

NO LACK OF LAMENTATION | Helen MacAlister

Helen MacAlister prepares a forthcoming solo exhibition for An Lanntair, Stornoway, a section of which will be platformed in London in 2009. *Rebecca Bell* looks beyond the meticulously worked surfaces of the works to discover multiple layers of reference and meaning



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

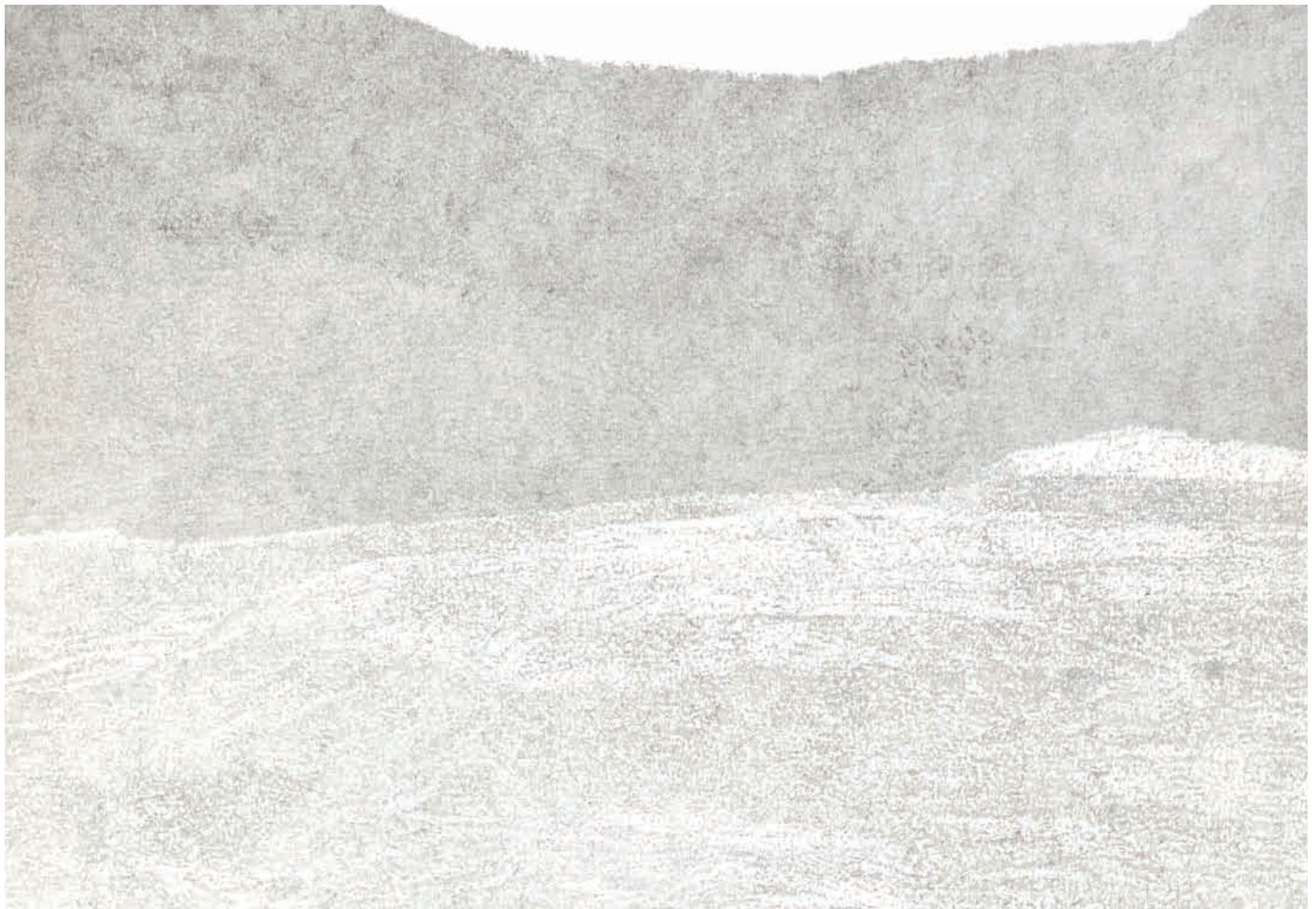
A new exhibition of Helen MacAlister's work, *No Lack of Lamentation*, will take place at Art First, London in March 2009. In many ways a platform for what is to come, the exhibition will include a combination of new and old pieces. Several are works which MacAlister is creating for her forthcoming major solo exhibition at An Lanntair Art Centre, Stornoway, and others were previously shown as part of MacAlister's exhibition *The Roar o' Human Shingle*.

The works shown in *The Roar o' Human Shingle* explored 'ideas of cultural

resilience: the resonance of language and place'.¹ The title, taken from MacDiarmid's *Prayer for a Second Flood*, comes from a poem concerned with what Duncan Macmillan calls 'the human shingle... dragged by the waves of revolution'. Each pebble is individual but moved as one by the tide: 'it is... a phrase that gives a sense of the tangibility of collective experience'.² *At the Foot o' Yon Excellin' Brae* is the suggested title for the forthcoming Stornoway show. Taken from Hamish Henderson's writings *Alias MacAlias*, the phrase is used as an illustration in Henderson's discussion of Scots-Gaelic bilingualism.

As the title of the Stornoway exhibition demonstrates, the use of bilingualism is never purely colloquial: it is also a self-conscious art form and therefore stylised. Just like the shingle which figures in both exhibitions, language is licked into shape. To her, the common sense of it all demands to be painted. As her interest in Henderson demonstrates, MacAlister is concerned with those people who have kept community and linguistic heritage alive. She questions who has recorded information, archived it, and kept it breathing.

