil on linen, 2012, A2, see pg 109

Drawings



Bealach nam Ba

pencil on paper, 2008, A2, see pg 103



Bealach nam Ba
detail



Loch Lomond Readvance
pencil on paper, 2008, A2, see pg 104



Loch Lomond Readvance

detail



Panegyric

pencil on paper, 2008, A2, see pg 105



Panegyric
detail

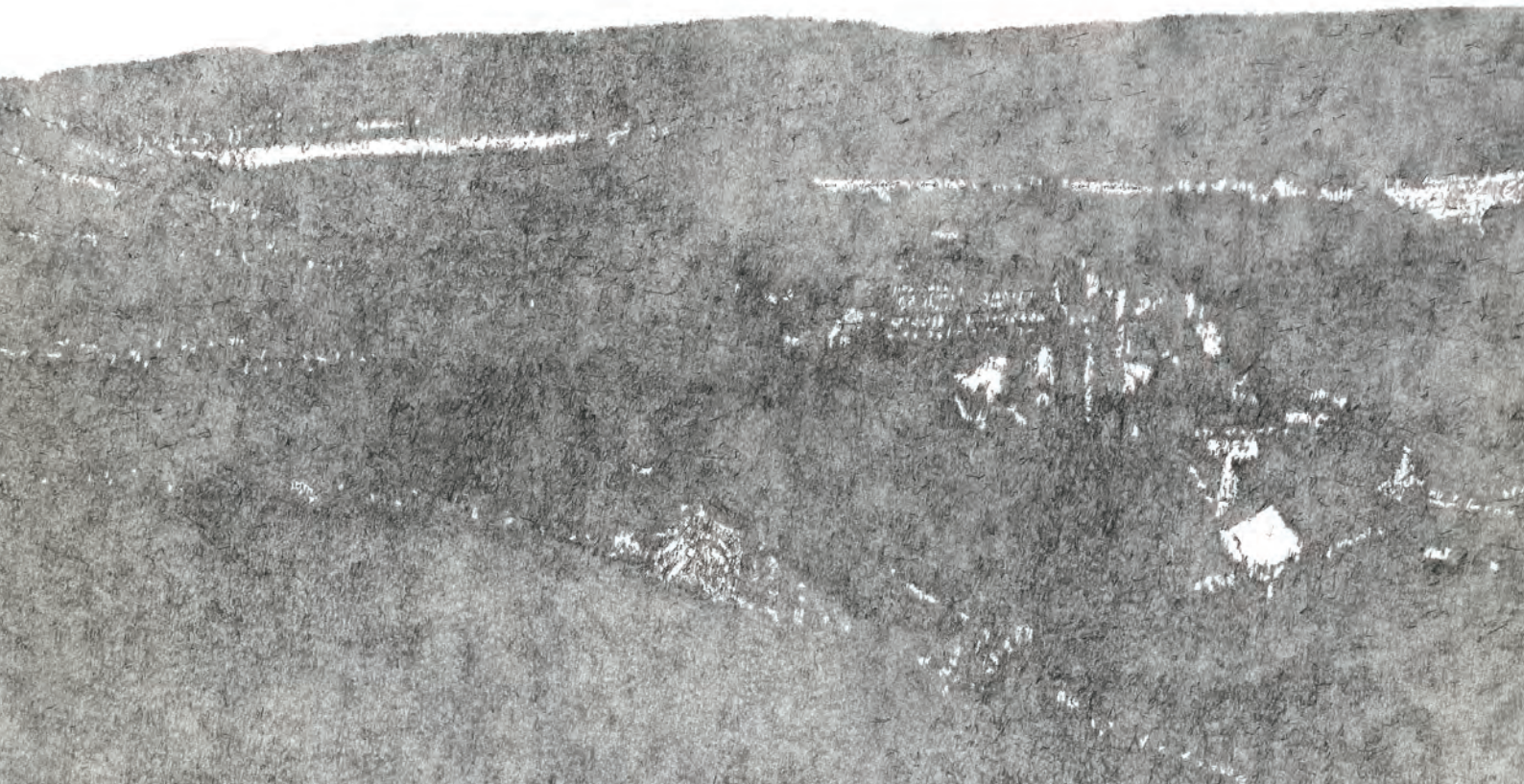


Buidhe

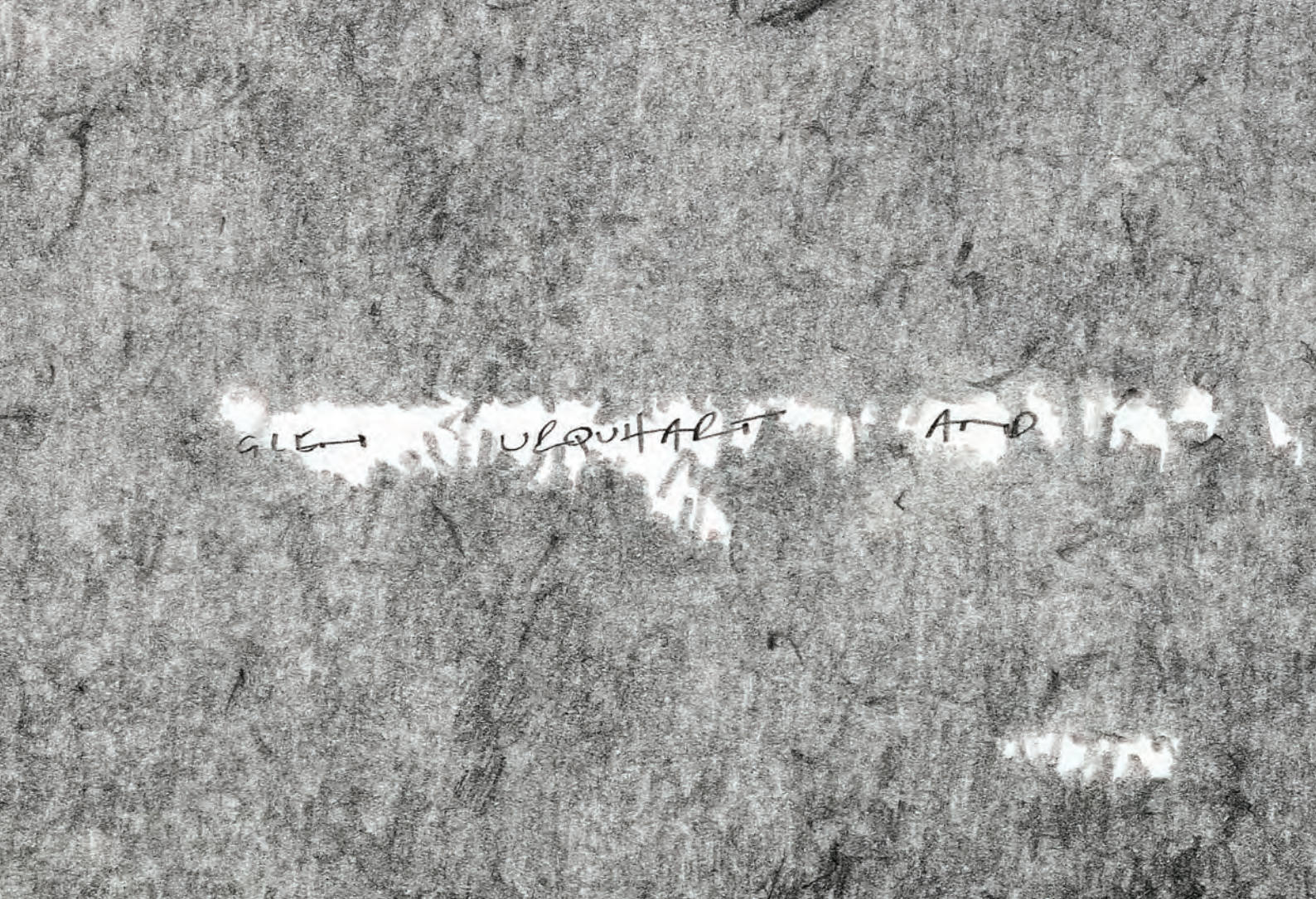
pencil on paper, 2008, A2, see pg 106



Buidhe
detail



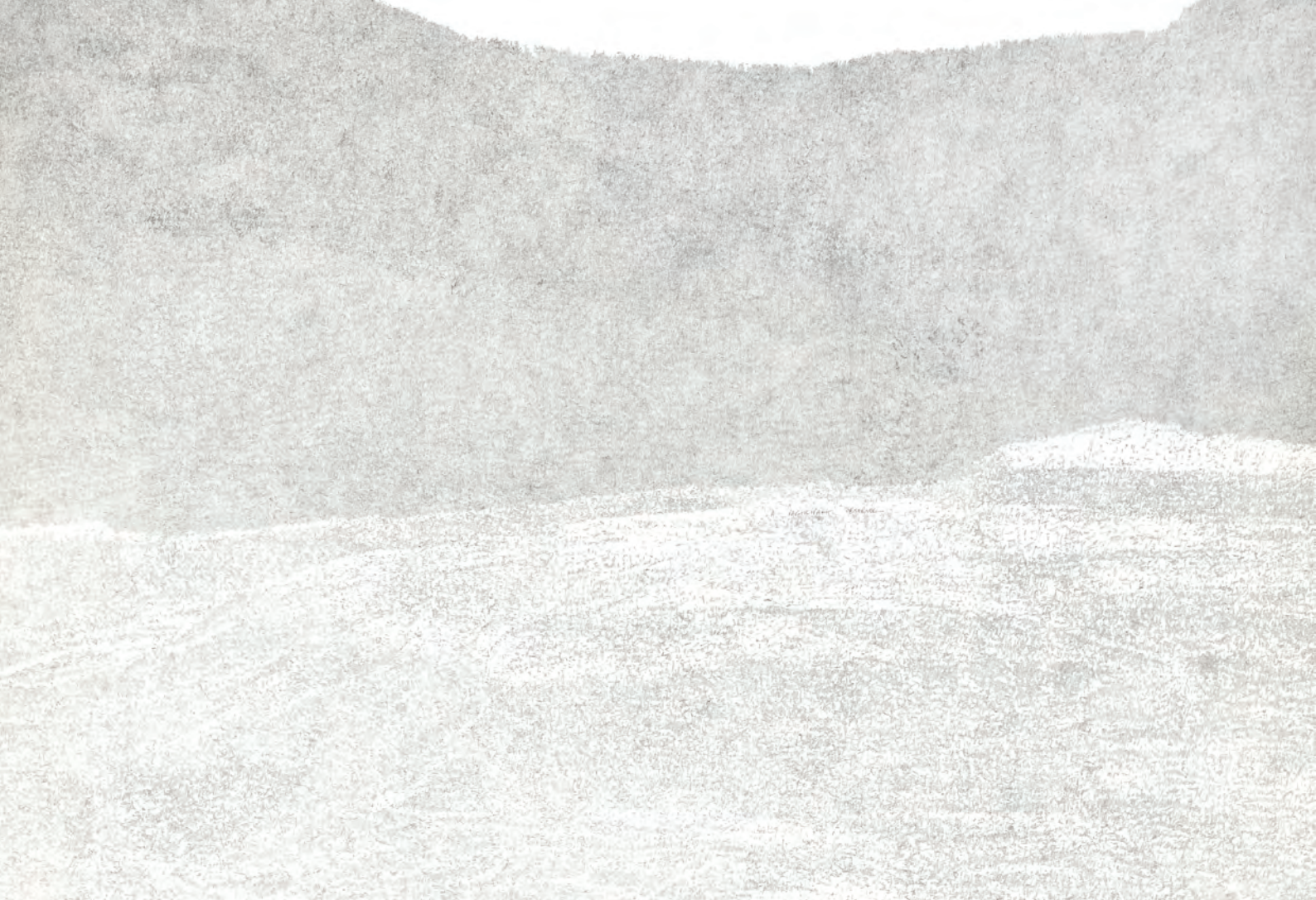
Glen Urquhart + Glen Moriston
pencil on paper, 2008, A2, see pg 107



