

From *Kate Downie: The Coast Road Diaries*

Over the past two years or so, the artist, Kate Downie, has travelled to a number of coastal locations in Scotland – and one in Ireland – to pursue a project which she has named *The Coast Road Diaries*. Each of the places she has visited has resonated with significance, either on a personal or professional level, or both. Discussing the project, Downie has observed that “... the overall project is based on a collection of journeys and short residencies,” adding that “... through the keeping of notebooks, film-making, photography and drawing along the way, ultimately hope to present a personal art-history through this new work ...”¹

The traditional idea of a diary may connote the lifestyle of a busy executive, or a leather-bound volume full of secrets or a planned and scheduled personal life. None of these applies to Downie’s project; this is, instead, more of a notional diary freed from logical, sequential chronology and linear temporality. It is a framing device which allows the temporally fragmented, spatially and geographically dispersed project to gain some kind of coherence, a form, if you like, of poetic or artistic licence. Downie herself explains this approach:

*The exhibition represents more of an idea of a diary than the actuality, that word ‘diary’ being used to convey the temporal and experiential nature of [my] own artistic development. The objective is to explore the connection between pictures and words, but more importantly, the revelations experienced by personal research into places, persons and influence.*²

The diary is, therefore, more of a metaphoric than a literal device and as such has a long history in art, film and literature. The literary diary and the road movie, although distant cousins, still have some common elements and it comes as no surprise to learn that some years ago Downie, with her partner, Michael Wolchover, made a short film, *Driven* (2001), which explores some of the themes in her work relating to Slains Castle on the East Coast of Scotland near Collieston, one of the locations visited in her present project. In many ways, *The Coast Road Diaries* is an extension of some of the earlier ideas explored here.

The Coast Road Diaries focuses on a number of well-known living and near-contemporary artists; and on a number of specific coastal locations. The choice of artist has been determined by a number of complex factors. The artists – Wilhelmina Barns-Graham (1912–2004), Muirhead Bone (1876–1953), Joan Eardley (1921–1963), Marian Leven (b.1944), Bet Low (1924–2007), Archie Sutter Watt (1915–2005), Sylvia Wishart (1936–2008) and Frances Walker (b.1930) – are all well known figures in the world of Scottish art. Barns-Graham, Bone and Eardley, in particular, have reputations which extend well beyond Scottish shores. Undoubtedly, all have profoundly influenced Downie’s approach.

Frances Walker was one of Downie’s teachers at Gray’s School of Art, while Leven is a near-contemporary who works on the edge of abstraction and figuration, as well as the edge of sea and land. Bone was a consummate draughtsman, well versed in

printmaking and drawing, who, like Downie was fascinated by the poetry of structure, architecture and engineering. Eardley, based in Townhead, Glasgow and Catterline in Kincardineshire, formed a dialectic (like a number of the artists here) from the opposing urban and rural tensions within her work; she was also a bold, determined figure who immersed herself in the – often adverse – elements to gain greater proximity to her subject matter. Barns-Graham, located in St. Ives and St. Andrews, but with a wider geographical frame of reference extending to Italy and the Swiss Alps, employed sparse and vigorous lines in her exploration of landscape and geology. Sutter Watt was a more lyrical artist whose love of the south west of Scotland and whose studies of sea, land and natural form, moved Downie to travel there to explore the artist's work and the places which inspired it.

Like Walker, both Low and Wishart were fascinated by the landscape and seascape of the north of Scotland – particularly Orkney – and it is the vision of these artists which drew Downie herself so powerfully to those northern islands.

In discussing the *Coast Road Diaries* project at some length it became clear that Downie's motivation and purpose for undertaking the project were complex, and indeed, almost impossible to express fully in written terms. Equally, the results, outcomes, and consequences of her exploratory, investigative, experimental vision were almost, by definition, unknowable.

That said, the premise of Downie herself visiting and working in places which inspired and motivated some of the Scottish artists whom she herself so admires, is a simple enough idea to examine. However, it should be emphasised that Downie's approach – about which she is emphatic and adamant – was not simply to revisit places, scenes and landscapes depicted by these artists and for her then to render them according to her own vision. The process and the journey have been more multi-layered, subtle and variable than such an approach would suggest.

In discussing the idea of influence Downie has commented that “there is nothing as invisible as the recent past and that which is just behind us. It colours our experience and our way of looking. *That* is what I want to understand so that I am able to move on.”³ For Downie, these artists represent the recent past, as well as the present. From the outset, Downie has been strongly motivated to examine both the work of these artists and the places which inspired it. The particular symbiotic relationship between place and art – the mutual influence which the one has had on the other – is, therefore, what has held Downie's attention.

