



Calum Colvin

The Magic Box

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## Foreword

Arthur Watson PRSA

This book was in preparation at the same time as a career retrospective drawn from over twenty-five years of practice and staged during the Edinburgh Art Festival, an increasingly important foil to its older cousin the Edinburgh International Festival, long separated from its earlier commitment to visual art.

The art of Calum Colvin bestrides the twin polarities of tradition and innovation. Like Scottish artists of a previous generation, he has taken on masterworks from the past – works by Titian, Canova and Rubens. He also consistently produces portraits, particularly of writers, several of whom have in turn written in response to his images. Substantial thematic exhibitions have analysed both Robert Burns and Ossian (as seen by James Macpherson), through works of visual virtuosity and conceptual depth. But all of these works are far from traditional in their execution. Figurative painting applied to large scale sculptural assemblages, fusing construction and carving with found objects; dazzling bricolages pulled together through the lens of his large-format camera and then printed at the highest resolution.

The essence of this process is the large format transparency which captures all the complexities of Colvin's working method, an amalgam of painting, sculpture, and installation mitigated through the subtleties of controlled lighting. Each transparency is a fully realised, full colour image in itself, but it is also the matrix from which unique photoworks, or indeed an edition, can be created. Print processes, like photography, rely on the initial production of matrices – stones, blocks, plates or screens, from which editions are made. However the matrices for print, particularly the multiple plates for colour printing, are hard to read even by an experienced printmaker, whereas these transparencies, when backlit, are microcosms perfect in every detail.

This artist's book celebrates the work of one of Scotland's most consistently innovative artists of the last quarter century. His responses to cultural history, the history of science and the history of ideas demonstrate visual research at the highest level; research that is accessible to a wide public, research carried out with wit, exuberance and élan.



Throw out page 8

## Magic Box: Looking at Calum Colvin

Tom Normand

Look at this photograph. It's a self-portrait. Its title is *Natural Magick*. It's an image of Calum Colvin staring, intently, at the outside world; at the chaotic universe, at the audience, at you the viewer. In his right hand he holds a frame, inside this we can see a lantern-lens and the outline of his piercing eye. The eye is the fulcrum of the picture. It's the eye that defines the intent, the resolve, and the engagement. For this self-portrait is about looking, the inviolable realm of the visual, and the inherent strangeness of the world perceived through sight.

Expanding outwards from this core we enter a magical, riotous, turbulent world. It's a world of concepts and constructions, signs and symbols, riddles and puzzles. It's a world that constantly transforms. Here, the artist-photographer recognises correspondences and associations and explores their subtle nuance. He projects inferences and subtexts and challenges the viewer to identify these discreet connotations. He hints at layers of meaning that reveal themselves only to metamorphose into another form, another thought. In this respect looking at a work by Calum Colvin is rather like engaging in a kind of archaeology, except that the terrain is constantly shifting and the layers fracture, ceaselessly.

For all this *Natural Magick* behaves as a self-portrait should. It offers a sense of the artist, his world, his vision, and his creative project; all constructed through installation, painted image, and the final photograph. The work, like all of Calum Colvin's photographs, requests analysis.

At its centre the right hand holds a frame that borders the eye. But this frame is echoed by yet more. 'Backwards', to the left of the photograph, past a large rectangular mirror, and on to a larger ornate gilded frame that contains a smaller and simpler mount. And 'forwards' to a table easel that holds a primed canvas, then to the right a full easel that carries a large stretcher. The relationship here is complex for the frames, stretchers and canvases could easily fold into one another to complete an exhibition of related images. In fact the sense of frame, framing and mirroring is resolute in *Natural Magick* for it references the fundamental role of the artist-photographer and his multifaceted relationship with reality.

This last intuition is important for so much in *Natural Magick* reflects upon photography and the eccentricity of photographic paraphernalia and, indeed, the photographic image. The eye in the centre of the image is overlapped by the lens of a slide projector. To the left a carousel of slides sits atop a pile of books and a 'straight' photograph of the artist-photographer holding a slide to his eye reprises the central motif. In the bottom right corner the projector is presented, again atop some books, and adjacent to a primitive stereoscopic viewer. Throughout there are photographs, a memorandum print of the completed image in the bottom left, a photograph of a skull in the top right – echoing the object displayed in the large gilded frame – and, positioned under the figure in the manner of Hans Holbien's *The Ambassadors*, a distorted image of the skull, suitably corrected in the reflecting mirror.

So much of this cites the realm of photography, but it also alludes to the world of fine art. Conspicuously the decorative ornament in the bottom left displays a dandy looking in a mirror,

the very performance of self-seeking – and look closely for this mirror reflects the 'real' world of the tableaux. Moreover, the set itself is a 'classical' construct of columns and pilasters staged upon the 'academic' styling of the black and white chequered floor. And, naturally, the constructed tableaux holds the memory of its assembly and painted subject. A decorator's brush sits next to yet more books on the flooring, an artist's palette perches on the central table, in his left hand the artist-photographer holds the instruments of perspective plotting, and a full of set of artist's brushes is displayed on a pedestal to the left of the tableaux.

Layer upon layer of reference, signs that quote and subvert one another, illusions and allusions that chime and challenge. What is this self-portrait? Surely it's *Natural Magick*. It is that alchemical confusion of science and wizardry. It toys with reality, slipping towards and across something tangible but falling into an enchanted dreamscape. It is Calum Colvin recognising and acknowledging the enigma of his craft. For the riddle of this creative practice conjures with the science of photography, records the virtuosity of art, and situates the essential environment of the creative artist: with all this semiotic, symbolic, conceptual and illusionistic gallimaufry returning to the lens, to the eye. Back to the inviolable world of the visual.