Glen Urquhart + Glen Moriston

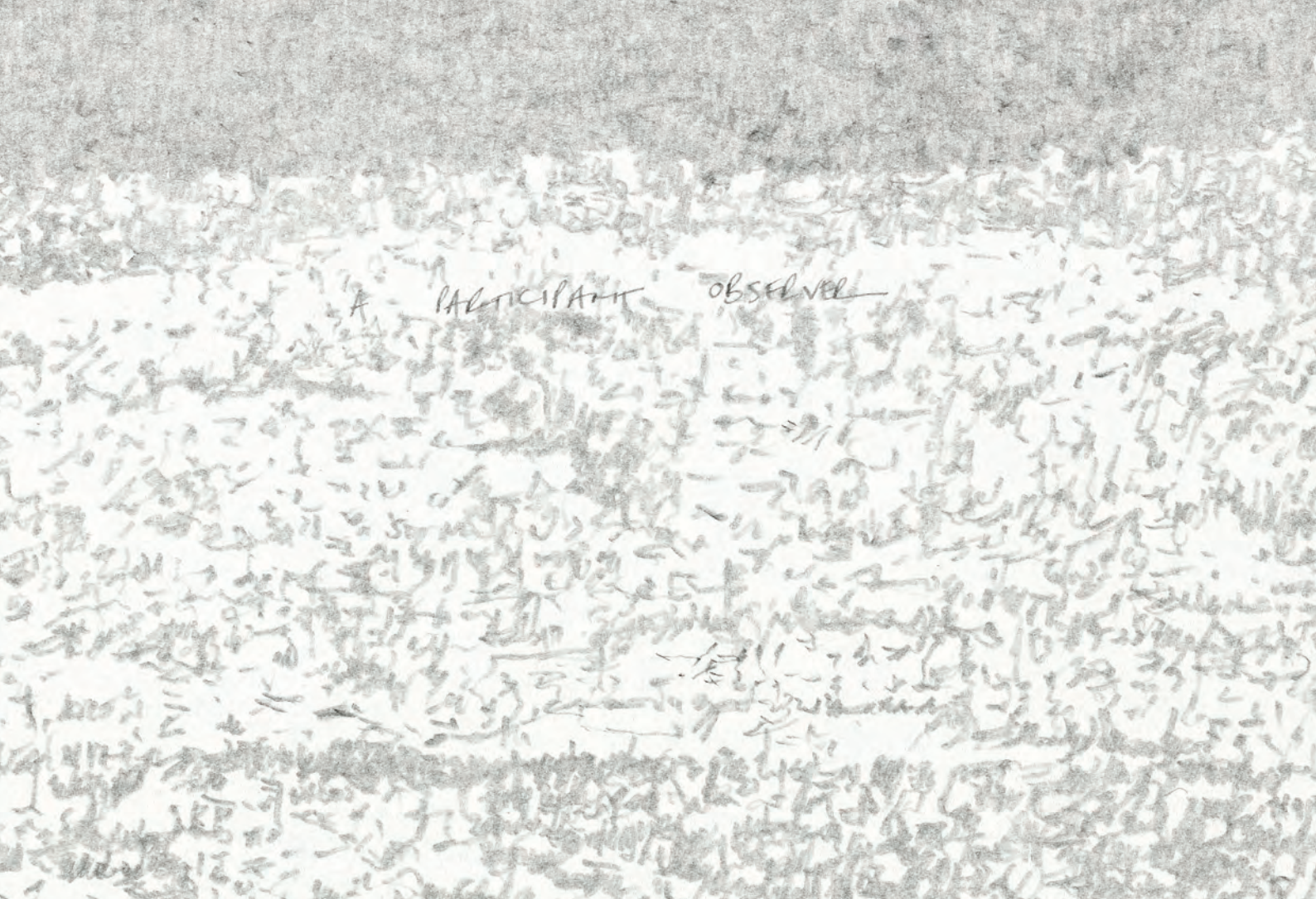
detail

GUEN MORISTON



A Participant Observer

pencil on paper, 2008, A2, see pg 110



A PARTICIPANT OBSERVER

A Participant Observer

detail

Standard Habbie
Christ's Kirk
The Cherrie and the Slae
Montgomerie's Stanza

Standard Habbie

pencil on paper, 2008, A2, see pg 111

Standard Habbie
Christ's Kirk
The Cherrie and the Slae
Montgomerie's Stanza

AND I BLEER MY EEN WI' GREETIN.

And I bleer my een wi' greetin.
pencil on paper, 2008, A2, see pg 112

AND I BLEER MY EEN WI' GREETIN.

And I bleer my een wi' greetin.

detail

The assimilation of background

The background of assimilation

The assimilation of background
pencil on paper, 2008, A2, see pg 113

The background of assimilation

The assimilation of background

detail

Prints

Dh'ith e chuid den bhonnach-shodail - he ate his share of the flattery bannock

Bannock

digital print, 2007, A6, edition of 10, see pg 114

Thoir thairis do bhòilich - be done with your romancing

Fàs a' ghruinnd a rèir an uachdarain - the yield of the ground is according to the landlord

Landlord

digital print, 2007, A6, edition of 10, see pg 114

Kilmarnock

Dundee

Stornoway

Montrose

epic detachment

Epic detachment : neo-dhàimh bharr-sgeulach
diptych, digital print, 2007, A6, edition of 10, see pg 115

- neo-dhàimh bharr-sgeulach

passionate objectivity

Passionate objectivity : méidh-chothromachd lasganta
diptych, digital print, 2007, A6, edition of 10, see pg 115

- méidh-chothromachd lasganta

You're welcome, Willie Stewart

You're welcome, Willie Stewart

digital print, 2008, A6, edition of 10, see pg 116

Charlie he's my darling

Charlie he's my darling
digital print, 2008, A6, edition of 10, see pg 116

“Cold iron!” cried Roddie

“Cold iron!” cried Roddie

digital print, 2008, A6, edition of 10, see pg 116