Downie is cautious about attempting to pin down her ‘influences’ more specifically, pointing to the multi-layered nature of any definition, its subjective individual quality and the fact that exploring the nature of influence also formed part of the basis for *The Coast Road Diaries*:

[I have an] interest in the nature of influence ... sometimes people ask you who influences you. And usually ... I find it extremely difficult to answer. And I am extremely reluctant to say ‘well it's the ... vigorous line drawing of so and

so, and it's the painterliness of so and so, and it's the real zest for life of someone else. And it's the rule of so-and-so ... and the act of disobedience by someone else, and the example of lifestyle of someone else'... as everyone knows ... those things are like saying 'well being alive on the planet Earth is what influenced me'.⁴

That said, Downie does cite specific examples of how visual thought, communication and culture affected her development as an artist:

... Edward Hopper ... that emptiness ... or ... Rembrandt or [other] people that are so obvious that you don't talk about them. [others]... like Tony Hart and Rolf Harris ... I was an American kid, I came to this country and television and what you saw on it was your little window into what other people did. So I didn't have a hierarchy of influence. It wasn't until I went to art school that I was told these people are supposed to influence you. So I suppose that's what I mean by looking at the recent past, ... I need to look just behind me. So these women and these men are not so much older than me, they're still doing stuff, a lot of them, and if they're not still doing stuff they're still being appraised and I'm part of that appraisal.⁵

In the democratic spirit of the American Pop artists, Downie's range of influence embraced not only visual *culture*, but *the visual* generally. Her way of seeing and looking was also informed by a non-hierarchical vision, or what Downie refers to quite specifically as her 'open-gaze policy' .

Such an approach is frequently reflected in Downie's art – evolving from her early work in Paris where she sat literally *in* street junctions and intersections in the midst of bustling urban life to a recent residency in Karmøy, Norway, where again she positioned herself and her drawing materials in the midst of an intersection (this time on an Oselvar rowing boat) better to record events around her.⁶ Discussing this approach, Downie has observed that,

... the junction is where everybody who belongs to a place passes over at some point, so there is a kind of ... collected ownership of that place. ... the intangibility of drawing a junction always attracts me hugely, that there's apparently nothing there ...⁷

In the current project a work such as *Full Tide* completed in the north-east coastal village of Gardenstown (or Gamrie) in the winter of 2009 further illustrates such an approach. The impression is not of looking *at* the sea and heavily-laden sky, the cautious, gabled-ended village, the restless greyness of the Moray Firth with a band of unbroken light just in the westerly horizon but, rather, of being *within* the scene. Just as the artist seems to be straddling the concrete road and the blue-grey sea so we, the viewers, seem to straddle the *representation* of a reality and reality itself.

Downie herself terms such works not as 'seascape', 'landscape', 'townscape' or 'skyscape' but rather as 'edgescape' – thus positioning them at the periphery of notice and experience. These are places where the road ends, most often giving on to the sea.

Although it is tempting to see such an approach as symbolic, it rarely, if ever, is. Downie is an artist whose vision is firmly rooted in actuality. It is worth noting an observation made by the critic Cordelia Oliver in respect of Eardley, for the same may also be said of Downie herself:

*... in spite of the obvious emotional charge invested in her late canvases (those grappings with the immensities of earth and air and water and sun) ... Eardley was essentially a factual painter, neither fanciful nor romantic ... subjective-seeming responses to the elemental tumult beyond the cliffs of Catterline are found to contain unmistakable points of topographical reference.*⁸

Like J.M.W. Turner and Joan Eardley before her, Downie believes that only by total immersion in an experience and place can it be done justice; her work is not solely about representing a place but conveying a deeper, wider experience of it. Her straddling of the concrete in Gamrie in the middle of winter and depicting it *as seen* is the equivalent of Turner strapping himself to a ship's mast in the midst of a storm, or of Eardley painting on the shore in equally bad weather.

This approach was adopted to a greater or lesser extent by most of the other artists here. Frances Walker, for example, has exhibited landscapes on large portable panels so that the experience of looking at her work and thus the work's relationship to objective reality has been crucially transformed.⁹

One may also cite the example of Muirhead Bone, who although a seemingly impassive observer does convey – in work such as *The Great Gantry, Charing Cross* (1906) – his closeness to his subject matter, his intimate knowledge of it and, by turns, his emotional involvement with it. Like Downie's (although the comparison might seem at first odd) Bone's, at its best, is deeply affecting work.

The sheer scope and ambition of Downie's *The Coast Road Diaries* – involving an investigation of the work of eight artists over a two-and-half-year period, in a 'journey' or more accurately *series of journeys* – make a description and blow-by-blow account of events an impossibility. However, it is clear that a number of important themes have emerged over the course of Downie's project.