This book celebrates the world and work created by Calum Colvin. It does this in images and in words. Language, words, books that are both open and closed, all feature in the photographs that Calum Colvin invents. They are the foil to the visual paradox and perceptual reversals. For all the deviance of language this is the concrete platform of understanding though, as always, the text in these photographs heightens rather than explains

the mystery. This, in part, accounts for the interest of writers in Calum Colvin's work. And it is poets, writers and scholars who respond to his oeuvre throughout this book.

But, to begin at the beginning, it is useful to recall the early moment of the artist's career, the period of the 1980s and the seminal exhibition 'The Vigorous Imagination' - wherein Calum Colvin played a cardinal role and when Scottish art was first thrown under the international spotlight. Naomi Stewart has explored the paradigm of the artist-photographer's early work within the context of 'postmodernism'. This critical terminology is redolent of the 1980s and that moment when Calum Colvin's work first exploded onto the art world. Naomi Stewart has subtly conjured with the suitability of this conception, and concludes that the photographs present 'enigmatic ... playful scenes that require the viewer to puzzle through the various compositional and symbolic mysteries of the image'. In truth, it is perhaps now apposite to view Calum Colvin's work through the lens of that more recent trope 'Contemporary Art' for his work has the character of 'intermedia' practice – performance, assemblage, appropriation, as well as painting and the multiple dimensions of photography – while it embodies aspects of critical reflexivity that challenges fine art practice and simultaneously reflects upon issues from the particular and local to the global and universal.

Of course the elusive manner of Calum Colvin's practice remains a treasure-chest for scholars and Fiona Stafford has presented an intense, not to say ingenious, study of the symbolism and sign-signals in the photographs. Her scrutiny of the kaleidoscopic turns on Robert Burns and 'Burns country' that has surfaced in recent works is surely a classic of empathetic insight.

This is most especially the case in her wonderful exegesis of the 'pun' in Calum Colvin's work and its oblique ramifications, for as she notes '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'.

Fiona Stafford is right to see Robert Burns as a *leitmotif* in Calum Colvin's marvellous photographs and this is a thread that has been followed by the Scots poet Rab Wilson in a poem that reflects upon the photographer's *Portrait of Colin McLuckie*, completed in 2013. The venerable McLuckie, a Burns speaker recalled from Calum Colvin's youth, is presented in the photograph deep in the reverie of recital. Rab Wilson, writing in Scots, incants in a final verse: Thon luik ye hae, as gif ye'd seen/That laund whaur aince Kimeny'd been/A warld lang-tint in some auld dream/Ye tried tae tell/The laump's gaen oot, aa's left auld frien's/A brucken spell. And so that magical sense of looking and dreaming and spell-binding is echoed as invocation and enchantment.

Surely it is the ethereal and ambiguous qualities of Calum Colvin's work that appeal to writers and poets and Janice Galloway has offered her reflections on the series of works first exhibited in 1998 and titled 'Sacred and Profane'. This group of poems burns with erotic instinct and chills with dangerous augury. The insight here is extraordinary for while Calum Colvin punned on the idea of sacred and profane art – the fine art of painting, the profane art of photography - Janice Galloway has reached back to the elemental condition of sacred and profane love, and has gifted a dark and beautiful votive to these primal conditions.

