

Evolving methods

Calum Colvin and Victoria Crowe share a talent for fusing disparate elements into a satisfying whole

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Binocular rivalry is the phenomenon that occurs when both eyes see different images simultaneously. The brain, unable to reconcile the conflict, leaves the eyes to fight it out. Sometimes one prevails, sometimes the other and instead of merging, the images shift back and forth from left to right and back again.

In his show, *Magic Box*, at Edinburgh Printmakers, Calum Colvin incorporates this effect into a stereoscopic portrait of the scientist and pioneer promoter of photography, Sir David Brewster. In one small detail one eye sees a saltire, the other a St George's cross. They compete, but don't ever merge enough to suggest a Union Jack. The visual subtlety, the sophistication of the image and the evident, richly informed understanding of optics are all part of Colvin's work, but so is the wry topicality of that little detail.

In Printmakers' tiny space, the exhibition makes a kind of condensed retrospective. It works rather as his pictures do, by subtle layering and cross-references.

To make an image, Colvin usually works upwards from an installation that includes sculpture, found objects, mirrors and all sorts of other things. He photographs this and then takes it through various further transformations. Painting and sculpture are part of the process as well as photography, but so are assemblage, collage and various printing processes.

The work on view ranges in date from the late 1980s to the present, but the works on the wall are supported by a display of large format transparencies. These represented the final stage of his work before printing, when film photography was still his

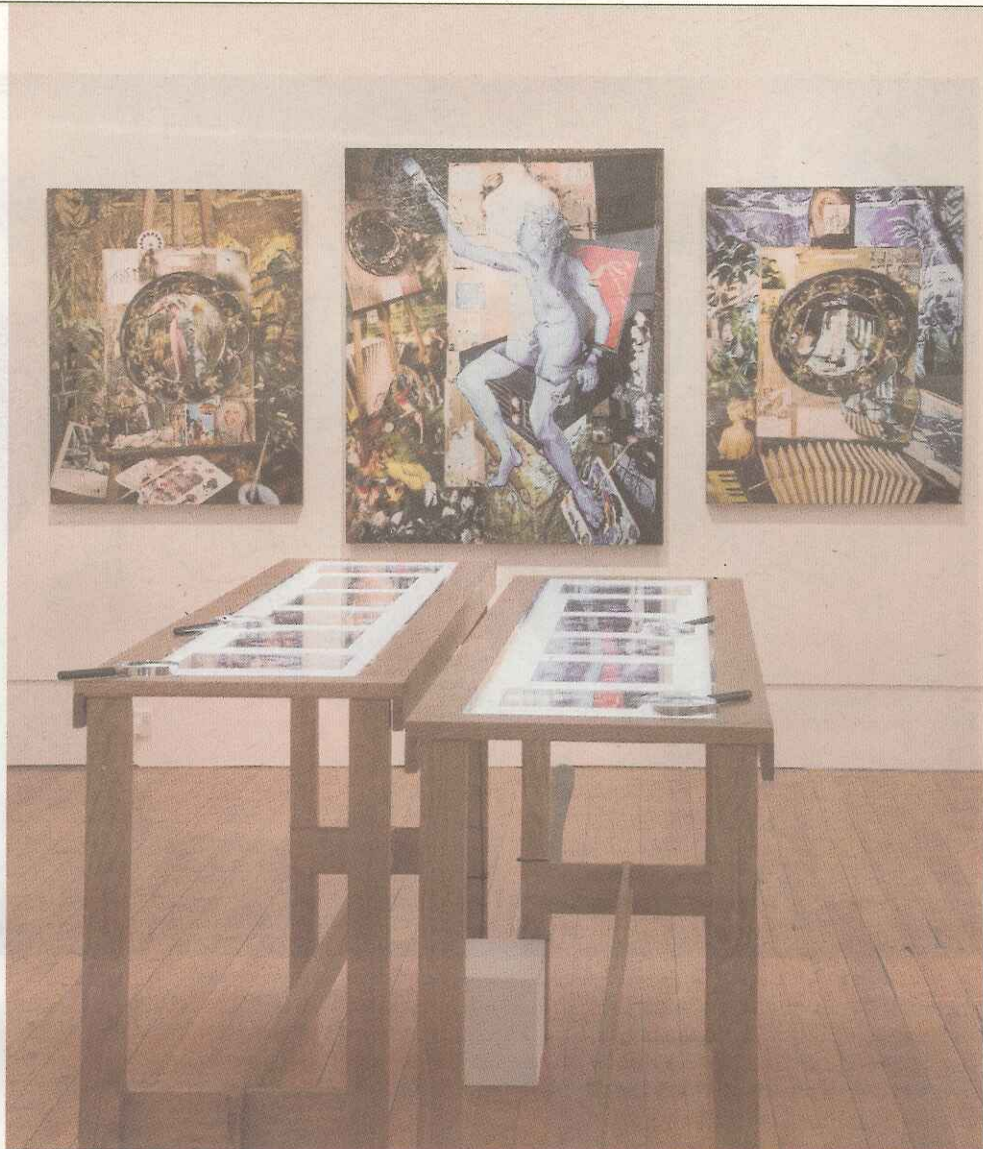
principal vehicle. Digital imaging and computer manipulation have evolved over these same years. His method of working has changed accordingly and this part of his story is also told in the techniques used in the images in the show.

