

Calum Colvin: interview

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Calum Colvin talks to Christiana Spens about the influences behind his art and photography, his feelings about contemporary Scottish society, and how, if he had the budget, he would like to make a film.

Calum Colvin: The Magic Box

Edinburgh Printmakers

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As part of the Edinburgh Arts Festival 2014, the Edinburgh Printmakers gallery is showing a retrospective of renowned Scottish artist Calum Colvin. The Magic Box brings together artworks created during the past three decades, from images exploring the case of James MacPherson's forged poetry, which masqueraded as the ancient verse of Ossian, to 3D works that consider the philosophy and science of perception and optics. As a magician might explain his tricks to a willing student, Calum Colvin enlightened Christiana Spens with a discussion of his practice, ideas and the details of illusions.

Christiana Spens: The works on show in The Magic Box form a retrospective. In what ways do they relate to each other, and to your previous major exhibitions? In particular, how did your work evolve to the point now, where you are experimenting with optical effects and 3D?

Calum Colvin: Well, in a way, the 3D work stems from my 2002 show *Ossian Fragments of Ancient Poetry*. [Some of the paintings of which hang on the left wall of this room.]¹ At that time, technology had made it possible to print photographs on to canvas. And given that the show was about James MacPherson and Ossian, I had to make something – I had the sense of needing to imitate something else – for it to be a forgery. So I presented all these images as if they were paintings.

After that, I began to think quite a lot about the surface of images, which made me curious about 3D. The Arts and Humanities Research Council funded me to take a year off work to make the body of work – and that's when I really was able to look in depth at the notion of stereo, and that led me to look at the history, and then I found out about Sir David Brewster. [He is referring to the "stereo pair" of his portrait.] Brewster got involved in a long-running spat with Charles Wheatstone – inventor of the mirror stereoscope, which ended up with them having a huge falling out and Brewster accusing him of being anti-Scottish. If you look here, in the corner of this image, there are two flags – a Scottish and an English flag – and by the scientific process of binocular rivalry, if you look at that for about a minute, what happens is your eye flips between the two flags.

CS: How that does work if your eyesight is not quite right, or is unequal?

CC: Well, the reason I'm so attracted to it – I also used it in this image [he guides me

towards *Vanitas (Anaglyph)* (2007), which requires 3D glasses to see the form of a skull popping out of wine goblets and books.] What you do is you get your left and right image, and the left one of this, I had a candle, and in the right, I blew out the flame – so in this one, if you look at it, the flame just goes out, for about 20 seconds, and then it comes back on. So that's binocular rivalry, and what's really interesting is, if you think about these two images, where one has got something that isn't in the other [is that] one eye is seeing one thing and the other eye's seeing another. You would think – or at least I thought, before it was explained to me – that you would get a ghost image, but you don't. It reinforces the idea that the visual world is presented to you by your intellect, because your eyes present these images to the brain and say: "Well you decide." Or the brain flicks between these two images.

CS: So if one eye is stronger, your mind will choose the image accordingly. That is particularly interesting, considering how perception defines memory, and determines the construction of a visual memory, too?

CC: Yes, it's allowing your intellect to make that decision – about what is there and what isn't there. So that is how I came to the idea of removing the surface of the image, and working in 3D. In a way, every body of work I make is a reaction to the previous body of work, so really this body of work, these large canvases, became [he looks back at *Vanitas (Anaglyph)* (2007)] these smaller, more metaphysical objects.

CS: It's interesting how you react to technology, as well, so each body of work is reacting to the past, but it's also reacting to technological advancements – the canvases, for example, in using new methods to print on to canvas.

CC: Yes, well history is quite an important aspect of things that I delve into – the history of art, the history of Scotland, philosophy, politics, debate and culture – all these things are in there.

This body of work [a series of transparencies, displayed along two custom-made lightboxes, which stand in the centre of the room] is called Ornithology, and this is unusual for me in the sense that I did it piecemeal over quite a few years. Normally, I work on a project to a deadline, finish it and then move on. But I kept coming back to making these images, the series called Ornithology – it was a reaction to a series I made using computers and digital stuff. I got fed up with that, and I really wanted to paint – and this was the first one that I made.

I was really just looking at the symbolism of various birds. Also they're all about social issues to a more or less extent. For instance, this one's the Sacred ibis; I made it around 1995, at the beginning of the national lottery. Where I lived in Edinburgh was quite a poor area at the time, and I noticed people spent a fortune on lottery tickets. At that point, nobody was really interested in political change, so I began to [think about that]... The idea of the Sacred ibis – the idea of luck and believing, in something. I'd also read in the press that someone had faked a scratchcard, got £100m winning by cutting it up and sticking it together, and it always struck me as a triumph for cold-blooded optimism.

CS: And a triumph for collage –

CC: Yes. I always liked that story. So that's what that's about – the death of political belief, and desperation.

This one [he points to *Unidentified Aircraft* (1994)] is about atmospheric pollution. This [the image of grey and green courier pigeons in a living room scattered with papers and rugs] is called *The Common Runt* (2007). I made this for Dundee Contemporary Arts when it first opened. And this is really about death, I suppose. It's about something being extraordinary and ordinary.

