

## Beneath the surface

Refusing to be shackled by any one medium, Kate Downie's work - an exploration of our relationship with the land and sea - constantly demonstrates sensitivity and humanity

During Kate Downie's formative years, an ocean separated her from the homeland she had never seen. In her child's mind's eye, despite never having seen any pictures of it, she knew exactly how it looked, right down to the rocks on the shore and the houses on the land.

“My father talked about Scotland a lot;” she recalls. “He had a wry romantic view of it, too, because by the time I was born, he hadn't actually lived there for a long while. He was a doctor who had trained as a neurologist in London, where he'd met my mother, a nurse. His speciality of neurology took him to North Carolina, which is where I was born.

“As a result, I had this visual mythology of Scotland in my head, particularly the north east of Scotland, before I'd even seen it. When we moved back to Aberdeen when I was seven, everything felt so new and this felt so exciting to me. If you grow up in suburban America where the oldest thing you see is a wooden house that's 70 years old, the shock of the new is immense when a change like that happens. I remember tiny details, such as the old-fashioned light switches and iron railings with their curly bits at the top with absolute clarity, even 40 or so years on.”

Today, Downie's work as an artist still has that vivid clarity and immediacy of a child seeing a scene or an object for the first time and it is this quality, coupled with her immense skill as a draughtsman and a communicator, which attracts people to her bold yet sensitively executed drawings, prints, paintings and photography. Over a career spanning three decades, she has also been involved in performance, film-making and in painting murals, most notably at Foresterhill Hospital in Aberdeen, where she produced a striking work in response to the Piper Alpha disaster in 1988.

Although she often wanders into urban and industrial landscape, time and time again she has been drawn back to coastlines, as though a magnet was pulling her hither and thither to this constantly shifting point at which the sea meets the land.

Like a cinematographer, she likes to get up close and personal with her subjects and, though people seldom appear in her work, the evidence of their presence is all around.

The sea and the coastline is a favourite subject for many a Scottish artist, but Kate Downie's work is as far from a shortbread tin waiting to happen as is possible to imagine. Like one of her painting heroes, Joan Eardley, she sees this constantly shifting part of the landscape as indelibly caught up in the affairs of men, a working place in which beauty emerges from the roughest edges.

Downie graduated from Gray's School of Art in Aberdeen in 1980 and, in between raising her two teenage children, has spent the last 28 years as a working artist, constantly searching for new ways to shed light on the tension between man and the land, without ever actually putting that man into her work.

In this time, she has lived and worked in the USA, Amsterdam and Paris, and is currently based in Edinburgh. She has worked as an artist-in-residence in a brewery, an oil rig (just prior to the Piper Alpha disaster), a maternity hospital and on an island below the Forth Rail Bridge.

For the latter project, she famously drew the bridge on a vast canvas from the unique vantage point of a studio constructed specially for her on Inchcolm Island by workers on the bridge. “That was some experience,” she laughs. “I’ve had a whole lot of adventures when I’ve been out drawing but the rail bridge was memorable.

“The island is full of rats and dropped rivets from the bridge - it’s a place the public don’t get to go so for me, as an artist, it was a privileged position. I was out drawing in all weathers and the guys asked me if I wanted a roof on the scaffolding studio they’d made for me. ‘How am I going to draw if I can’t see out!’ I told them.”

For Downie, the more extreme the conditions, the better her work becomes, as demonstrated by her most recent body of work, which was inspired by a seven week residency late last year on the Norwegian island of Karmøy.

The trip was organised as part of a programme of artists’ exchanges to tie in with Stavanger’s joint tenure as 2008 European City of Culture.

Downie’s most recent exhibition, *The Sea Room* – held at The Watermill Gallery in Aberfeldy - was wholly inspired by this Norwegian visit. According to gallery owner, Kevin Ramage, this new work took the Edinburgh-based artist’s career to a new level, which saw viewers taking their engagement with her work ‘one stage further’. It was also a major success in sales terms with almost three-quarters of the work selling.

“It was an incredibly rich body of work to come out of a relatively short seven-week study;” he comments. “There was great depth and variety there, from paintings, to ink washes to monoprints. She also experimented a great deal with opposing textures, pouring paint onto plastic sheets, for example, to achieve this feeling of a liquid pool of light in the midst of lead-grey skies, roads and seas.

“There is such energy and vigour in a Kate Downie work and anyone who meets her will appreciate that is her personality too. There is an urgency at play when she works and she won’t shirk from the less decorative aspects of a scene. She paints what she sees, even if it is not decorative. She has always explored the interaction between the land and human presence. Radio masts do not get in the way; they add to the scene.”

The energy and vigour in Kate Downie, the person, is very much to the fore when we meet in her Edinburgh home on a steamy summer day. In the midst of clearing her old studio to move into a new one, she scuttles verbally through her career at breakneck speed before jumping to her feet to give a tour of the various works of art she has hanging around her house, as well as a pile of unframed pieces which she has pulled from the cupboards of her old studio.

Ever anxious to get beyond the scene at face value, she is eloquent in her exposition of what brought the work to its finished state and it’s a fascinating insight into how she works as an artist.

*Study in Red and Grey*, for example, which at face value appears to be a row of

berthed scarlet red fishing boats set against a ramshackle harbour lined with huge truck tyres used as fenders, leaps to life and under your skin, the more you look and the more Downie tells you about how she painted it.

The term 'mixed-media' is a tired modern cliché used to describe art which tells you nothing, but Downie thinks nothing of instinctively mixing up ink, watercolour, oil, pencil, print techniques and photography to tell her story. In this particular painting, there are lines drawn in on top of the paint in pencil to reveal the squall in the grey sky and in another, there the frenetic fluttering of seagulls as they hover over a harbour is accentuated by the Downie's instinctive use of digital photography.

A true exponent of showing without telling, be it an old plane in a museum or the scene from her studio window, her work levers up the mundane and the workaday into something altogether more poetic.

There is a real sense of journeying throughout Downie's career, in the literal sense and also her in her work. She has spent this summer and last, for example, 'clunking around' around the coastline of Scotland in an old campervan, following in the footsteps of a handful of Scottish artists who have influenced her work.

This fruits of this labour, which she has called *The Coast Road Diaries*, will go on show next year at prestigious Scottish Gallery in Edinburgh, accompanied by a book.

"This is almost like a homage to a group of artists who have made an impact on me over the years. All of them have painted in different coastal areas of Scotland and, apart from Joan Eardley and Wilhelmina Barns-Graham, many are not as well known as they should be."

The other artists she is looking at include Sylvia Wishart, who painted in Orkney, Archie Sutter Watt, who worked from his studio in Kirkgunzeon in the south west of Scotland, Marion Leven, who is based between Tayport in Fife and Polbain, near Achiltibuie, Frances Walker, who works between Aberdeen and the Western Isles and Bet Low, the Glasgow-based painter who died recently and who had a particular affinity with Orkney.

"I was really keen to look at the source of all these artists' inspiration, and for the exhibition, which will work as a sort of continuous diary, I am also curating a group of paintings by each artist. It's a typical Kate thing; curating and painting at the same time, but every one of these artists has influenced my work over the years."

## Text by Jan Patience

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