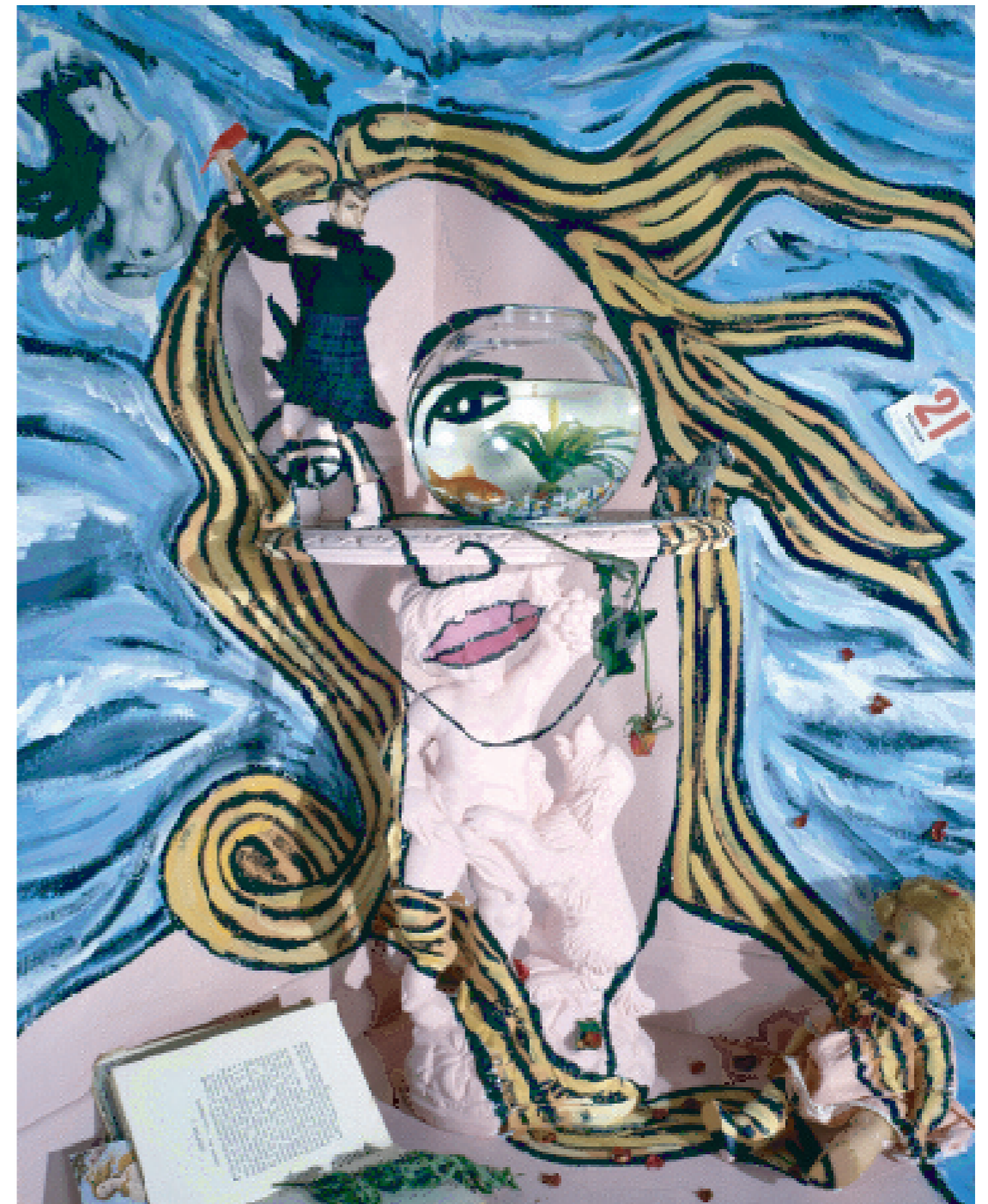
In parallel Alan Spence has presented a thoughtful and impressionistic memory-piece that mixes recollection and reflection. The spark for these speculations is the recall of having sat for Calum Colvin in respect of the group portrait of writers titled *The Kelvingrove Eight*, from 2000. Alan Spence sees both the slippage of the particular moment and the echo of mortality in the portrait, for 'there's a constant Escher-like sleight of hand, a cubist sense of shifting planes, of objects behind the stage set and yet in front of it. What could be wallpaper is like clouds drifting through the room, and scattered around the floor are our books, the objects we chose. *Fragments shored against our ruin*'. But even more than this he threads together those patterns and puzzles that recognises in Calum Colvin's work that subtle dialectic of 'The seeing eye, the shaping intelligence'.

It's another kind of memory that shapes the piece by Frédéric Ogée for his subject is the 'Ossian' series that Calum Colvin completed in 2002, and his theme is the 'trace'. His insight is profound 'The whole sequence of *Ossian* suggests a passing of time as we *truly* experience it, the inescapable, beginning-to-end narrative of our own *tracing* and mental recording' but it is also raw in distinguishing that the core thought in this series is 'fading itself, the erasure of all life into that dust and the final repulsive shroud'. Though there is a kind of redemption in this 'fading' for the very act of creativity is celebrated everywhere in Frédéric Ogée's writing, and certainly in his subtle intelligence on Calum Colvin's nuanced insights and truths.

Whereas Frédéric Ogée has spoken of the 'trace' in Calum Colvin's work Kirsty Gunn returns us to the mystery of looking and seeing. Her finespun meditation on the project titled 'Camera Lucida', from 2012, speaks to the movement of engaging with these interlaced images 'the process of coming close, an allowance of an intimate, untested space that might exist at the centre of experience' and so recognises the sense of a looming discovery in each encounter. An encounter that Kirsty Gunn has acknowledged folds the philosophical into the imaginative and light into dark.

What a body of work Calum Colvin has produced. Threading together constructed and narrative photography, digital experiment, installation, portraiture, and theatre design. Journeying across subjects in fine art, vernacular culture, pop art, and contemporary experience. Exploring the broken terrain of love, myth, identity, natural science, ecology, morality, and mortality. And fracturing every kind of certainty with insight, intelligence and humour. This is an oeuvre that offers the perfect synthesis of the epic and tragic with the playful and comic. It is a world without end; an extraordinary, hallucinatory phantasmagoria of illusion and image.

This generous, wonderful vision is captured, in part, in this *magic box*.



Death of Venus 1986

## Calum Colvin and the Postmodern Turn

Naomi Stewart

In a 1994 interview, published in *Transcript*, Calum Colvin stated that he was 'uncomfortable with the term postmodern' despite some critics having applied it to his work. Given this, it may seem futile to try and analyse Colvin's images within a postmodern frame. However, the suggestion that his works display some of the markers of the 'movement' has arisen more than once in the scholarship surrounding his oeuvre. We might ask ourselves, therefore, if the artist's own discomfort at the term 'postmodern' should be overlooked in favour of a more objective consideration of his photographs in relation to this critical turn. Certainly his images raise issues of originality, authenticity, the mixing of media and morphing of narrative, and indeed the role of the artist – all of which are connected to the postmodern. But it is possible – perhaps even probable, given his own feelings on the matter – that if we focus too much on the idea of Colvin as a photographer with postmodern concerns, we lose the real significance and impact of his images.