And this one [a scene of a baby bird hatched from a large room, apparently dead, or perhaps asleep, with a dark carpet beneath it, in a claustrophobic room] is called *The Magnificent Frigatebird* (1995). It's about childhood, I suppose. It's about reduced social expectations of people. People tend to think of Edinburgh as a wealthy city, but – particularly at the time I was making these pictures, in the 90s – it was pretty down at heel at Craigmillar – and I lived round there. Craigmillar has now been revitalised and there's been a lot of money poured into it. It looks fantastic, but at the time I was making this picture it was a really run-down place. Trainspotting would look like something you'd aspire to. At that time, though it's now illegal, people used to hit their children in the street as well. – I've four children and it's never occurred to me that I would *ever* want to hit them, so I find it very frustrating. So (these are) the kind of issues that spur me, really.

This one: [an image of a cramped corner of a room, covered in blue-patterned wallpaper and a shady blue floor, with a man projected into the centre – *The Stoning of St Stephen (after Elsheimer)* (1997)] is about drugs; an Irvine Welsh-inspired image. Obviously it's after an Elsheimer's painting, but it's also about the ideas of drugs and illusions.

CS: Oh, yes, I see ... That's funny, I was drawn to that image because I was wondering what the photograph was about, and now I see that it's covered with white powder ...

CC: Yes. And the photograph – well you know the penguin pool at Edinburgh zoo? I was trying to photograph the penguins – can you see the penguin there? Then I noticed there was a reflection in the glass of this overweight guy in 70s sunglasses – and for a minute I thought – “It's Elvis!” So I quickly took a picture of this penguin floating in the air with Elvis in the background.

CS: Do you ever think of having the little details from these pictures exhibited alongside them?

CC: I've never done that, but it could be possible to do that ...

CS: Maybe a book one day. You know those books where you flick through them and an animation emerges?

CC: Flick books?

CS: Yes – would you ever consider doing something like that? Your work reminds me of them somehow.

CC: I haven't done that many publications actually, over the years, and I always wanted to do one big publication of my work, but there's a lot of detail in something like that. If I had a budget, I would make a film though. Using stills.

CS: What does this one mean?

CC: This is called *Diana and Callisto (After Titian)* (1998). Again, this is a reflection on photography. The pictures [being discarded] are of a man disappearing into the ocean, which obviously has a reference to reproduction. In this original story, Callisto was cast out because she was pregnant, when Diana found out. [Referring to twin images of a hand, layered on to twin paintings, Colvin points out]: Here, I painted her hand twice. I had these rather bizarre photographs, two of them. So that brought together ideas of reproduction, both photographically and physically.

CS: Did you like comics, when you were younger?

CC: Oh, yeah, I was a big fan of them – all those Marvel comics.

CS: It reminds me of those ones where you have to spot the difference ... Or “what’s different?” between two seemingly identical images.

CC: Oh, yeah [laughs]. Well, sometimes, when you do a construction like this, which takes a long time, you obviously end up taking a lot of photographs, and sometimes I get into a kind of thing where I just keep photographing it – and I keep looking at it, and the tiny little changes – and doing it again – and tiny wee bits – until eventually I think to myself: “I’ve got to stop. It’s just finished, stop mucking about.” And then a few months later I look back through them and I think: “Why do they all look the same?” But there is something different in each one.

CS: These images are a kind of archaeology aren’t they? A forensic process into a social history as well as art history?

CC: They are, and it’s quite funny – I was giving a talk last night and kept going off on these stories about the time, what was going on, at the time that I made the images. When I made this version of the *The Feast of Herod (after Peter Paul Rubens)* (1998) it was the time when the Scottish parliament was being made, and there was so much negativity around, especially in the press, that I started really thinking about the idea of the prospect of Scotland controlling its own affairs. People were actually balking at the idea – hence, I put myself instead of Herod. It was the idea of Scotland being presented to the people as an asset, and people’s response, which for a certain percentage of the population still is something that they balk at – the idea of it.

CS: It seems the opposite of a revolution, doesn’t it?

CC: Yes.

CS: Martin Amis wrote a book a few years ago called *The Pregnant Widow*, and at the beginning there is a quote by Alexander Herzen – “The Death of the contemporary forms of social order ought to gladden rather than trouble the soul. Yet what is

frightening is that the departing world leaves behind it not an heir, but a pregnant widow. Between the death of the one and the birth of the other, much water will flow by, a long night of chaos and desolation will pass.”

CC: It's a good quote. I approach these subjects in a comic way though; humour is a big part of what I do. The head of Herod, here, is a parrot – it's a plastic parrot – with a giant ostrich egg coming out of it, hence all the feathers. And there's a jokey sense of that in the dead parrot and the giant egg. Maybe it died, and produced this enormous egg. But there is a sense of ludicrousness. At the time [I made this picture], well, for a while I was getting phoned up by the press, because they were asking me about the parliament because there was a budget to buy art for the parliament. It wasn't a very big budget, and some artists criticised it and said, well, there should be more money for art for the parliament, and then the press latched on to that, and someone from the Scotsman phoned me up and asked: "What do you think about this *dreadful* parliament? Don't you think it's awful, and do you think – would you *give work* to the Scottish parliament?" And I said: "Well I'd rather be paid, but if it came to it, yes, I would give them work, because I would consider it an honour." The guy just hung up on me.