One of these is the idea of dichotomy. Almost all of the artists here, to some extent or other – including Downie herself – have an element of this in their work. With Low, Eardley, Wishart and Walker, and even Bone, there is an oscillation between the urban and the rural; or between the constructed world and the natural. Barns-Graham, although predominantly concerned with the geometries and underlying structure of natural form, has dwelt from time to time on the architectural – while the work of Sutter Watt also exhibits such a polarity. Sutter Watt was selected by Shell to record some of the company's activities in Port Glasgow; so, although far better known as a lyrical painter of landscape, still-life and seascape, his scope extended beyond this to the world of the constructed and the engineered.¹⁰

Downie's subject matter therefore inherits such dichotomies and expands upon them; although largely un-peopled, her work nevertheless rarely, if ever, fails to record a human presence. And while her subject matter here embraces the rawness of the cold winter sea or the desolation of two days spent alone on a grave-yard island (Eilean Munde on Loch Leven) the fact that we are presented with views through windows or, even windscreens, makes the mediation of the human an important factor in Downie's work.

As Downie has noted, *The Coast Road Diaries* has been a project with various unknowable outcomes or outcomes which may be only partly perceived or understood. One of these relates to what she refers to as a 'personal art history'. At its simplest this has been about discovering and to some extent documenting the effects and influences these artists have exerted on her work. Downie has to some extent recorded this experience here. However, it is worth noting her particular 'relationship' with Eardley and her work. Downie never met Eardley as the latter died when Downie was a young child and still living in North Carolina. However, as an art student in Aberdeen under the guidance of Frances Walker and Sylvia Wishart, Downie was keenly aware of Eardley's reputation, legacy and 'presence'. Realising increasingly in later years that she shared some of Eardley's concerns, Downie avoided visiting Catterline – the village on the east coast twelve miles south of Aberdeen where Eardley lived between 1956 and her death in 1963. It is important to note, however, that this did not mean an eschewal of Eardley's *work* and what it generously had to give to the younger artist. The issue revolved around place and particularly Eardley's relationship to it:

I had made a specific point ... before this journey, The Coast Road Diaries, never to visit Catterline ... and specifically never to make work there. And the more people who said 'oh have you never been to Catterline', I'd go 'well, actually not, because what would I say that hadn't [already] been said so brilliantly?' ... [Eardley] influences the way that you would look at a particular coastline ... and although I'm a figurative artist, I'm always interested in the conceptual side of how we interpret landscape or seascape or faces or buildings or anything.¹¹

Downie's points are important and require scrutiny. She clearly felt that Eardley's vision and way of looking were somehow definitive and could not be bettered. Eardley's stature was such, and her abilities as an artist so formidable, that revisiting Catterline for the purposes of making art would be a futile, counter-productive, and perhaps even humiliating exercise. Downie was not the first artist to have to deal with the legacy of another artist of great stature. Since J.M.W. Turner painted what was wrongly thought to be the Bass Rock in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, that subject matter has undoubtedly proved problematic for generations of artists. Numerous examples of this 'syndrome' appear elsewhere.

In fact, the decision to visit Catterline near the outset of the present project proved a fruitful and energising experience resulting in some of Downie's most successful work. It gave the project momentum and helped to shape it. The three ink drawings, *Bird Watching in Catterline* (1–3), made in June 2007 present views from Downie's

camper-van across and around Catterline Bay. Although it may be tempting to see these works as ‘sketches’ (with that term’s connotation of the preparatory) they are in fact carefully constructed, finished works (using three types of ink) and as such allow a number of crucial observations to be made about Downie’s approach.

All are views *through* a rectangular window and implicitly recall the work of Sylvia Wishart. But they also offer an apt metaphor for *The Coast Road Diaries*. The project itself is about Downie looking at the work of other artists through the prism or lens of her own art and experience, and reciprocally looking or re-looking at her own work after the experience of place and work which these artists offered. In the first of the three, Catterline Bay is seen through the window of the Hymer van and is inscribed: “Willow warblers and common gulls looking east from Catterline”.

It is as if Downie is tentatively edging toward a direct encounter with Eardley, for the ‘view’ is partially obscured by a shrubby tree, and despite the inscription, it is a lone gull which inhabits the sky in this image. In numbers 2 and 3 of this series, Downie directs her gaze northwards, towards Catterline harbour, the cliffs and beyond that to the ‘Watchie’ (one of the buildings used by Eardley as a studio). It is a view to which Eardley herself devoted considerable attention and is represented in paintings such as *Winter Sea IV*. Downie’s perspective is taken from a point on the road which leads from the cliff-top cottages down to the harbour. As if to eliminate any doubt that the view has been made from the road itself, Downie has included a triangular road-sign which indicates the danger of falling rocks. The image of the sign is closely juxtaposed with the image of the ‘Watchie’ – and in both cases sign dwarfs dwelling.