Colvin's output has been substantial and varied but it's profitable to focus on the seminal works included in the 1986 exhibition 'Constructed Narratives'. Though early works, they are typical of the style of image Colvin has explored and seem appropriate to this analysis because their timing – the 1980s – was the era when postmodernism, as a critical discourse, dominated the art world. Indeed, it is these 'constructed' images,

incorporating painting and found objects into a kind of photographic stage set, that seem to have been most frequently talked of in relation to the notion of postmodernism in Colvin's work.

In her book, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, (1989), Linda Hutcheon suggests that postmodernism in art and literature generally manifests itself as a 'self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement', the intention of which is to emphasise or destabilise the themes under review. This is a useful explanation in that it attempts to provide a rubric for postmodern production and its goals. Encapsulated within the very word 'post-modernism' is the suggestion of a moving beyond 'modernist' hegemony and, as such, it is not hard to see why contradiction and subversion might be crucial methods in the pursuit of a postmodern aesthetic. Indeed, these strategies are part of the reason why photography particularly has been hailed as a postmodern medium: because photographs are created mechanically and can therefore be infinitely reproduced, they contradict and subvert the notion of a 'unique' work of art.

Nevertheless, we can be even more specific about techniques common to postmodern photography. In abandoning the formalist associations of modernism, such photography often displays an amalgamation of high-art and mass cultural forms. There is also a tendency towards the mixing of media, usually text and image – as in the works of Barbara Kruger. Appropriation is perhaps the most obvious postmodern strategy, exhibited in the works of figures like Sherrie Levine and Cindy Sherman, who borrow from both cultural and art history in their photographs in order to question the originality and authenticity of social experience and production. Often there is an element of irony



Cupid and Psyche 1986

and parody involved, a subtle way of enacting the kind of subversion and contradiction we now understand as inherent to postmodern practices.

In all of this, we must also consider where the photographer stands as originator of the work and where the photograph stands as work of art. For the implication with postmodernism is that the photographer facilitates revelations about the constructedness of nature, and that the images produced are not works of art in the traditional sense but are, rather, intended to be probed for the cultural and political insights they allow. This has the tendency to preclude a visual reading that takes into account the possibility of personal narrative and of significant labour on the part of the photographer. And it is here, particularly, that we begin to run into problems with the thesis that Colvin's photographs can be called 'postmodern'.

Evidently, Colvin works not only as a photographer, but he also displays his talents as painter and sculptor in his construction of his stage-sets. It is true, then, that the borders between the media in Colvin's photographs appear indistinct – we might, in fact, be forgiven for thinking that they are paintings at first glance. Indeed by including painting and sculptural elements in his photographs, thus referencing the long-established high art traditions, he may well intend to destabilise the hierarchy of artistic modes that has existed for centuries – undoubtedly a postmodern aim. But I would argue that we can interpret Colvin's combining of these various media as a critique of postmodernism in both painting and photography, as much as an example of this model. Rather than photographing the canonical works he appropriates, as Sherrie Levine does most famously in her image *After Walker Evans* (1981), Colvin instead takes up his paintbrush and reproduces them by hand, not

in their totality but in quoted form, thus resisting the direct and mechanical cultural referencing so often enacted in postmodern photography. And rather than simply producing a figurative painting, he swathes it across a backdrop of found items and photographs it, thus establishing a tension between and amongst the various artistic practices of postmodernism.

However, his intentions in employing both of these methods are perhaps more innocent than a postmodern reading would suggest. For if we return to Colvin's personal history we find that his initial training was in sculpture. Consequently, given his acknowledged uncertainty about the label 'postmodern' being attached to his works, we might view his mixing of media as a chance to utilise his various skills in an exploration of the interplay between formats – more concerned with spatial relationships and the viewing experience than with postmodern subversion. This is further corroborated by Colvin's own suggestion in the 1994 *Transcript* interview that the inclusion of certain elements in his images is often the result of accident and coincidence, as is the case with the quotation of Botticelli's work in *Death of Venus* (1986) – he found a postcard version of the original on the street in London and decided to make it a component of this piece.

Finally, we can move to reflect on the symbolic and thematic concerns of Colvin's works. Several scholars have identified a preoccupation with the signs, or the 'myth,' of Scottishness in his photographs. Amongst the images that constitute the 'Constructed Narratives' exhibition, this is nowhere more obvious than in *The Beastie* (1985). The title is a reference to the Robert Burns poem, *To a Louse*, and thus a connection is immediately established to the figure of the Scottish artist.



Top: Untitled (Camera Eye) 1985 Below: The Beastie 1985

In the imagery of the photograph itself, markers of Scottishness proliferate: there is an Irn Bru can, discarded whisky bottle caps and the kilted Action Man – who is a feature of the majority of these early works – significantly stripped bare in this image. Juxtaposed with these are photographic slides hinting towards the idea of nature and biology, an off-the-hook telephone implying lack of communication, a newspaper with the headline 'We only kill each other', and a lampshade cresting the head of the human figure; punning on the idea of the Enlightenment. Then, in case we needed any more of a hint that this image is a comment on masculine Scottish identity, the book at the forefront of the photograph lies open at a page detailing 'Masculine Traits of Character'. These juxtapositions seem to intimate the contradictory nature of that identity in which the Scottish male can be both an Enlightened, creative and expressive figure and simultaneously possess the less compelling qualities of the 'beastie'.

