

The Open Eye Gallery: three new exhibitions



Lunchtime on the
balcony (1951)
Alberto Morrocco

A woman lies face down on a balcony, her slipper cast aside. Next to her, a man reads. This could be anywhere, but the artist's use of shade and light in this beautiful ink and wash painting lets us feel the heat of the Mediterranean afternoon, just as the casual position of the figures conveys their languid, sleepy, postprandial mood. ***Lunchtime on the Balcony (1951)*** is just one of the outstanding collection of pieces in ***Alberto Morrocco: Works on Paper*** now on at The Open Eye Gallery.

Alberto Morrocco was born in Aberdeen to Italian parents, entering Gray's School of Art at the age of only 14. There he came under the influence of **James Cowie** and **Robert Sivell**, both of whom placed emphasis on drawing.

Although Morrocco's style developed throughout his long career, quality of line and meticulous draughtmanship remained fundamental to his practice: *Works on Paper* is a testament not only to these skills, but also to his artistic genius, especially as a portrait painter. After graduating Morrocco spent much time in Europe, eventually returning to Scotland to become Head of Painting at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art in Dundee, a position he held for thirty two years.

He has been credited with laying the foundations for the high reputation that the college (now part of Dundee University) has today. He drew and painted what he saw around him; many of the pictures in this exhibition are of his wife **Vera Mercer**

(also an artist), their children and the Aberdeenshire countryside of his youth.

In *Vera, Sleeping* Vera lies on her back on a bed before an open window. Beside her is an open book; she has fallen asleep in the heat of the afternoon. Morrocco excels at drawing the curves of bodies, and here light from the window illuminates those curves; Vera's arms are folded across her breast in a scene that exudes calm and quietness. Another study with the same title shows Vera on a couch, this time in darkness, whilst in a third she leans back in a chair, awake now but still utterly relaxed.



Bedtime Cuddle.
Alberto Morrocco c
1946

Morrocco's paintings of babies are particularly charming: *Bath Time* shows us a gorgeously plump little person sitting in the tub, whilst *Bedtime Cuddle (1946)* is possibly the same infant, this time sitting on Vera's lap. Now the baby seems older, his legs dangle down almost to the floor – but the closeness of mother and child is palpable. Vera's expression is serene, even Madonna-like, as she spends this precious time with her baby.



Aberdeenshire Farmhouse (1948)
Alberto Morrocco

Aberdeenshire Farmhouse (1948) has a different mood; the house is seen through finely drawn trees, bare of their leaves. It is one of those moments of stillness that can even now be experienced in the rural north. *Through The Trees* is perhaps another study of the same house, but here there are leaves on the branches; spring has come. *Tenements* – one of my favourite pieces – is an ink and wash painting of a back yard in the

city. Washing hangs from a line strung from a window, two small children play; . although there are no other figures to be seen, you know that urban life is going on all around them.

Morrocco did not always stick to black and white; as travel became easier in the 1950s he started to paint colourful scenes of beaches and boats, together with vibrant still lifes. ***A Kitchen In Paris*** has an impressionistic style; a small boy sits at a table eating bread, whilst behind him we see a Belfast sink and a line of bottles in soft, mottled colours. It is a scene that is quintessentially French. Although he never really learned Italian, Morrocco visited the country several times; a large painting ***Zattere al Ponte Lunigo, Venice***, has for me echoes of the style of James McBey. In these paintings as in his earlier works, Morrocco shows a wonderful understanding of the human body; in ***Sunbathers (c 1970s)*** a woman stands beside another, who is seated – and beside her we see the sticking-out feet of a third, prone figure. All have good solid bodies; they are real – and the feet add an extra, witty comment. The charcoal drawings also impress; the simple lines of ***The Water Pump*** depict a woman sitting on a wall waiting for her pitcher to fill; ***The Bench*** (a drawing in conte) is a study of three old men, the outlines of their hats making them instantly recognisable; in the foreground a woman pushes a carriage pram.



Self portrait in the kitchen c
1960s, Alberto Morrocco

Morrocco painted a huge number of portraits in his lifetime, his subjects including all the principals of the University of Dundee and even the Queen Mother as its chancellor. Although these more formal works are not shown here, two self-portraits amply demonstrate his skill. In ***Self Portrait in the Kitchen***, he faces us, whilst behind him a mirror reflects infinite images of the scene.

Alberto Morrocco died in 1988; writing his obituary in *The Independent*, **Duncan MacMillan** spoke of his combining 'the best of Scottish directness with Italian warmth, courtesy and generosity of spirit. Throughout his long career as a painter, these qualities were reflected in his art.' A fitting epitaph to a wonderful artist.

All three of Alberto and Vera's children work in the arts; the Gallery is showing two of his son Leon's own works – in ***Gardens*** a figure complete with flat cap is outlined in the background of a flower-filled plot, the tops of the high stalks protected with little pots behind a fence. It is a charmingly realistic scene, and one still to be seen on many allotments.



Ruth Brownlee: Westerly Gales, West
Yell

The Open Eye Gallery is also hosting two other new exhibitions. In ***Coastline*** a number of artists contribute their interpretations of the varied and spectacular UK shorelines. **Sarah Carrington's *Rocks and Shallows, Melmore*** and ***Rocks at Low Tide, Iona***, are particularly impressive, as is **Catherine Davidson's *The Night Before***. **Richard Demarco's** smaller studies ***Millport Harbour*** and ***Arran Mountains from Millport*** are full of colour – pinks, greens and purples conveying the glowing glory of the west coast scenery, whilst their use in ***Blue Fishing Boat at Rothesay Harbour*** brings a feeling of evening, of the day closing.

Meanwhile **Ruth Brownlee's** first solo exhibition ***Shetland*** includes some spectacular paintings exploring the islands that have been Ruth's home since 1998; there is a strong sense of the power of the elements in this far flung part of the country. A final mention must be given to the woodblock pictures by **Mabel Alington Royds**. Royds travelled widely with

her artist husband Ernest Lumsden, and her travels are reflected in exotic Indian scenes such as ***Lamma Harvest***, in which musicians play drums and a horn as the workers toil, and ***The Shrine***. The simple colours – blue skies, brown robes, pink saris – in these pictures are both effective and appealing.

Works on Paper, Coastline and *Shetland* are all on now at The Open Eye Gallery, Abercromby Place. The gallery is open 10am-6pm Monday to Friday, 10am-4pm Saturdays. *Shetland* closes on 9th February 2015 and *Works on Paper* and *Coastline* continue until 11th February 2015.