Mary Hamilton – There was Mary Beaton and Mary Seaton
And Mary Carmichael and me.

1971 = 477

Monoglots

screenprint, 2010, 57 x 76cm, edition of 15, see pg 117

1971 = 477

424

400

GlensHiel

screenprint, 2010, 57 x 76cm, edition of 5, see pg 118

424

400



A Participant Observer
screenprint, 2011, 54 x 76cm, edition of 10, see pg 110

Glass



Sainte-Chapelle

Sainte-Chapelle

sand-blasted glass, 2008, A6, edition of 3, see pg 119



BÀN : DEARG

sand-blasted glass, 2009, A6 (halves = 105 x 74cm), edition of 2, see pg 120



RACHD

Rachd

sand-blasted glass, 2010, A6, edition of 2, see pg 121



ILL-PLAC'D

ILL-PLAC'D

sand-blasted glass, 2010, A6, edition of 2, see pg 122



Cold air in the nostrils


Cold air in the nostrils

sand-blasted glass, 2011, A6, edition of 4, see pg 123



Newly minted coins

Newly minted coins
sand-blasted glass, 2011, A6, edition of 2, see pg 124



No Lack of Lamentation

No Lack of Lamentation

sand-blasted glass, 2009, A2, edition of 2, see pg 125

LIGHE

Lighe

sand-blasted glass, 2010, A2, edition of 2, see pg 126

Reference Notes

Mol, shingle praise

oil on canvas, 2008, 148 x 210cm

Mol, shingle praise. A raised beach, a place beyond the high tide mark, a place that endures. Shingle as cultural deposit (this example being Rum). Shingle as speech. 'Speech has its being in the mass of individuals who use it, with the run and stress, the direction, depth, and force of feeling at work. Speech can never be a fixed standard, like the standard foot; it is a force of life in action, alternately affecting and itself being played upon'.¹

Mol is a *beach* or *shingle* as a noun in Gaelic but to *celebrate*, to *commend* or to *praise* as a verb. This painting is a note taken, an account of a malleable vocabulary. Its visual minimalism is determined by the need to articulate a simple 'celebration'.