In an essay in the recent book, *Postmodernism: Style and Subversion* (2011), Paul Jobling asserts that the approach displayed by postmodern photographers towards identities is typified by a deconstructive penchant for 'double-dealing' – that sense of a thing being 'itself' and 'another'. It is obvious that Colvin is concerned with notions of identity and of nationalism, and the contradictions involved in his visual exploration of these issues might suggest a play with 'double-dealing'. However, it is important to consider in this context another of the artist's own observations this time on the issue of cultural identity: 'So much of Scottish culture is based on not quite the truth'. In anything where the truth is not concrete, contradictions must be involved. Therefore, in seeming to double-deal, Colvin's intention is not to offer a deconstructive postmodern critique of

Scottish identity but, paradoxically, to show something vital about it – the mythic quality, related to history and to fiction, that makes it so hard to pin down. Indeed there is a strong sense in which Colvin's exploration of Scottishness and its contingent parts has personal significance, not least because the Action Man figure comes to be seen as a kind of *alter ego* for the artist. This is most obvious in the 1986 work, *Explorer II*.

In *Explorer II* we are presented again with the figure of the Action Man but where before he had been posed in a commanding position here we see him supine and vulnerable, missing one boot and set adrift in a sea of uncertainty. The photograph was created at the time when Colvin had moved from Dundee to London to formally begin studying photography at the Royal College of Art and the sense of displacement and alienation he experienced comes through strongly in the imagery. Signifiers of Scottishness are once again present in the form of the Irn Bru can and whisky bottle but here they, like the Action Man, are lost at sea. The open book upon which the Action Man is spread-eagled compounds for us the idea that this image is about an uneasy separation from the familiarity of home – the title on the page simply reads 'Exiles'. Consequently, as James Lawson has noted Colvin presents his works in terms of a simultaneous connection with personal issues and with more public and cultural anxieties.

Moreover, Colvin's use of visual puns is particularly effective in drawing attention to the theme of exile and its broader applicability: the fire emanating from the finger of the Poseidon-like figure threatens to cut the Action Man's harnessing rope, therein rendering him 'cut adrift,' and the other dolls floating in the painted waves are redolent of the idea of being 'at sea' and being 'dead in the

water.' Wit and irony is something that recurs throughout the works in the 'Constructed Narratives' series and there is the potential for it to be seen as a postmodern device for subversion but, in *Explorer II* especially, Colvin seems to employ it not as a destabilizing element but a universalising one. As he himself remarked in the *Transcript* interview, 'humour is a great leveller'. Hence the personal and humorous facets to Colvin's work, which bridge the gap between private and public concerns, again move it beyond a straightforward 'postmodern' reading. Indeed in trying to exercise a postmodern interpretation on his work, we risk losing his subtle intimations of memory and nostalgia – of personal narrative – amongst the broader allusions to cultural estrangement.

Evidently, the relationship of Colvin's photographic works to the various tropes of postmodernism is a complicated one. Certainly, there are elements in his images that hint of a postmodern trope, but there is always a problematic aspect to our reading of these photographs as postmodern. What he seems far more interested in is the games to be played by constructing enigmatic but playful scenes that require the viewer to puzzle through the various compositional and symbolic mysteries of the image as a whole. This open-ended, disruptive and disrupted narrative of incidence and coincidence is surely his greatest triumph.

