

RSA New Contemporaries



A man lies face down on the sand; a woman in a sun hat sits on his back whilst another man manipulates his legs. A third man, in a deckchair, looks decidedly puzzled. What is going on?

✖ In **Luke Vinnicombe's** deceptively simple *Therapy on the Beach* nothing is quite as it seems; on closer inspection we see that the prostrate man is huge compared to the others; he is fully and formally clothed – his mauve tie stretches out at right angles across his towel – and his head is almost grotesque, his wide mouth crammed full of red teeth. Beside him on the bright yellow sand grows a tree such as never grew on a beach before. We start to feel a bit like Alice; curiouser and curiouser.

Vinnicombe, a recent graduate of Aberdeen's **Gray's School of Art**, is one of 65 exhibitors in ***RSA New Contemporaries 2017*** at the **Royal Scottish Academy** in Edinburgh, a show seeking to highlight 'the finest emerging artists and architects' selected from the Scottish 2016 degree shows. The exhibition encompasses sculpture, architecture, painting, film making, photography, printmaking and installation, and ably demonstrates the wealth of artistic skills and innovatory ideas coming out of the country's five schools of art.

While Vinnicombe describes his approach to painting as ✖ 'playful, with the subject set in a lively fictional world that may seem absurd...' others aim to challenge us through more sombre imagery. **Megan Rea (Edinburgh College of Art)** makes models of parts of buildings – entrances, staircases – then explores them further in her paintings. In looking at 'how (these) spaces alter when they are rid of life' Rea's work makes us feel slightly uncomfortable – anxious even – and anxiety is one of the themes that recurs throughout this

exhibition.


Doug Stevens (also ECA) has developed a sculptural work, *Condition Report*, based around the notion of anxiety; at the bottom of a wooden box words are fired at us from a videotape, each of them making us feel more and more unsettled. Stevens says 'I am particularly interested in how (anxiety) simultaneously manifests itself on both a deeply personal, individual level and as a collective effect influenced by large scale structures and systems embedded in society.' Whether we are worried about world politics or our own personal problems, most of us are probably more worried than we were this time last year, and it shows.


✖ Perhaps it is for this reason that some artists have turned back to the natural world for inspiration. Wester Ross-born **Kirsty Wallace (Moray School of Art, University of the Highlands and Islands)** has created *Shelter* (right), a life-sized Lowland Travellers' bothy. *Shelter* is formed from a frame of hazel wood over which is stretched felted wool.


Joyce Cartwright, Moray's Programme Leader, says of Kirsty that she 'embraces the culture and (forms) a shared experience by guiding viewers through the work to explore her world' and indeed visitors to the show can take off their shoes and creep into the cosy interior of this beautiful construction. Kirsty also displays a bowl of blaeberrries; they look good enough to eat, but in this instance they are used as part of the dyeing process. Firmly rooted in her local environment, Kirsty ✖ seeks to explore 'my sense of the almost intangible interweaving of ancient textile techniques, text/story, tactility, handwork and healing, and how these can all be linked through the interlacing connections of the mind into a coherent fabric of embodied story.'

✖ The artistic standing of **Dundee University's Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art & Design** continues to soar, and the work of the alumni exhibiting here will only add to its

status, from **Claire Connor's** powerful cardboard placards ('*Thur is such a hing is society*' , '*Yull fun nae answers here*') to **Lily Hassioti's** innovative *Garden of Evolution*, an installation that at first looks like a traditional maze but reveals itself as a collection of QR codes. Originally created in Dundee's Botanic Gardens, the work invites the viewer to scan the codes to listen to a series of sound pieces. The codes work as connectors between the physical and the digital as the sounds accompany the viewer's walk round the garden.

Interaction with nature is also seen in **Jasmine Summerton's**  (Duncan of Jordanstone) lithographic prints of the Cairngorm National Park as seen from her portable observatory. She identified the nine compass stations of the park, and collected water from nine rivers to make her beautiful wooden compass, carved from Scots pine from the ancient Caledonian forest. Her nine prints reflect different aspects of this magnetic landscape.

 **Katie Watson** (Gray's, now Artist-in Residence at **Leith School of Art**) also looks at nature, but her special interest is man's attempts to cultivate and tame it. 'I feel guilt for the suffering of other species, but as a painter...it is my 'natural' inclination to see the fantastic sculptural quality there is to the collision of 'abstract' human architecture and natural architecture.' Watson's diptych *A Divided Landscape* (part shown left) with its still, contemplative mood, draws our attention to the lines of ploughshares, pines and gates.

The theme of anxiety recurs in architecture. *The Otemachi Tower* is **Oliver Beetschen, Jonathan Piper** and **Shimai Morjaria's** (The Edinburgh School of Architecture and  **Landscape Architecture**) project to re-design a building in downtown Tokyo. They consider the effects that our risk-averse society has on design; if architects and builders are insured against all conceivable catastrophes, does that make them less likely to take care in their work? Does insurance actually

make buildings potentially more dangerous?

There is so much to enjoy and admire in this excellent exhibition. I have only two issues with it; the first is the lack of space to view – and perhaps more importantly to hear – video/sound installations, much of whose effect is drowned out by the busy, noisy, slightly crowded rooms; the second is the opaque, obscure and downright nonsensical language of some artists' statements. A few simple lines about the artist and his/her ideas are so much more accessible than a page of gobbledygook.

✖ This leads me to my very favourite *RSA New Contemporaries* pieces, **Sam Drake's (Glasgow School of Art)** mysterious, atmospheric and most skilfully painted *Everyday is like Sunday* and *The Alchemist (A Portrait of Nathan Dubovitsky)* (above). Drake's artist's statement is actually not that short. It tells us what he's trying to do ('explore the tipping point between abstraction and figuration...free(ing) the figure from connotations of identity, using them as a vessel for obscurity and the universal') and how he does it – 'dripping varnish into undulations of paint, (incorporating) mono-printing in the under painting and (exploiting) various tools such as plastic bags and cling film...collages are made before paintings which involve a layered process' – see? Even to a non-artist like me that makes sense. These paintings are subtle, ambiguous, haunting; they combine technical expertise and big ideas; like Kirsty Wallace's *Shelter*, they tell stories. The viewer wants and needs to return to them many times, and every time they will evoke new feelings and ideas. Drake has already won the RSA Keith Prize and the Richard Ford Award; he is destined for great things.

RSA New Contemporaries has many messages, but the most important one by far must be that the future of Scotland's art is in good – and exciting – hands.

RSA New Contemporaries 2017 is open 10am-5pm Monday to Saturday, 12 noon-5pm Sundays, until 15 March at the [Royal Scottish Academy](#), The Mound. Admission £5/£3; the ticket price includes a high quality catalogue.