One turns to John MacInnes for background on the 'extending' of words. "A number of words exist in Gaelic which certain writers, have lengthened unhistorically. When an author succeeds in transmitting his individual perception of a word – its sound, its appearance on a page, or a latent meaning – to the public context of his work, a hitherto unrealized potential is made available. In that creative process a writer puts his own impress on a word: it can never be quite the 'same' word again. Its position in the language has shifted; its status has been enhanced and its meaning extended. A major writer alters the language itself."²

Therefore - to plumb and prolong. Coincidentally, the active 'doing' aspect correlates with the heavy use of the verbal noun in Gaelic – it's in the *offing* and can be revised.

¹ Scottish Literature and the Scottish People - David Craig, p240

² Dùthchas Nan Gàidheal: Selected Essays of John MacInnes, p406

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Bealach nam Ba – The Pass of the Cattle

oil on linen, 2009, 148 x 210cm

Countra Wit

oil on linen, 2009, A2

Bealach nam Ba

pencil on paper, 2008, A2

Bealach nam Ba [*sic*] makes its own link to topics of population and politics through it being a parliamentary road. [This engineering of Telford, links also to MacDiarmid's upbringing beneath Langholm Library (to which Telford left a bequest) – the ground of his self-education and latter politics.] The language interest, with an eye on Scots and Gaelic, find its visual outing in such selection – kicking a stone along the road between them. *Bealach nam Ba – The Pass of the Cattle*, land-link between two points, in this case Kishorn and Applecross in Wester Ross.

For *countra wit* I quote David Craig, "The style used for this plainly draws directly on spoken, unliterary Scots. That kind of sceptical, ironic downrightness is in fact what came to be the standard idiom of Scottish poetry. It is always present, suggesting a kind of norm of common-sense (what Burns called 'countra wit'), even in the most abandoned comic flights. My point here is that it is through such processes in the sensibility, rather than in any outward censorship, that 'Calvinism' mainly affected the deeper life of the country."¹

The physicality of the pass connotes duality or countering. The normality of 'reposing' at a summit is incidentally satisfying – no slippage: a space for the reflex action of seeing our own seeing. A 'Rest and Be Thankful' – another parliamentary road.

¹ Scottish Literature and the Scottish People – David Craig, p76

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Painting = © St Andrews University, Valentine Collection

Glen Roy, parallel roads

oil on linen, 2009, 148 x 210cm

'Bastard' affairs

oil on linen, 2009, A2

Loch Lomond Readvance

pencil on paper, 2008, A2

Parallel roads, shorelines of an ice-dammed lake (in this case Glen Roy). The result of a period of glacier readvance also known as Loch Lomond Stadial. The work is metaphorically giving location to 'bilingualism' – framing the running of the Gaelic and the Scots line. A parallel implicit in the landscape.

Alec Finlay on Hamish Henderson: "He took delight in demonstrating that all languages are, as Gavin Douglas has it, 'bastard' affairs."¹

¹ Alias MacAlias - Hamish Henderson; edited by Alec Finlay, xxv1

Drawing = © 'Original image courtesy of British Geological Survey'

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Ben Dorain

oil on linen, 2010, 148 x 210cm

At the Foot o' Yon Excellin' Brae

oil on linen, 2010, A2

Panegyric

pencil on paper, 2008, A2

'Ben Dorain' ascribes to given analysis¹ of Donnchadh Bàn MacIntyre's poem, *Praise to Ben Dorain* as being a panegyric to a mountain, a visual documentary.

However, the pieces are also conceived of looser conceits: the *bàn* is Gaelic for fair-haired, (off)white but can also signify blank, empty and pale ie, *talamh bàn* = fallow ground (an uncultivated field is pale in contrast to the dark ground of ploughed) and of course fallow as in fallow deer. By extension there is the pertinent *dèan bàn* = depopulate.

Thomas Clark in *A Book of Deer* is apposite:

*'In a glade of smoky light, that which is
lost, or is constantly displaced, steps
beyond its image.'*

The title of the show is Hamish Henderson's. *At the Foot o' Yon Excellin' Brae*², a text in which he says 'the purpose of this present essay is to demonstrate that a curious "bilingualism in one language" has always been a characteristic of Scots folksong at least since the beginning of the seventeenth century.'³ He further points out that the language is never purely colloquial but is formal and even stylized. 'It is in the great songs, licked into shape like pebbles by the waves of countless tongues, that this sense of formality is most marked.'

'At the Foot o' Yon Excellin' Brae', as declarative, 'steps beyond its image'.

¹ Dùthchas Nan Gàidheal: Selected Essays of John MacInnes, p266

² A line from Courtin' Among the Kye, sung by Willie Mathieson

³ Alias MacAlias - Hamish Henderson; edited by Alec Finlay, p52 & p54

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The Lido, Campbeltown bay

oil on linen, 2011, 123 x 175cm

Buidhe

pencil on paper, 2008, A2

The works pull on a passage in which Hugh Miller¹ implied, although not always the case however, that the foreshores were crown land and therefore the only land available for congregation in times of 'disruption'. It is the allusion of an un-held place that is of interest here.