What does this tell us about Downie’s approach, her vision, and her stance in respect of Eardley? Downie has commented on what she describes as her ‘open-gaze policy’ and her ‘non-hierarchical vision’. These images are clearly part of this way of looking, for she has stressed that it is not so much the medium in which she works or the style or method of her approach but *where* she directs her gaze which is the most important element in her work:

*... you don’t really need to make things up, you simply have to allow everything in ... I’m choosing to look at the solidity of the silhouette ... there’s little comments to be made [about] the relationship between the past and the present. I’m almost coming to Catterline in a historical context but by including these symbols ... I’m bringing it up to the here and now ... by creating the window effect I’m placing myself as ... [a] ... tourist ... I’m always really interested in that relationship.*¹²

A common tendency in this context would be the deliberate exclusion of the road-sign as representative of, perhaps, modernity or visual ‘clutter’. Indeed this approach was practised in Catterline by Eardley herself. But to Downie the inclusion of the sign is crucial and stands firmly at the centre of her approach to image making. To Downie, everything which comes within the scope of her vision has an equal status and thus fits within her ‘non-hierarchical’ artistic view of the visual world. This way of looking was partly encouraged by both Wishart’s and Walker’s ‘deep-looking’ – their

landscapes often include elements such as telegraph poles as a form of vertical ‘punctuation’ in work necessarily dominated by horizontals. Downie explains:

*I always remember expressing frustration at what was left out in ... the cliché of landscape and getting very cross with the fact that things like ... telegraph poles or cars were ignored in the context of things. [The] artist’s job on one level is ... to introduce people to ... their own truth ... there’s always a game between what you are fed in the picturesque image and ... the reality ... by completely, continuously updating what is really out there you help people to assimilate a full view of their own role ...*¹³

Downie further explored these ideas with a series of monoprints in which the framing device of the window is developed. In most, the road-sign is not only visible but is the dominant compositional element of the image. It was this way of looking which allowed her to approach Eardley’s legacy in all its forms. Thus, Eardley’s vision has not obscured Downie’s but is complementary to it. This series reaches an accomplished and powerful conciliation in Downie’s *The Watchie Path* – where Eardley’s cottage, although partially obscured, is seen as an element with equal compositional status to the sea, sky, vegetation and pathway which comprise the image.

It is clear, therefore, that through her approach to Eardley, Downie has also been able to contextualise her own work in relation to that of the other artists here. The result is a series of powerful, exciting and absolutely fresh images. While acknowledging her debt to past and living artists, Downie has nevertheless succeeded in her primary purpose – to create a personal art history, at once unique but deeply aware of its antecedents.

Giles Sutherland, August 2009

from *Kate Downie: The Coast Road Diaries*, published by The Scottish Gallery
www.scottish-gallery.co.uk

1. Downie, Kate, Original submission proposal for *The Coast Road Diaries* project, 2009
2. *ibid.*
3. *ibid.*
4. Downie, Kate, Interviewed by Giles Sutherland, Edinburgh, June 30, 2009
5. *ibid.*
6. Downie lived and worked in Paris for a number of months in the latter part 1988. This resulted in a touring exhibition *Urban Circus*
7. Downie, Kate, Interviewed by Giles Sutherland, Edinburgh, August 3, 2009
8. Oliver, Cordelia, 'Joan Eardley and Catterline' *The Scots Magazine*, November 1979, Vol. 112, no. 2, p. 135
9. 'Coastal Glimpses', The Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh 1995
10. Sutter Watt's work on such subject matter is generally little-known. "In 1954 Shell Petrol organised a 'Painting Project' inviting selected young painters from Britain and Europe to paint Shell Industry subjects. Edward Gage and John Houston were among the Scottish painters selected and Archie was sent to Lithgow's Shipyard at Port Glasgow (where Stanley Spencer had worked previously) to paint the super structure (sic) of a tanker. He completed four paintings, two of which are held by Shell." *Archie Sutter Watt, RSW* (catalogue of exhibition at Gracefield Arts Centre, Dumfries, 2000)
11. Downie, Kate, Interviewed by Giles Sutherland, Edinburgh, June 30, 2009
12. Downie, Kate, Interviewed by Giles Sutherland, Edinburgh, August 3, 2009
13. *ibid.*