

**HELEN MACALISTER**

**AT THE FOOT O' YON EXCELLIN' BRAE**

**Art First, London, 28 February – 6 April 2013**

'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.....'

Roddy Murray, Director of An Lanntair, Stornoway, commissioned MacAlister's exhibition over 6 years ago and gave it time to evolve before launching it in the Summer of 2012. The extract above is from his introduction to an illustrated online catalogue, in which Duncan Macmillan's essay and the artist's illuminating reference notes expand eloquently on the 'cryptic clues'.

MacAlister's elegant, reductive work is part of her overall exploration of a specific distilled cultural/political history. This substantial body of work – paintings, drawings, prints and glass – reflects her poetic use of language in which Gaelic and Scots are part of her subject matter. From the fact of language, built-in bilingualisms and 'sentence landscapes', the mountains, braes, roads and bays align themselves with single words or phrases in a visual encapsulation that fuses word with image.

The large landscapes are monochrome, in a range of muted colours. *Bealach nam Ba* is a rich brown, for instance, while *The Lido, Campbeltown bay* is golden 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 multiple marks, of signs, light and dark, and in detail chaotic, but which, overlaid on the raw image behind them, reveal its outlines. The drawings, which sometimes relate directly to the paintings, work the same way with a mass of fine pencil marks from whose confusion the image emerges.

Small glass pieces with words sandblasted onto them take the same horizontal post card format as the prints, yet their transparent simplicity, as Macmillan suggests, 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.

From a group of three proverbs, we have the spare black and white digital prints, such as:

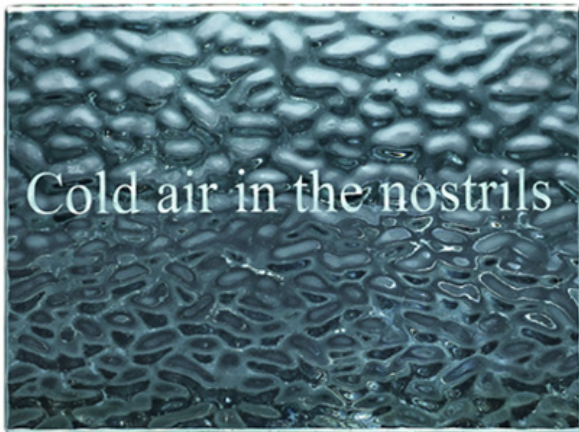
*Dh'ith e chuid den bhonnach-shodail - he ate his share of the flattery bannock.*

The visual/verbal potency of these tiny prints embody the same charge as the choice of specific landscape in the dominant two meter wide paintings. Ben Dorain is hung with its 'diptych', the small canvas at its side, painted with the words of the exhibition's title *At the Foot o' Yon Excellin' Brae*. This phrase is taken from Hamish Henderson's essay of the same title, on the language of Scots Folksong, and is one of the keys to MacAlister's project.

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.



At the Foot o' Yon Excellin' Brae



Online catalogue: (<http://www.artfirst.co.uk/ebooks/helen-macalister/excellin-brae/index.html>)

Illustrations: clockwise from top left: Glen Roy, parallel roads, 2009, oil on linen, 148x210 cm  
At The Foot o' Yon Excellin' Brae, 2010, oil on linen, 42x59 cm  
Bealach nam Ba, 2008, pencil on paper, 42x59 cm  
Cold air in the nostrils, 2011, sand-blasted glass, edition of 4, 15x10.5 cm

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