Constructed Narratives  
1980s



Narcissus 1987



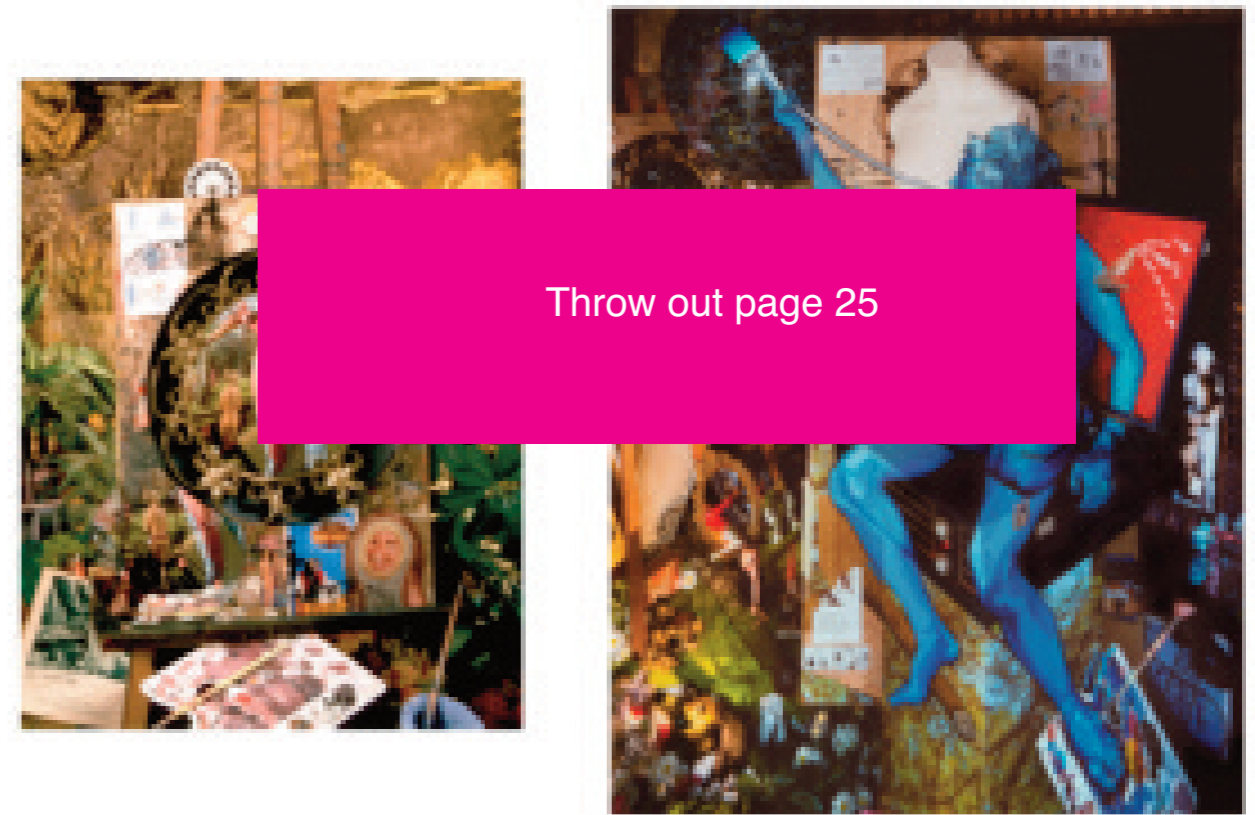
Heroes I 1986



Heroes II 1986



An Allegory with Venus and Cupid (after Bronzino) 1992



Deaf Man's Villa 1989



Burns Country 2012

## 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



Portrait of Robert Burns (after Archibald Skirving) 2001

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 rashies' 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.

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 (Portrait of Robert Burns Anaglyph) 2008

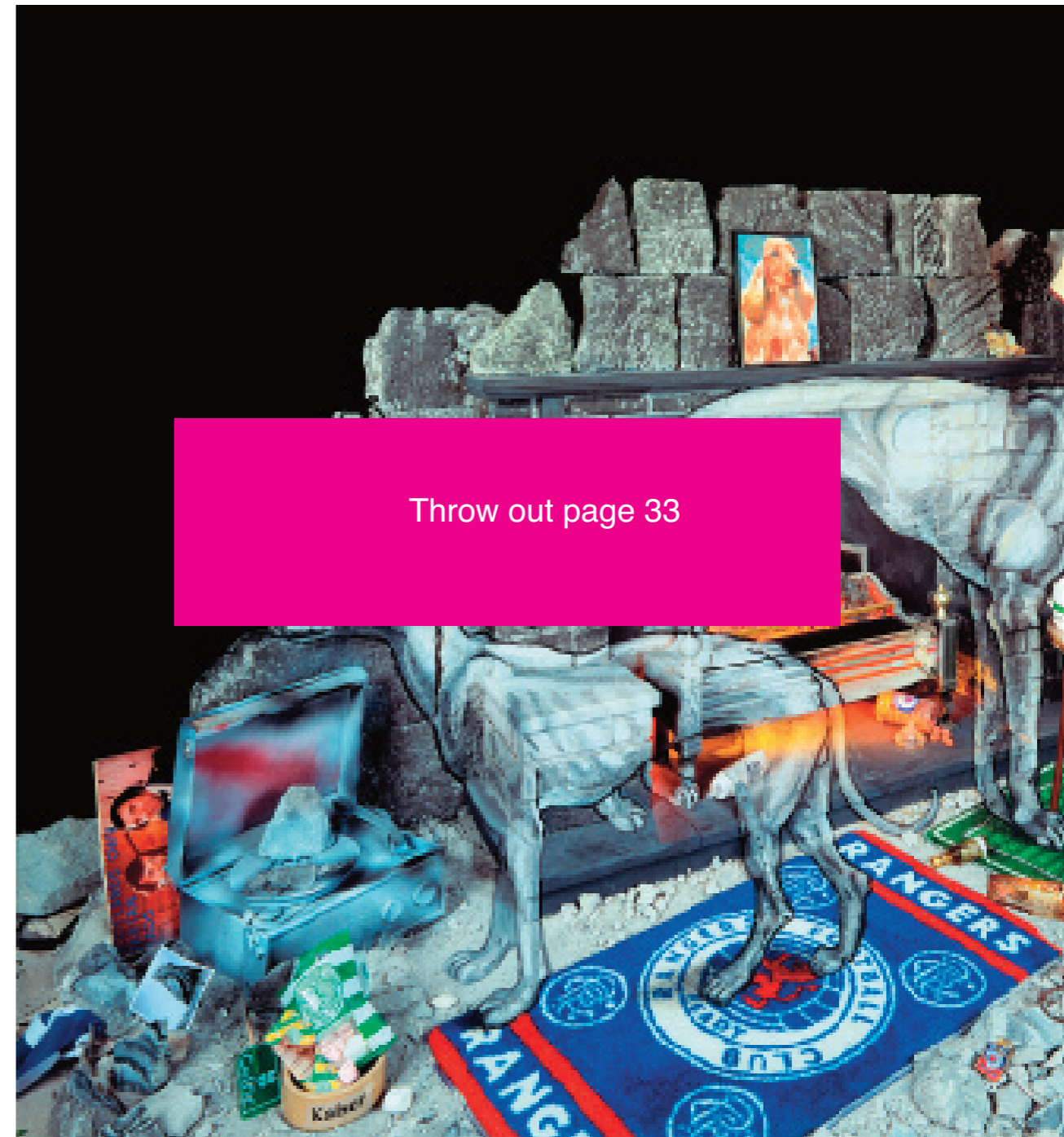


Negative Sublime II (Portrait of Lord Byron Anaglyph) 2008

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.

