

At The Scottish National Portrait Gallery – Graham Fagen: The Slave’s Lament

GRAHAM FAGEN: THE SLAVE’S LAMENT

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Scottish National Portrait Gallery

1 Queen Street, Edinburgh EH2 1JD

0131 624 6200 | Admission FREE

#GrahamFagen

Part of Edinburgh Art Festival 2017



A fascinating artwork inspired by a pivotal moment in the life of Robert Burns and the poignant beauty of one of his celebrated poems, will be shown in Edinburgh for the first time this summer, when it will be on display at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery.

The Slave’s Lament, a four-screen audio-visual installation by the distinguished Scottish artist, Graham Fagen, takes as its starting point Burns’s haunting lyric of the same name. Published in 1792, the poem was written from the perspective of an African man forced into slavery and exile in Virginia, who despairs of his fate and longs for his homeland of Senegal.

Fagen’s work embraces sculpture, drawing and photography, writing and text, installation and performance, and he often works with artists from a range of different disciplines. For *The Slave’s Lament*, his collaborators include the Scottish composer Sally Beamish, who has written a beautiful score for Burns’s evocative lyrics. Her music, for violin, cello and double bass, is played by members of the Scottish Ensemble and

sung by reggae artist Ghetto Priest, while production and guitar are provided by Adrian Sherwood and Skip McDonald, who helped to found the legendary dub record label On-U Sound.

The installation touches upon a significant moment in Burns's life, when the poet came close to taking up a position on a Jamaican sugar plantation. In 1786, despairing of his impoverished circumstances and his tangled love life, Burns decided to leave Scotland for an estate near Port Antonio, in which his friend Patrick Douglas had invested. It was only the timely publication and instant success of his first volume of poems that prevented him from making that journey.

The struggle against injustice is a powerful theme in Burns's poetry, and his empathy with the oppressed is evident in *The Slave's Lament*. Fagen's thought-provoking installation therefore presents a fascinating meditation on an alternative trajectory in Burns's life, and its unknowable impact on his work, his legacy, his reputation and on world literature.

Born in Glasgow in 1966, Fagen is one of the UK's foremost contemporary artists; he was selected to represent Scotland at the 2015 Venice Biennale, the world's most important showcase for contemporary art, where he premiered *The Slave's Lament*. His broad-ranging work is often concerned with the ways in which the lives of individuals and communities are shaped by external forces, and has previously touched upon turning points in social and cultural history. Growing up in the west of Scotland, as he did, there was no escaping the poetry of Burns, and he is also fascinated by the significance of popular music in people's lives, as a force that reflects and defines personal and collective experience and identity.

The Slave's Lament is also informed by Fagen's passion for reggae music, which originated in Jamaica, and his broader interest in the theme of slavery. Since its initial showing in Venice, a hub for the trafficking of slaves for hundreds of years, the installation has also been seen at Hospitalfield in

Arbroath, whose staff curated the Venice exhibition. Shown in a different format at each venue, *The Slave's Lament* continues to resonate, reflecting the ongoing displacement of people across the world today.

From 29 July to 29 October the SNP Gallery will also be showing *Douglas Gordon: Black Burns*, a work by another prominent Scottish artist, inspired by Burns. This site-specific installation will be a response to the full-length marble statue of Burns which stands in the Gallery's Great Hall. John Flaxman's exceptionally fine and subtle sculpture confers heroic status upon the poet, and celebrates a set of universal virtues that have been ascribed to him, but does not perhaps address the more complex and nuanced nature of the man himself. Douglas Gordon, whose work is often concerned with revealing a conflict and tension in the Scottish psyche will aim to render Flaxman's totemic sculpture of Scotland's national hero at once more human, more vulnerable and more exposed.