But there is the added bonus that the artist himself has set up his studio in the gallery to work on a portrait of Janice Galloway. You can see how he works because you can see him working.

Colvin is one of the most glaring omissions from Generation's highly tendentious selection of Scottish art of the last 25 years. He should qualify. He is in his fifties and his syncretic way of working parallels, but also anticipates, Steven Campbell's approach in *On Form and Fiction*, the exhibition reconstructed as the arbitrary starting point for Generation.

Colvin is no doubt disqualified on two grounds, however. He has never been nominated for the Turner Prize, nor is he likely to be, and although there is also a great deal more to it, his art is topical. "Don't mention the referendum" seems to be an unspoken subtext of Generation, but Colvin's *Ossian* series from ten years ago, part of which is on view here, is one of the most subtle reflections on the whole question of Scottish identity offered by anyone in recent years.

Similar thinking informs his *Burnsiana* series and he is currently working on a new Jacobite series for the Scottish National Portrait Gallery. He has always been happy to skewer the tacky side of Scottish identity's forms of expression, so Bonnie Prince Charlie – or, remembering the controversy over his supposed portrait in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, perhaps it is his brother Henry Benedict? – gradually dissolves into a kitsch



CALUM COLVIN: MAGIC BOX

Edinburgh Printmakers

★★★★

DALZIELL + SCULLION: TUMADH: IMMERSION

Dovecot Studios, Edinburgh

★★

URBAN-SUBURBAN

City Art Centre, Edinburgh

★★★★

VICTORIA CROWE: REAL AND REFLECTED

Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh

★★★★★

equestrian monument against lace curtains.

Colvin deserves much more space, but there is nevertheless much else to give delight and to inform here. His phantograms – three-dimensional pictures that need green and red specs – are fascinating, for instance, but so is the opportunity to peer into the depths of his large-format transparencies with a magnifying glass.

Edinburgh Printmakers are to be congratulated for correcting this grievous omission from Generation, but if Colvin is omitted, Dalziell + Scullion at Dovecot are very much part of it. They're at Dovecot because Harris Tweed – the weaving of it – is their chosen medium.

They have set up mannequins wearing odd tweed garments and there is a film of a lugubrious chap wearing a tweed hoodie communing with the trees and the flowers. In the centre of the room, a headless female figure trails an immense tweed skirt 15 feet behind her to suggest a kind of landscape.