MacAlister's works are possibly best described



A Participant Observer pencil on paper, 2007, 42 x 59.4 cm



A *Participant Observer* detail

as 'documents'. She looks at landscape, history, sociology, and the evolution of language, particularly within the context of Scotland. However the themes aim to be universal, applicable to the sociological and linguistic history of many nations. She herself is a learner of Gaelic, and the process of unravelling meaning is pivotal to her work which is testament to the shared meanings and structures of linguistic binaries. Binary interest is frequently made literal in MacAlister's use of a dual palette.

MacAlister's new works will depart from those shown in *The Roar o'Human Shingle* while solidifying explorations of the themes which motivated previous pieces. A central difference is that the new works telescope outwards, shifting from close-up botanical studies and details to the wider landscape. An example of this is *Glen Urquhart*, one starting point for which was Duncan Macmillan's exploration of the site in his essay for *The Roar o'Human Shingle* catalogue.

In discussing paintings of church interiors included in *The Roar o'Human Shingle*, Macmillan mentions the Free Kirk in Glen Urquhart, around which the grassy banks were

'stepped like an ancient theatre'.³ The congregations were often so heavily numbered that they would spill out of the church on to the surrounding banks. Macmillan discusses the major role that the institution of the kirk played in shaping modern Scotland. MacAlister has since discovered that the kirk congregations were allegedly divided by language: English speakers on the inside, and Gaelic speakers outside. The kirk thus acts as a retainer of social history. Further to this, Sorley MacLean commented that Glen Urquhart and Glen Moriston were alone in being untouched by the Clearances. The landscape therefore is both retainer of what has happened, and what has not – the absence made this scene of even greater appeal to MacAlister as a subject.

Duality in all forms is a key element which arises in MacAlister's thinking and formal values. The first duality which must be kept in mind is the visual weight borne by her pieces, which can be appreciated as autonomous works of art. However, parallel to this is an unfolding of texts and references, a 'semantic build-up' (Clare Cooper, Director Art First), which inspire but also act as a basis of continued motivation. The latter is vital: MacAlister's application of intensely detailed pencil and oil is time consuming – the first oil on canvas created for Stornoway which will be shown at Art First, *Mol, shingle praise*, took a year to complete.

Mol is a Gaelic word for beach or shingle, but also means to praise or commend. The double meaning of this term is explored in MacAlister's work of this title, which shows a raised beach, based on a shingle beach in Rhum. In

the same way that the meaning of the word *mol* changes, so does the shingle shift and move with the tide. Together the title and subject of the work serve as a metaphor for the fact that speech is never a fixed standard: it is a force of life and action. MacAlister explores the unfolding association and play of the term *mol*, and the work aims to be a simple celebration of articulation and changing meaning. Gaelic scholar John MacInnes has discussed in his writings the 'extending' of a word: '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 unrealised potential is made available.'⁴ The author makes an 'impress' on a word when using it. In this way language has a historical baggage, the role of which is fundamental to MacAlister's work. Interesting in this context is MacAlister's inclusion of the title of the work within the painting itself. Among the intricate shades and lines on the canvas are the letters M-O-L, thus exploring the literal form of the word from which the themes and subtexts of the piece stem.

New drawing *A Participant Observer* also has a phrase embedded in the surface. This time, 'a participant observer' can be read within the myriad of marks on the paper. The term comes from a phrase relating to great Scottish poet and folklore revivalist Hamish Henderson. Henderson was largely responsible for bringing about the 'People's Ceilidhs', celebrations of traditional Scottish culture that foreshadowed the modern Edinburgh Fringe

Festival. His role as researcher of Scottish identity was two-fold: the definition of participant-observer is a researcher who is skilled enough to both participate in group work and also observe group process simultaneously. In many ways while MacAlister celebrates the act of observing and learning, she also participates in Gaelic language. Her approach to subject is empirical but far-reaching: texts and associations unfold in an apparent infinity (MacDiarmid's 'inexhaustible quarry'). And while notions of community, culture, song and landscape, can veer towards Romantic nostalgia, this is not the intention or result of MacAlister's clean, often monochrome works. Henderson was conscious that

he should be 'a remembrancer', a poet of his highland people and of Scotland, but he also keeps the life of his subject going, and evolving, through recording and researching. MacAlister adopts a similarly self-aware role.

The Art First exhibition, *No Lack of Lamentation*, will contain several more drawings, including minimal text drawings, alongside large paintings among which *Mol, shingle praise* will figure. The drawings and paintings are equally weighted as documents of research, toil, thought – and there is a key relationship between the two mediums. Colour is also attended to as thoroughly as every other aspect of the process. The resulting works take their part in a constant evolving narrative, a

history, a celebration of human creation and research.

Rebecca Bell is a freelance writer based in London. After completing an MPhil in Art History at the University of Glasgow, she has worked for various artist studios and public art organisations in both Scotland and London.

Edited by Selina Skipwith with Helen MacAlister.

No Lack of Lamentation
17 February – 19 March
Art First
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1 Helen MacAlister, *The Roar o' Human Shingle*, exhibition catalogue, An Tuireann, Isle of Skye 2006 (touring exhibition, also shown at Art First 17 April – 17 May 2007)
2 Duncan Macmillan, *Ibid.*
3 *Ibid.*
4 John MacInnes, *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal: Selected Essays of John MacInnes*, Edinburgh, Birlinn, 2006