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



Throw out page 33

The Twa Dogs 2001



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.

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.



Portrait of Colin McCullie 2011

## Portrait of Colin McCullie

Rab Wilson

The Bard's wirds hae aa turnt til mools,  
The canty sang's nou dowf an dool,  
Time's redd awa yer picks an shuils,  
Nae mair ye'll sing,  
Whiles young anes mouth the wirds o fuils –  
They're deif an blin!

You, as a boy at pickin tables,  
Else, reddin-oot at Main-Gate stables,  
Heard giants speak wha wir weel able,  
Tae tell Burns' lays,  
The thocht cam tae ye, you wid ettle,  
Tae dae the same.

Sae frae yer piece-bag ilka shift,  
The buiks ye'd prie an ne'er missed,  
A chaunce tae set yer hairns adrift,  
In poetry,  
Whiles thae 'auld heids' wid keep ye richt,  
Wi whit tae dae.

An later in the gairden shed,  
Or setten oot yer onion beds,  
The wirds ye'd gang ower in yer head,  
Syne they wir richt,  
Till then ye swooped lik some young gled,  
In its first flicht!

Aye, Colin! There wis ne'er lik you,  
Tae speik the leid sae leal an true,  
Their nae dout ye'd thon gift enow,  
Bi Druids divined,  
That they wid train until it grew;  
Bards o their kind.

Thon luik ye hae, as gif ye'd seen,  
That laund whaur aince Kimeny'd been,  
A warld lang-tint in some auld dream,  
Ye tried tae tell,  
The laump's gaen oot, aa's left auld frien's  
A brucken spell.

The Seven Deadly Sins  
and the Four Last Things  
1993



Anger 1993



The Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things 1993



Avarice 1993



## Sacred and Profane

Janice Galloway

*the present is only the past is only the present in different names*

*behold: kump*



We shouldn't be here.

The three of them, that single bed: the specs are  
off. Theirs is the moment and the meaning of the moment.  
The grace.

*friend*



The Combat: Women Pleading for the Vanquished – an Ideal Group (after William Etty) 1997

*i cao2 snc gnc*

Mercy, wearing too few clothes, makes her pointless intercession.

The blood is up, the heat full bung. That sword is raised.

Despite the plaster animals and weeping fig, this

spat will end in tears.

*spilled.*

*pizac.*

*mined. grave.*

*newswale.*

get away from it all



Some things not even a man's best friend forgives.  
Harp on your hardships and you harp alone.  
Ask Prometheus, Philoctetes, the madman in chains,  
the abandoned creature of Frankenstein.

redone again

Philoctetes Left on the Isle of Lemnos by the Greeks (after David Scott) 1997

political discourse



The Stoning of St Stephen (after Elsheimer) 1997

bird.cage.

stay at long

iv

Acceptance is a virtue harder won than most.  
 Stephen, like a missionary in a cooking pot, couldn't  
 take it in. Till the light appeared, those  
 two fat cherubs. Thereafter, stars.

inexorable pieces

*virgins (virgins) through a glass*



Discount carpet. Those fucking shelves.

His dad was a Real Hard Man. This Herod, though?

He can't control his women. One dance and they've got him by the balls.

*hardass*

*how confessions*

*are hard, crabs*

*fucking big towel*

*crashers*

*darkness*

In loincloth and unprepossessing socks  
a young man blunders into the wrong changing room .  
A stag , you say? That's punishment? Should have  
turned him to a *doe*.

*harem*

*muscle buns*

*multi propens: corz approach*



Diana and Actaeon (after Titian) 1998

qwe fwe

erolw



Diana and Callisto (after Titian) 1998

This virgin is not the forgiving type. Hard as  
mirror glass, her hand turned some to beasts.  
Goddess of pain in childbed - whose idea of a joke  
was that? Callisto, cast out, bore her babe in the woods  
alone. Now she's in the sky with diamonds.

erolw

erolw

erolw

erolw



Venus Anadyomene (after Titian) 1998

*nasheed*

*nasheed*

*nasheed*

Turn bling down the hair salt drops have wet  
stands Venus, risen, naked. Net or no net, she is  
close enough to touch. She smells of

