

Portrait Postcards: Glasgow School of Fine Art 1975-2015

This is a work-in-progress exhibition by Barry Atherton and Linda Atherton at the Studio Pavilion and ART PARK, House for an Art Lover, Glasgow.

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As I began to write this introduction I was reminded of two apparently trivial events from my student years. They are both remarkably profound in their implications for this exhibition. The first event took place in the Nag's Head pub in Covent Garden. I was enjoying a pint with an old friend, an orchestral musician by profession, between his rehearsals at the Opera House. My friend made a disarmingly honest off-the-cuff remark, "I don't understand how people can look at a painting for hours. It's not as though it's going to move". I was about to start my postgraduate course in Painting at the Royal Academy Schools and my friend's comment provoked serious doubts, as well as some hilarity, about my chosen career. He had unwittingly thrown a spanner in the works. I began to ask myself some difficult questions: In the age of film and television is painting anachronistic? Is painting obsolete?

The second apparently trivial event occurred a few days later when I visited the RA library for the first time. The librarian asked me for the title of the book I wished to see but, not knowing where to begin, I pointed sheepishly to a book in one of the display cases. She unlocked the glass-panelled door and handed it to me. Still distracted by the elaborate columns and cornices of the library's interior architecture I sat down, opened the book, and read a few pages. After a short time I returned the book to the librarian. She replaced it on the shelf and locked the cabinet door.

The ideas I encountered in those few pages in the RA library and my friend's throw-away comment in the Nag's Head had a strange and complementary resonance. The questions they provoked took me by surprise at the time and like Chinese whispers echoed quietly in my subconscious mind influencing my work for more than four decades.

In later years I was able to attribute the book to a distinguished German dramatist and philosopher. I had stumbled quite fortuitously on the very text that would provide answers to those difficult questions: *Laocoön* by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. Lessing's masterwork compares Virgil's poetic representation of the Laocoön myth in the Aeneid to the sculptural representation of Laocoön in the celebrated Hellenistic statue. The key idea I take from Lessing is this: Poetry and Music unfold over time; Painting, Sculpture and Architecture also unfold over time as the viewer moves to experience the work.

My current project *Portrait Postcards: Glasgow School of Fine Art 1975-2015* is a large and complicated history painting. The concept of unfolding over time has played an important part in the painting's development, not only in the time taken to produce it, but in the anticipated response of the viewer confronting the finished work.

The painting is based on four decades of Glasgow School of Fine Art history. The original idea for the painting came from a conversation with GSA art historian, Ray McKenzie. He suggested we bring together in a commemorative work three people whose influence on the School helped to establish its international reputation, the former heads of department: Sam Ainsley, David Harding and Alexander Moffat (affectionately known together as AHM).

We began work on three panels and set the scene in the Mackintosh Museum at GSA. Early on in the progress of the painting we decided to include a ‘supporting cast’ of artists from the Fine Art School, many of whom have high-profile careers in the visual arts and are former students and colleagues of AHM. This gave rise to the question of who should be represented in the painting. We knew from the start we must include as many people as possible and be wide-ranging in our choices. AHM were emphatic in their advice: be inclusive, democratic and egalitarian.

As a way of giving equal representation to a large number of artists we came up with the idea of an exhibition of artists' postcards. As far as subject matter was concerned we decided to restrict the postcards to Portrait because a large number of GSFA artists continue to work in that tradition. By adding two extra panels, one hundred and sixty artists' postcards are now showcased. AHM themselves are placed centre stage, each in one of the three central panels. In all, two hundred and forty-seven GSFA artists are now represented. The overall number of artists shown is still growing. More panels and more postcards may be added later. After all, this is a work in progress.

The postcard portraits are transcriptions of GSFA artists' original artworks taken either from my own earlier paintings and photographs or sourced online. They are my homage to the achievements of GSFA.

The generous dimensions of this project allow us to think of it as a well-populated visual novel, a one-act stage play, or even an opera with full cast of players. The Mackintosh Museum becomes a perfect choral auditorium, as Michael Stumpf's sculpture commands us all, “Now sing”. Removed from its temporary home on the roof of the new Reid building, Stumpf's *poème concret* is relocated in our imagination to the ceiling space of the Mackintosh Museum. Most of the participants in the performance are confronting the audience through the imaginary fourth wall of the theatre-like space. Are we anticipating a critical response to the exhibition of postcards or even a round of applause?

As well as the major narrative the painting is full of minor but no less dramatic sub-plots. The fourth panel shows a funeral pyre of academic art. Was it a mistake for art schools to abandon the academic tradition and the teaching of visual perceptual skills? Marcel Duchamp's *Bottle Rack* is mysteriously placed beside an image of a carved Corinthian capital by Michelle de Bruin. Why? An allegory in modern dress based on Nicholas Poussin's *Et in Arcadia Ego* is performed by GSA artists, Ross Sinclair, Roderick Buchanan, Gregory Rankin and Christine Borland. What have they just discovered? Are they admiring the towering achievements of our famous predecessors, Henry Raeburn, Nicholas Poussin and Pierre-Paul Prud'hon? Or are they rejecting traditional ways of thinking and of practising art?

Viewing a painting on the scale and complexity of *Portrait Postcards: Glasgow School of Fine Art 1975-2015* takes time. The more one interrogates it the more time it takes. My musician friend was right to challenge my assumptions. Paintings do not move in the obvious sense but through the process of interpreting them they are defined by time, just as much as the temporal arts. And yes, people can look at a painting for hours.

Barry Atherton October 2016

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