'The question of the ownership of the land in the Highlands is central to the cultural integrity of Scotland in this new century. Indeed, the long record of land-centred struggle in the Highlands may be said to have contributed – in conditions of unassailable imperialist unionist hegemony – a struggle, albeit by proxy, for precisely that cultural (& political) integrity.'²

The route is discursive: from *buidhe* meaning yellow to 'bay'. 'Bay, creek' is *òb* which led to an *t-Òban*. Therefore to be tight it should have been Oban or in fact Leverburgh, an *t-Òb*, rather than Campbeltown used.

Interestingly and with similar process, John MacInnes has found that albeit in a different context (one evoking ripening corn) 'Buidheachas' is gratitude; 'buidhe' is yellow. These words are unrelated and are not normally linked in the mind of a native speaker of Gaelic.³

The convolutions are endless, for example *is buidhe dhut* is equivalent to 'lucky for you'.

The space and the colour determined the results.

¹ Reference; The Cruise of the Betsey – Hugh Miller, p459

² Highland Resistance – Iain Fraser Grigor, p10

³ Dùthchas Nan Gàidheal: Selected Essays of John MacInnes, p407

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Glen Urquhart

oil on linen, 2012, 123 x 175cm

Glen Urquhart + Glen Moriston

pencil on paper, 2008, A2

Glen Urquhart. The glen's kirk, or its surroundings, lent itself to being a natural amphitheatre – there is opinion that the English speakers were inside and the Gaelic out. Most crucially, Sorley MacLean made comment on Glen Urquhart & Glen Moriston being alone in their innocence of the Clearances – evident in their very appearance. The glen names are therefore used within the drawing itself to reference an original landscape: a landscape as retainer and something to picture.

Tim Robinson comments on a specific Irish situation: "That it had ever been found and remarked upon was evidence of how intensively this shore, and indeed the intertidal zone all around Connemara's labyrinthine inlets and archipelagos, was explored by human hands...This repeated laying-on of hands, to me, is the human touch that has made such places holy."¹ In crude comparison, it has been the *non*-laying on of hands in this instance that singles out Glen Urquhart and Glen Moriston.

¹ Connemara - Tim Robinson, p246

Drawing = © St Andrews University Library, Photographic Collection

Painting = © St Andrews University Library, Photographic Collection

Nonsense Vocables

oil on linen, 2012, A2

John Purser: "There is a saying in Sassenach Scotland, 'that's all hidorum hodorum,' meaning it is all nonsense. But 'hidorum hodorum' is none other than canntaireachd, and to accuse it of being nonsense is to make as big a fool of oneself."¹

To add, as reverse, the word 'ruapais' meaning rigmarole, nonsensical talk² and suggest the Gaelic as source.

¹ Scotland's Music - John Purser, p162

² Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness, vol.xxxv11; Some rare words and phrases, p17

don't give a tinker's curse¹

oil on linen, 2012, A2

'...the land of inner tinkerdom...'²

¹ Second Sight - Neil Gunn, p102

² Travelling Scot – Christopher Harvie; Preface by Tom Nairn, p8

A Participant Observer

pencil on paper, 2008, A2

screenprint, 2011, 54 x 76cm, edition of 10

Printed by Paul Liam Harrison, Visual Research Centre,
Dundee

A participant observer was what Hamish Henderson called himself in his approach to fieldwork.

In geological terms the form shown is an alluvial fan – a depositional feature formed at one end of an erosional-depositional system in which sediment is transferred, from one part of a watershed to another: that constitutes the metaphor.

© 'Original image courtesy of British Geological Survey'

Standard Habbie

pencil on paper, 2008, A2

Standard Habbie, *Christ's Kirk*, *The Cherrie and the Slae* and *Montgomerie's Stanza* are strung together to present a compressed idea of an indigenous standard. They are four compositional structures which Burns, amongst others, traced through the poetic line in Scotland and therewith took joint ownership of. Thereby locating his work, whatever the subject, to a particular culture: articulate devices. Supplant *words* with *native metrics* in 'the words were centres round which to gather his wandering wits'.¹

The drawing of them ascribes voice to these influential component parts and imagines the visual transfer ie, drawing or painting in 'standard habbie' for example.

There is foundation: 'Language is the express image and picture of human thoughts; and from the picture we may draw some certain conclusions concerning the original. We find in all languages the same parts of speech; we find nouns, substantive and adjective; verbs, active and passive, in their various tenses, numbers, and moods. Some rules of syntax are the same in all languages.

