

Through Burns Country

Fiona Stafford

It's difficult to know what to make of the large face gazing from the centre of Calum Colvin's Burns Country. The striking features are instantly recognisable, and yet it's not someone we've met in person: this is a portrait of a portrait of a portrait. A plait of reeds and leaves encircles the head, but does this suggest a picture frame, a window or even a mirror? Robert Burns may be appearing, larger than life in the woods and fields outside, or his face may have been caught, reproduced, and hung on the yellow wallpaper in the living room. Perhaps he is not there at all – and the arresting image is what each of us projects – an idea of Burns that is always some sort of self-portrait.

Colvin's artwork captures the inherent complications of 'Burns Country' – is it real or is it an idea? Internal or external? Common ground or somewhere deeply personal? 'Burns Country' often refers to an area around Ayrshire down as far as Dumfries, where the poet once lived and worked, the land that he made his own and transformed for ever through his writing, but it also means the poet's huge cultural domain: the fields and fields of poetry, art, music, museums, performance, publishing, literary scholarship, Scottish studies, popular tradition, memorabilia, tourism and national heritage. 'Burns' has become an adjective as much as a Proper noun, as easy to attach to a Club, a Supper, a stamp, a snuffbox or a tea towel as to a poem. Burns's manuscript –or a Burns manuscript? One suggests that the poet is in charge, the other that he's an aspect of a valuable object.

Colvin's work encompasses both the extraordinary commercial legacy and the remarkably resilient power of the art from which it derived. Burns's songs and poems continue to speak directly to new audiences as freshly as to those of centuries past – you only have to read or hear a couple of lines to recognise the authentic voice. Seeing Burns is another matter, of course. Colvin's Burns is based on Archibald Skirving's, which in turn derived from Alexander Nasmyth's. There are very few original portraits of Burns taken from life, so almost all the countless representations since his death in 1796 have derived from the Nasmyth portrait. Skirving's beautiful drawing, which loosened Burns's hair into more Romantic wisps and made the eyes as sensitive as any poetry-lover could wish for, was already a step

or two from life. There Burns is caught for ever, as if in aspic or formaldehyde, or rather, like photos of James Dean or Kurt Cobain – never allowed to grow old. Had he lived to ninety and been portrayed over the decades, this would probably still have been the image cherished by admirers – Burns in his late 20s, the brilliant author of *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*.

A striking feature of Colvin's work over the years has been its insistence on the passage of time. If photography suggests the captured moment or the visual documentary, truthful in its ability to record what was there, these artworks operate very differently. There is no desire to render Burns as he might have looked on a particular day, for the strong lines of this stylised portrait are furrowed with different moments and meanings. Colvin brings Burns to life by evoking his poems and marshalling material remnants of what they have meant to so many in the centuries since his death. This is a portrait not just of the man himself, but of the immortal memory. The idolatry that gradually transformed an eighteenth-century painting into an icon is all part of Burns Country, where the central portrait is surrounded by books, mauchline ware, ceramic figurines, and a candle, burning as if at the shrine. Some of the best-known poems are signalled in the foreground detail of the mouse, nest and plough, or the more distant birks, cornfields and yellow woods. The woven wreath recalls 'Green grow the rashes' and the 'Green, slender, leaf-clad Holly boughs' worn by Coila in Burns's poem, The Vision, though the blood-red, paint-spot berries also evoke the crown of thorns. Burns is at once the national poet, inspired by the muse of his native land, a figure who inspires quasi-religious devotion, but perhaps, at heart, a man who suffered and died.



Burns Country 2012

But if Colvin's artworks have the power to suggest deeply thought-provoking parallels, they also reveal a contrary urge to send up the self-importance of those who claim to be reading into art when really imposing upon it. Throughout his career, seriousness and satire have been closely intertwined, sacred blood and paint spots easily mistaken. The artist who delights in 'visual puns', offers generous invitations to share the joke – but viewers who accept may still be left wondering whether the real point has eluded them. Interviews, essays and exhibition catalogues open helpful avenues into Colvin's art, but the works themselves are packed with disconcerting details, which give rise to further surprises, and quiet revelations. Like Burns's verbal puns, Colvin's visual puns offer both immediate aesthetic pleasure and the satisfaction of additional meaning. The rustic Muse of The Vision features in Colvin's artwork as a diminutive, young, tartan-clad, figurine, extending a shapely leg from beside a

ceramic clock, and thereby drawing attention to the literary dimensions of the central design. Burns's poem concludes with her binding holly around the temples of the poet:

The polished leaves and berries red

Did rustling play;

And like a passing thought, she fled

In light away.

The 'rustling' suggests an acoustic dimension to 'play', which blends with the alternative 'play' of light surrounding the vanishing Muse; but this elegant fusion of meaning is also playful, as is the entire poem. The Vision is Burns's artistic manifesto, setting out his ambition to become a great poet and to immortalise his native land, but it is also a comic masterpiece, addressing writer's block and making fun of the habitual self-aggrandisement of poets. In other words, its 'play' is at once serious and comic – and the poem's self-knowing character introduces yet another dimension of the word 'play', which means a theatrical performance. All of these ideas, which Burns wove so deftly into The Vision, are there in Burns Country – as well as in other pieces belonging to the 'Burnsiana' series. In Colvin's artwork, a musical instrument, such as a guitar, can catch the play of light and create a play of features. Each creation is carefully set up, as if on a stage, to conjure up different stories, while simultaneously drawing attention to their illusory, created nature. It is not surprising that one of Burns's alter-egos is the self-consciously theatrical poet, Lord Byron. In these stage sets, the characters are inseparable from the props, and so a bookshelf stands as a metaphor for the internal workings of the poet's mind and for the physicality of the skull beneath the skin. (The memento mori is rarely absent from these works, though it's as likely to take the form of a jolly, Halloween toy or anamorphic puzzle, as of a sombre, traditional death's head.)