CS: Not what he wanted to hear.

CC: No, not what he wanted to hear. He wanted ... negativity.

CS: They want conflict, I think; they want drama – people upsetting each other.

CC: Yes, well they never asked my opinion again. [Laughs] That's what happens. So that's what that was about really.

CS: Can you explain your relationship with photography?

CC: Well I think of photography as a social art. I was brought up looking at the great photojournalists, Henri Cartier-Bresson and people like that.

CS: There was a big retrospective of [Cartier-Bresson's] work in Paris a few months ago – it was incredible. And fascinating to see how many crowds were there, how social the act of experiencing photography was, with his work especially.

CC: Yes. He was here once, but I never got to meet him. But Bill Brandt – I met him once – and I showed him my work. I had an interesting conversation with him. For me it was a great thing, meeting Brandt, one of my great heroes – and also someone who worked with Man Ray. Incredible really. But I would have liked to have met Cartier-Bresson; I would have liked to have shown him my work. Because in a way it's so far-removed from what these guys do, but it is also where I came from.

CS: Also [Cartier-Bresson] had that Surrealist phase –

CC: Yes, and he always wanted to be a painter, too. Some of the best photographers always wanted to be painters. David Bailey has spent a lot of his time painting. Who else? Man Ray, of course. I don't think they were very good ... but his photographs are stunning. Anyway, there's always been that interesting relationship [between photography and painting]. I used to look at photographers who'd become painters, and some younger

photographers used to criticise them for that and say that they're betraying their *true cause*, which is photography. People were very focused on what photography was. So when I started making my work, and it was presented at the Photographers' Gallery in London, in 1986, the show was mobbed, and people reacted quite extremely to the show. Some people said it was an appalling thing for the Photographers' Gallery to do, to show this work. Other people said this was the way forward for photography. Of course, what has happened now is photography has been consumed by the all-consuming art world and documentary photography is presented as "Art".

CS: Do you think that all war photography, for instance, should be shown only in art galleries, to be respectful to those subjects who are also victims, then?

CC: Yes, well I know that that's something that Don McCullin was wrestling with – the impact of his works, and the facts of beauty and death and so on.

CS: And Susan Sontag, too, of course.

[I realise that Colvin is cleaning a mark he has noticed on his display.]

CC: Sorry, I'm just obsessively cleaning my light box.

CS: It must be difficult, having people come and move things around.

CC: No, well I'm not precious. But, like all photographers, I'm very protective of [people] altering things ... Probably a bit OCD.

CS: But you paint as well ... Are you like that with painting, or is it just photography?

CC: Well, you have to be messy with paint, remember, whereas if you've got cameras you've got to be careful with them.

CS: So it's a practical thing then, rather than anything more?

CC: Yes. But my studio is filthy, and my house is spotless, so I don't know ... Studios have to be dirty though. I don't like it; it's just the way it's worked out. And I do like sloppy painting. I don't do it so much anymore, but I used to use cans of car spray paint, to get that effect, and that's also horribly messy.

CS: I suppose your work has that contradiction of the clean white lines and the areas of paint ... Maybe that aesthetic explains your spaces as well?

CC: Yes, well most photographers' studios are spotless; mine is not. Spray paint leaves a horrible mess, and is very bad for you. I used to smoke as I spray-painted ...

CS: Are your lungs OK, then?

CC: Well, I gave up smoking a long time ago, so hopefully I'll be all right. Talking of being messy, though, I often make sure that the lines don't quite match. Some people would never believe me ... Sometimes they match perfectly, sometimes they don't *quite*. Sometimes I just leave bits of painting. If it's too perfect, people don't [look properly] ... Essentially, when you're looking at this, [referring to *Deaf Man's Villa* (1989)], you're looking at two things. I think Wittgenstein talked about that, with the duck/rabbit visual

phenomenon – the point being, you could never see both at the same time. And there's something interesting there. In fact, in this picture – this is the earliest picture in the exhibition – there are some clear references to Wittgenstein. Here – playing with that idea of the impossible square. And here is the duck/rabbit. There are references to that everywhere. And where is it? Ah yes, here ... this line from the Tractatus: "What we cannot speak about, we must pass over in silence."

[As if on cue, there is the sound of a familiar dog – a panting, four paws tapping upstairs –]

CS: I hear a dog ...

[We turn to see my dog, April, coming into the room, and with her entrance, the interview has ended – with what cannot be spoken about to be passed over in silence, or rather, in canine murmurs and growls. We will have to leave discussions of optical experiments, forensic consideration of art history and current affairs, and Wittgenstein, for another day.]

Reference

1. The works hanging on the left wall of the room, which Colvin references, are: *Fragment I*, *Fragment IV*, *Fragment VI* and *Fragment VII* (all 2002). They were part of the major show, *Ossian Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, which was inspired by the fraudulent works of James MacPherson that masqueraded as poems by the poet Ossian.