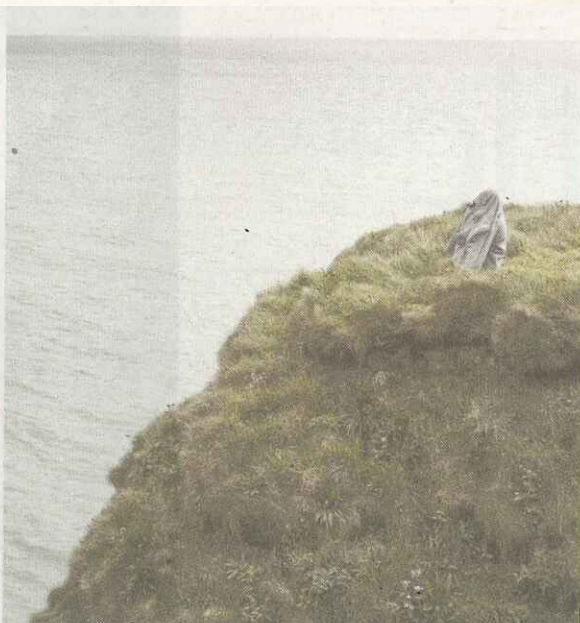
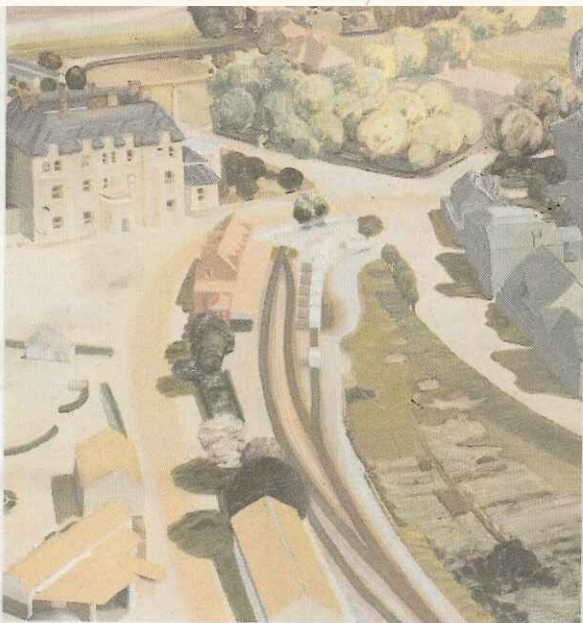
The point all this labours so earnestly is that Harris Tweed is a natural material made from the wool of sheep nurtured in the landscape that also provides the dyes for the fabric. So to make a Harris Tweed skirt look like a landscape is really

clever, isn't it? In the next room are some handsome boulders of Lewisian Gneiss and some pictures of blue skies. On the walls in both rooms are appropriately woolly quotes adapted from David Abram's book *Becoming Animal: an Earthly Cosmology*: "Blending our skin with the rain-rippled surface of rivers, mingling our ears with the thunder and the thrumming of frogs" etc, etc. Abram is an American environmental guru whose writing seems to state at considerable length the obvious: we are part of the world we inhabit.

There is certainly an urgent problem in our relationship with the natural world, but I am not sure that sitting on the wet grass in a Harris Tweed hoodie is really much of an answer. It all reminded me of Molesworth's bitterly despised fellow pupil at St Custard's, Fotherington Thomas, who liked to skip around the school, blond locks fluttering, greeting nature: "Hello clouds, hello sky!"

The exhibition is well presented. Dalziell + Scullion are serious artists who have produced some good work, but I fear they have been misled by the unquestioning awe with which our artists are too often treated and have dropped their critical standards.

Edinburgh City Art Centre has



From left: Calum Colvin's work at Edinburgh Printmakers; Carol Rhodes' *Town* from *Urban/Suburban*; detail of Dalziell + Scullion's *Tumadh: Immersion*

an admirable record of keeping its Scottish collection up to date and so, to prove that it hasn't missed out on the Generation generation, it has put on *Urban/Suburban*, including work by Christine Borland, Toby Paterson, Kenny Hunter, Chad McCail, Carol Rhodes, Martin Boyce and a number of others, most of whom are currently also represented elsewhere around the city.

Kenny Hunter comes out best

with two sculptures, including a splendid cubist exercise called *two cats and four chairs*. There is also a set of his brilliant posters in bold colours, the letters piled into the page like toy bricks tumbled in a box: "Everlastingagitation" (all one word) or "If I stand fast they will dig my grave." It's a long way from Fotherington-Thomas.

A similar spirit inspires Chad McCail's cheerful anarchist dream

in six pictures of a world where the police disappear, the prisons are knocked down, all CCTV is removed and the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh move into a nice suburban house.

In a set of three photographs, Christine Borland reflects rather more grimly on the analogy between a human skull and a water melon when it's hit by a bullet. I am not so taken by some of the others,

but Kate Grey's *Mission* – a couple, half-undressed, walking through a stubble field towards Torness nuclear power station – offers an intriguing enigma.

Fashions in art come and go, but painting will go on forever and Victoria Crowe at the Scottish Gallery shows just how good it can still be. Her work is based on observation of nature and beautiful drawing and some of her pictures here are straightforward landscapes of bare trees illuminated by the setting winter sun. There are also beautiful pictures of Venice.

There is much more to her work. Although she is a very different artist, in a way that is a little bit like Calum Colvin her pictures are also often layered to bring together into a poetic unity that which is greater than the sum of its parts; associations, memories, reflections and hints of familiar places and objects.

Callum Colvin until 6 September; Dalziel + Scullion until 13 September; Urban-Suburban until 19 October; Victoria Crowe until 30 August