Now what is common in the structure of language, indicates a uniformity of opinion in those things upon which that structure is grounded. The distinction between substances, and the qualities belonging to them, between thought, and the being that thinks, between thought and the objects of thought, is to be found in the structure of all languages. And therefore, systems of philosophy, which abolish those distinctions, wage war with the common sense of mankind.'²

¹ A Lost Lady of Old Years - John Buchan, p122

² Scottish Philosophy - The Principles of Reason, Thomas Reid; edited by Gordon Graham, p146

And I bleer my een wi' greetin.

pencil on paper, 2008, A2

John Purser on Burns's *Ay Waukin O*: 'for it was a new thing, to enter so deeply into the feeling and inner mood of a tune and realize it in language.'¹

Douglas Young talks of 'the typical Scot as a schizophrenic creature at once realistic and recklessly sentimental.'²

¹ Scotland's Music – John Purser, p231

² A Clear Voice – Douglas Young, p146

The assimilation of background

pencil on paper, 2008, A2

The assimilation of background : The background of
assimilation

**Bannock / Romancing / Landlord /
Kilmarnock, Dundee, Stornoway, Montrose**

digital print, 2007, A6, edition of 10

Hang in line of 4 in order as above, left to right
Printed by The Summerhall Press, Edinburgh

Kind thanks to:

Paul Harrison, Visual Research Centre

3 proverbs:

*Dh'ìth e chuid den bhonnach-shodail -
he ate his share of the flattery bannock*

*Thoir thairis do bhòilich -
be done with your romancing*

*Fàs a' ghruinnid a rèir an uachdarain -
the yield of the ground is according to the landlord*

Kilmarnock, Dundee, Stornoway, Montrose is trying to hit on a Gaelic shorthand – a test of 4 placenames entitling 4 psalms, a broad and not uncomplicated trigger alone – but like the chosen proverbs, spare.

It has been variously proposed that language is not experience but a means to organise experience. The prints are the 'organising' of a few basic visuals on what is latent in the duo of Gaelic & Scots.

As an aside, the word 'taisbeanadh' is used for 'exhibition' but also for 'revelation'.

Epic detachment

neo-dhàimh bharr-sgeulach

Passionate objectivity

méidh-chothromachd lasganta

diptychs, digital print, 2007, A6, edition of 10
Printed by The Summerhall Press, Edinburgh

Kind thanks to:

Paul Harrison, Visual Research Centre

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The diptychs are extracts from Roderick Watson on Hugh MacDiarmid: "In fact, what MacDiarmid has taken from his interest in Gaelic art is a sense of epic detachment. This is conveyed through a special kind of passionate objectivity, as if poetic description were an intense and relatively selfless act which does not seek to invest the landscape with Romantic shades of the writer's own psyche."¹

The quotation notes MacDiarmid's attention to Gaelic – the 2 diptychs are simply translating that thought, one move.² The cool passion of distance – or space or place – has bearing when one considers Gaelic, like Scots, having 3 distances – seo, sin & siud: here, there & yon.

¹ MacDiarmid (Open Guides to Literature) – Roderick Watson, p72

² Translation by Aonghas MacNeacail

**You're welcome, Willie Stewart / Charlie he's
my darling / "Cold iron!" cried Roddie / Mary
Hamilton**

digital print, 2008, A6, edition of 10

Hang in line of 4 in order as above, left to right

Printed by The Summerhall Press, Edinburgh

The first two are Burns and 3 of 4 can be sung.

"Cold iron" was exclaimed throughout one of Neil Gunn's novels – it was said at sea when all had to touch iron to avert the bad luck that comes from naming God at sea.

The ballad of The Four Marys¹ is an example of the sometimes confusion in historical pass-downs.

¹ Child Ballad

Monoglots

screenprint, 2010, 57 x 76cm, edition of 15

1971 = 477

The question of Gaelic-only speakers was last asked in the 1971 census. The total figure recorded was 477.

477 monoglots.

The blue used is matched to Pantone 300 (international colour code). In 2003, the Scottish Parliament recommended that Pantone 300 should be recognised as the correct colour for the saltire. It's an advisory decision and does not have statutory force.

'Currently, English is rising up like a terrifying behemoth that devours other languages by sucking them dry and tanning their skins..'¹

¹ In Praise of the Garrulous – Allan Cameron, p98

GlensHiel

screenprint, 2010, 57 x 76cm, edition of 5

census 1881¹

	pop.	G-speaking
glenshiel	424	400

As for the title's form: 'H is really just a breathing, and is rarely found on its own; and lenited consonants have some air coming through.'² - air through Glenshiel / Gleann Seile.

"we might as well omit to study nature because she is old"³

¹ Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness - vol.X

² A Gaelic Alphabet – George McLennan, p18

³ Walden & Civil Disobedience - H D Thoreau, p146

Sainte-Chapelle

sand-blasted glass, 2008, A6, edition of 3

'Hugh MacDiarmid's rhymed version in English¹ has been widely admired, and thought to convey the impression of a tremendous and unique work; but even this excellent attempt bears hardly more relation to the original Gaelic than the view of the stained glass from outside bears to the sensation of gazing up from inside the Sainte Chapelle.'²

The work is therefore the aspiration of seeing from within. (The glass itself is *Scottish Heather* by colour-name and *English Muffle* by type).