Negative Sublime I (Anaglyph) 2008



Negative Sublime II (Anaglyph) 2008

Again and again, Colvin presents images with different dimensions and, therefore, multiple meanings. The Twa Dogs, for example, figures 'rock music' as a small boulder on a record player and a football

'fan' in the decorative, paper fan on the far side of the hearth rug. The standard lamp in the 'Camera Lucida' series is anything but 'standard', even though it reminds us of the common (or standard) destiny of humankind.

The serious pun established in the moving sequence of meditations on death, decay, and memorialising carries the same ideas into Burns Country, though here the reappearance of the lamp brings new light, through recalling an idea, dominant in Romantic poetry, of the creative mind as lamp rather than mirror - an active agent not a passive reflector of external things. In its new setting, the standard lamp is further magnified by an additional pun on 'standard' (as opposed to 'non-standard') language - distinctions central to Burns's playful poetry, which in turn links the standard lamp to the little dictionary lying on the ground below the portrait. This detail, featuring a dictionary under the plough, has been explained by Colvin as an image indebted to an Elvis Costello lyric, 'like a chainsaw cutting through a dictionary', which represents Burns composing as he worked. Some viewers may be reminded just as much of Heaney's 'Vowels ploughed' in the Glanmore sonnets. Burns's poems came while he was ploughing, as To a Mouse makes plain, but in his bold use of Scots he was also ploughing through eighteenth-century notions of literary language and opening the ground for those whose language differed from Dr Johnson's dictionary definitions. Colvin's images give concrete form to abstract ideas, turning metaphors into things and in so doing, reanimating the commonplace.

Through his focus on common words, Colvin draws together objects that initially seem disparate. Visual puns offer invisible repairs to the apparent fragmentation of what has been assembled – an allusive counterpart to the visual power of the arrangement. For although these works are built from strange materials, the overall designs, with their careful colour, strong lines, and balance of light and dark, all cohere to create a stunning whole. These artworks dwell on fragmentation, but still emerge as powerfully unified pieces – in a kind of postmodern concordia discors, or creation from chaos. Puns also raise awareness of the constructed nature of art – when a writer includes words with double meanings, the reader's experience of an imaginative illusion is momentarily interrupted by the need to consider an alternative sense. Immediately, a new dimension opens up, as the reader becomes an active participant in the creation of meaning. Visual puns, similarly, unsettle the immediate response to a picture, by encouraging focus on a detail that may, in turn, lead to new trains of thought and fresh connections.



Twa Dogs, 2002

The clues are everywhere in Burnsiana, which becomes a multi-media experience as viewing sets so many familiar songs - the Red, Red Rose, The Braes of Ballochmyle or The Rigs o Barley - to play in the brain. The visual details operate in the same way as allusions in a complex literary work, enriching the central narrative with powerful moments from other texts. The parallels between art and writing are especially marked in the holly leaves of Burns Country, which refer specifically to The Vision and more generally to the pages – or ‘leaves’ – of all the books that inhabit these literary portraits. Their bold lines are visual versions of the lines of verse, the printed memorabilia, evocations of Burns’s ‘guid, black prent’ and every other published text. Poetry and Art are not so much ‘Sister Arts’ as twins – or doubles. Colvin’s wittily self-conscious art has been playing with parallels for many years – the recurrent chests of half-open drawers or curtains invite us to think about artworks that are partly drawn, partly crafted and partly photographic. In his recent work, ceramics have offered similarly self-reflexive possibilities,

as traditional printing plates become printed plates, which in turn depict images of antique, commemorative ware. These extraordinary ceramic works commemorate Burns, Byron and Napoleon, but in the process they are also celebrating the memorabilia of the past, so often discarded by sophisticated modernity and yet there to be recovered through new forms of art.



Top: Burns Country (Ceramic) 2012

Bottom: Burns Ceramic Plate, Wood & Sons c.1914

Colvin's attraction to the heroes of the Romantic era is ironised by the inclusion of mass-produced commercial giftware, infusing his work with a mock-heroic quality, in keeping with his satirical bent. Rather than see this springing from impatience with the triviality or materialism of contemporary society as the mock-heroic is so often taken to suggest, however, Colvin's juxtapositions of low and high art derive just as much from a desire to elevate the ordinary and recognise the grandeur hidden in unlikely places.

Perhaps the most affecting piece in Burnsiana is the Portrait of Colin McLuckie, a tribute to the Burns reciter and former miner, whom Colvin knew from childhood. There is no mockery in this portrait, but rather deep respect for a man whose mind was capacious enough to carry Burns, along with memories of coal mining, and all those other, unrecorded moments of a long, full life. This portrait is as true to Burns as the images of Burns himself, in its understanding of the human condition and willingness to glory in what takes place every day in sheds, village halls and sitting rooms. The spots on the ground are dirt, paint, coal dust, tears and stars, the threads of wool are a life unravelling, and yet, still poised to become another story, to be woven into art.