

Edinburgh Art Festival 2017: Scottish Heritage Inspires Something New

by *Madeleine Kaye*

Scotland's largest visual art festival returns for its 14th year, as Edinburgh itself celebrates its 70th anniversary as a festival city.

Edinburgh Art Festival (EAF) is one of the youngest festivals in Edinburgh and it's 'a proud grandchild of the rich festival culture', as described by Director **Sorcha Carey** at the programme launch yesterday.



Sorcha Carey Director of Edinburgh Art Festival with Bobby Niven who has created the Palm House/Artists' Workshop at Johnston Terrace Wildlife Garden.

With each year EAF has grown more impressive and more entertaining, with this year's programme exploring Scotland's heritage and presenting the emerging artists who are inspired by it.

Scottish history is the basis of one of the festival's highlights, **Douglas Gordon's** installation '*Black Burns*' being shown in the **Scottish National Portrait Gallery (SNPG)**.

Turner Prize-winning, Glaswegian born, artist Douglas Gordon typically uses film and photo to explore ideas concerning modern identity, as shown in his widely exhibited film '*24 Hour Psycho*' 1993. Gordon's '*Self-portrait as Kurt Cobain, as Andy Warhol, as Myra Hindley, as Marilyn Monroe*' 1996, currently on display in the SNPG's ***The Modern Portrait***

exhibition is another of his characteristically humorous pieces. Yet for *'Black Burns'* Gordon draws on some much older inspiration, the full-length marble statue of Robert Burns sculpted by **John Flaxman** in 1842, currently housed in the Portrait Gallery. The supernatural and melancholic themes apparent in some of Burns' work can be felt in Gordon's response. The dramatic installation is a darkly lit replica of Flaxman's original sculpture, which aims to render the totemic image of the national poet as an exposed and nuanced individual. It can be seen from many view points on the ambulatory above where the mythical Celtic murals deserve more than a glance

The SNPG has another installation which examines the Scottish poet; **Graham Fagen's** *'The Slave's Lament'*.



Still from the Slave's Lament 2015 by Graham Fagen

Since its initial showing in Venice, the installation has been extensively exhibited but shown in a different format at each venue. The installation takes Burns' famous lyric as its starting point, and examines a time in Burns' life when he considered taking a position on a Jamaican sugar plantation where he would have been directly involved in the punishment of slaves.

The poet declined this position after he experienced sudden success from a timely publication of a volume of his work. Themes of injustice and oppression are present in Burns' poetry and it is this expressive legacy, contrasted with his possible alternative trajectory, which is the basis of Fagen's meditation. Fagen employed artists from different disciplines to create the multi-dimensional piece, and here his collaborators include the founders of dub record label **On-U Sound**, reggae artist **Ghetto Priest**, and composer **Sally Beamish**.

Even more can be learnt about Scottish art and craft in the **Dovecot Gallery**, which will present the story of key women weavers and other artists who have contributed to the tapestry studio's history in the exhibition, **Daughters of Penelope**. Contemporary tapestries by female artists like **Christine Borland** and **Dame Elizabeth Blackadder** will be shown alongside key historical works as the exhibition investigates the history and cultural identity of women as expressed through their textile work.

One of the many international artists showing in the festival is the American **Ed Ruscha**, with his exhibition **Music from the Balconies, Ed Ruscha and Los Angeles** held in the ARTIST ROOMS of **The Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art**.

Ruscha plays with Los Angeles imagery and text to create sleek and clean pictures which are a contemporary blend of painting, conceptual art, and pop culture, and which bring a uniquely American influence to the festival. The gallery also presents **True to Life: British Realist Painting in the 1920s and 1930s**, an exhibition bringing to light the often-ignored generation of artists who worked in a realist vein between the wars.

The inaugural exhibition of the **NOW** series is also open in the Gallery's Modern One building. It is a three-year programme of six exhibitions featuring some of the most exciting artists of today. The first exhibition in the series begins with **Nathan Coley** and his impressive piece, *'The Lamp of Sacrifice, 286 Places of Worship, Edinburgh 2004'*, a recreation of every place of worship in Edinburgh, where visitors can spot their local church, mosque, etc in miniature cardboard form.

At the City Art Centre the celebration of Edinburgh and its history continues while working with museums across the city to create **Edinburgh Alphabet, an A-Z of the City's Collections**. The venue will also be presenting emerging artists in their new Alt-w LAB, where New Media Scotland

mounts the first UK exhibition of work by **Thought Collider**, a collaboration between **Susan Cámara Leret** and **Mike Thompson**. Leret and Thompson aim to experiment with meanings and values, and to explore metabolic processes, bodies, and spaces using modern techniques and media.

Over on Calton Hill at the **Collective** gallery, London-based artist **Patrick Staff** has created an audio guide for the hill using research into its ecology and botanical formations. As an artist who has looked at sexuality in culture before, most notably in his film exploring the legacy of the homoerotic artist Tom of Finland, Staff uses this knowledge to examine how the geography of Calton Hill can be used to investigate the queer body, and also labour and dissent. Even newer art is to be displayed as part of the Collective's Satellites programme; Glasgow School of Art graduate **Ross Little**'s film and installation work looks at the ship-breaking yards of India, and at life on board a transatlantic cruise ship.

Talbot Rice Gallery hosts exhibitions by **Stephen Sutcliffe** and **Jacob Kerray**. Sutcliffe's exhibition takes its name from a review of David Storey's novel, *Radcliffe*, **Stephen Sutcliffe: Sex Symbols in Sandwich Signs**. The review was critical of all the qualities Sutcliffe claims to admire, namely the novel's bleak and alienating narrative.

Through Sutcliffe's distinctive video work utilising archive footage, the exhibition expands on recurrent themes in the artist's work; self-doubt, obsession, and class conflict. Kerray, meanwhile, was commissioned by the gallery to respond to the University of Edinburgh's vast collections, and to create his colourful paintings with his personal themes of belief, taste, morality, and pro-wrestling, to be presented in the Talbot Rice Round Room.

For more fresh talent there is the **Edinburgh College of Art's Masters Show** showing at different campus buildings in August and culminating with a concert featuring new experimental

electronic music and installations from the Masters students.

For something outside the city centre (and in the outdoors!) there is **Jupiter Artland**, which is hosting the Argentine artist **Pablo Bronstein**. His outdoor piece '*The Rose Walk*' is a connected pavilion structure celebrating the Gothic and Chinoises Revival styles, met through a 25m long rose garden.

These imposing follies will simultaneously act as entrance to, and framing of, Jupiter Artland's promenade. The venue also hosts a commission of one of the many emerging artists featured in this year's festival. For his first outdoor commission **Marco Giordano** has taken inspiration from the historic stonework set around Jupiter Artland (and if you haven't been you really must go). He has created an avenue of sculptures emitting a mist of water that symbolically offers a blessing to each person who passes along the road.

These are just some of the events taking place during Edinburgh Art Festival 2017.

To see more you can visit the festival kiosk in Gladstone Court, go to www.edinburghartfestival.com or follow them on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#).