¹ Of Alasdair MacMhaighistir Alasdair's *Birlinn Chlann Ràghnail*

² A Clear Voice – Douglas Young, p92

BÀN : DEARG

sand-blasted glass, 2009, A6 (halves = 105 x 74cm),
edition of 2

Position: white on left + red on right

Bàn means white and dearg is red.

'Bàn is the left-handed of the furrow in ploughing, distinguished from dearg, the red or right-handed side. Bàn is empty or waste, as an unplowed field,'¹ leaving dearg describing tilled + turned – things seen and thought of in direct visual terms.

R.B.Cunninghame Graham told of a character in a short story, that by, 'Not having Gaelic, he had lost the gift of picturesque expression.'²

¹ Gaelic Words & Expressions from South Uist & Eriskay – Fr. Allan McDonald, p256

² Scottish Stories - R.B.Cunninghame Graham; (A Retainer) p59

Rachd

sand-blasted glass¹, 2010, A6, edition of 2

Rachd – A choking sensation from smothering intense feeling, as of anger, sorrow, interest, in listening or reading.²

¹ The glass itself is *English Muffle* by type

² Gaelic Words and Expressions from South Uist & Eriskay - Fr.Allan McDonald, p198

ILL-PLAC'D

sand-blasted glass¹, 2010, A6, edition of 2

¹ The glass itself is *English Muffle* by type

Cold air in the nostrils¹

sand-blasted glass², 2011, A6, edition of 4

¹ Tormentil and Bleached Bones - Thomas A Clark; (Beinn Fuar) p55

² The glass itself is *English Muffle* by type

Newly minted coins

sand-blasted glass¹, 2011, A6, edition of 2

In discussing Sorley MacLean, John MacInnes writes²
'MacGill-Eain uses the Gaelic lexicon in such a way that literary Gaelic will never be the same again. The context of his poetry gives the common currency of Gaelic, as well as the antique and unusual words, the quality of newly-minted coins'.

¹ The glass itself is *English Muffle* by type

² Dùthchas Nan Gàidheal: Selected Essays of John MacInnes, p406

No Lack of Lamentation

sand-blasted glass¹, 2009, A2, edition of 2

The phrase, ironic and droll, comes from an alert² to a particular disposition – an aptness to romanticise. This predilection can be host to a defiled factoring of things Scottish or Highland, thereby Gaelic and can obscure healthy questions of tradition and contemporaneity by dint of acceptance. Properties of obvious sentiment and (false) reverence can mar.

Language itself is agent and need not be thirled. 'Lamenting' can be shunned.

The obligatory 'Cha robh na duain so air an tionndadh gu Beurla riamh roimhe – not previously translated'³ is rich and the 'lamenting' domain can alter.

¹ The glass itself is *English Muffle* by type

² Reference; Skye: The Island - James Hunter, p18

³ Highland Songs of the Forty-Five - John Lorne Campbell, p V111

Lighe

sand-blasted glass, 2010, A2, edition of 2

Lighe (or Li) – water with the idea of its covering something. Water with fish in a pot, water covering stepping stones, water flooding newly planted or sown ground. [when anything was exposed first and later submerged, the water covering it was called *lighe*]¹

The blue used is matched to Pantone 300 (international colour code). In 2003, the Scottish Parliament recommended that Pantone 300 should be recognised as the correct colour for the saltire. It's an advisory decision and does not have statutory force.

(As aside, 'Li, as in Mullach Li in the west, is not a short form of liath (grey), but means instead coloured or hued'²)

A world of specifics – “when that ray of sunshine rests on the blue plate in the corner of the dresser, it will be 5 o'clock.”³

¹ Gaelic Words and Expressions from South Uist & Eriskay - Fr.Allan McDonald, p165

² Scottish Hill Names - Peter Drummond, p104

³ Pilgrim Souls – Hector MacIver, p89

Helen MacAlister

'Man's one method, whether he reasons or creates, is to half-shut his eyes against the dazzle and confusion of reality.'²

In trying to *reason* these works, you find language. Language as process, register and reference. It identifies. To that extent the works are documents.

But 'kinship or authenticity does not come from knowing the facts. Facts can be acquired easily enough. It comes rather from the attitude of the author to the facts.'³ : and so to how a thing is read. By metaphor, the works can figure with things political and the distinction of traits & temper.

'Some time ago a distinguished Scottish writer, broadcasting on the efforts of his brethren, suggested that our Scottish countryside had nothing more to give the indigenous novelist. As if it were a place that had been skinned, leaving the void beneath. How effectively Mitchell proceeded to show that so far hardly even the skin had been affected!⁴ : and back thereby to how a thing is read.

¹ Alias MacAlias – Hamish Henderson; edited by Alec Finlay, p52 & p54

² Robert Louis Stevenson – Ian Bell, p283

³ Belief in Ourselves - Neil Gunn; (The Novel at Home) p116

⁴ Belief in Ourselves -Neil Gunn; (Nationalism in Writing [on Lewis Grassie Gibbon]) p88

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Aig Bonn a' Bhraghad Bharraicht' ud

Eilidh NicAlasdair