semen,

oysters,

helmet shells

*nasheed*

*dust of*

*thruvex*

Ornithology  
1994-2000



A Caucus Race 1999



Unidentified Aircraft 1994



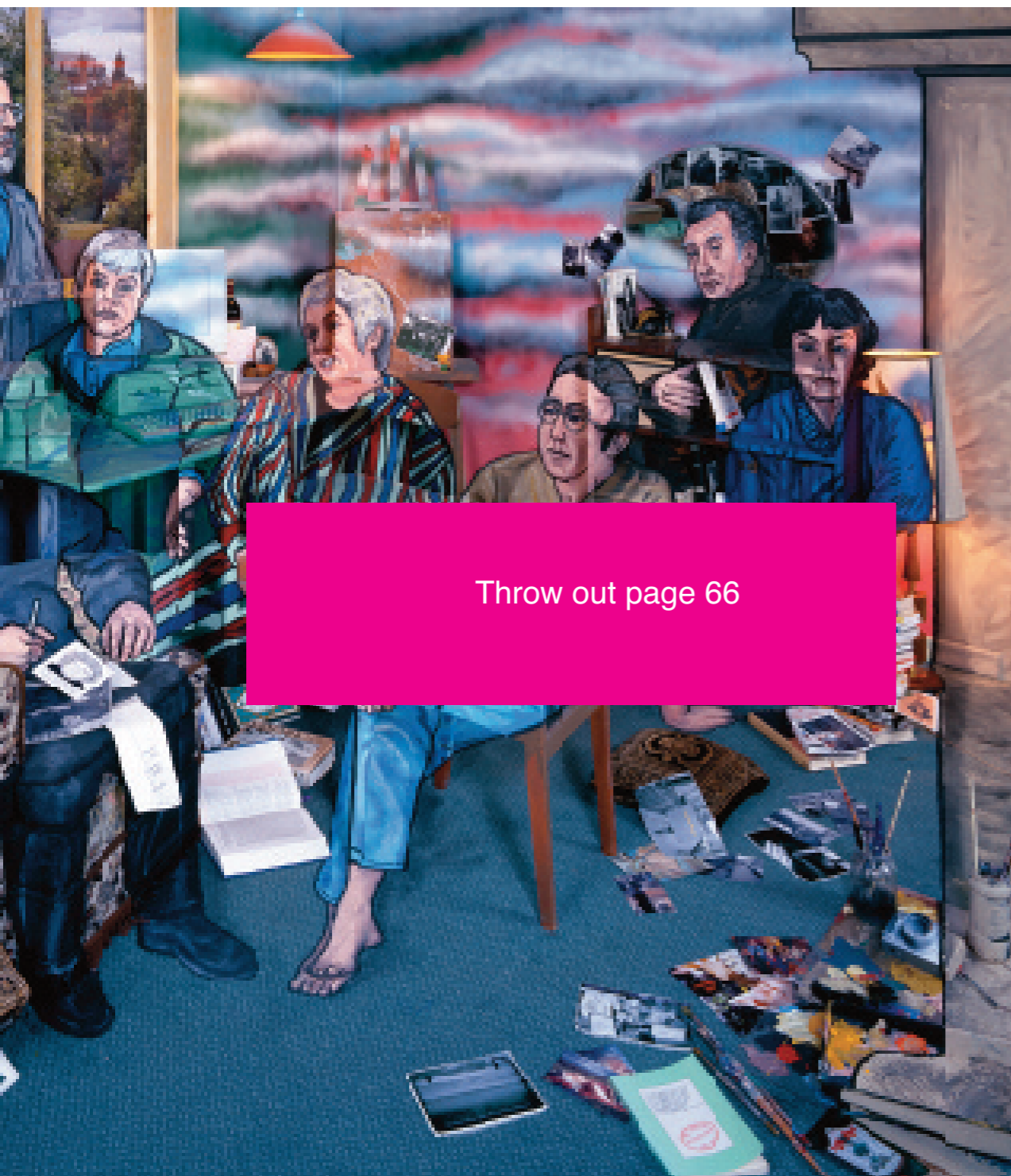
Mute Swan 1994



Sacred Ibis 1995



The Magnificent Frigatebird 1995



The Kelvingrove Eight 2000

## Objects of Contemplation

Alan Spence

I first met Calum Colvin when he was commissioned by the Scottish National Portrait Gallery to make a group portrait of eight Glasgow writers – *The Kelvingrove Eight* – a companion piece/homage to Sandy Moffat's fine painting, *Poets' Pub* from twenty years earlier. Calum's depiction of the current generation of writers would be done in his own unique, inimitable style.

Calum is a true original. When I first saw his works – his portrait of composer James Macmillan, his wry reworkings of classical themes – I couldn't quite work out how they had been made. They seemed to be photographs, printed large, but the subjects had clearly been painted. There were elements of photomontage but had a fascinating depth to them (in both senses of the word), looked almost three-dimensional. Were they photographs of actual objects, installations? If so, at what stage did the painting come in? It was intriguing, and magical, and I looked forward to seeing the work take shape.

I was one of the writers to be included in the portrait, the others being Alasdair Gray, Liz Lochhead, Janice Galloway, Tom Leonard, Bernard MacLaverty, Agnes Owens and Jeff Torrington. As part of the process, Calum would photograph each of us and use the photos as templates for painting us into the composition. He came to visit me and we spent some time just blethering about this and that, getting to know each other. Almost by the way, he took a few photos of me, black-and-white. It was relaxed, non-intrusive, and I enjoyed his company.

The moment he caught, the one he would use, showed me sitting at the edge of a couch, leaning forward slightly, one leg crossed over the other. I wore jeans and t-shirt, was barefoot (as I'd usually be, inside the house) and was looking into the middle distance. It was natural, but the moment was framed, composed – spontaneity *and* artifice.

In addition to the photograph itself, he also wanted to use copies of my books, and a single object that meant something to me. I gave it some thought, chose a small brass statue of Ganesha, the elephant-headed Hindu god. He's the Remover-of-Obstacles and also the God of Literature, often depicted writing in a book. (I liked to keep in with him, keep in his good books!) I had picked up many figures of Ganesha over the years, in shops and markets from Glasgow to Kathmandu. This one showed him dancing and I'd bought it on a cold snowy day in a craft shop in Ottawa.

Calum explained a bit more about his 'constructed photography,' about how the portrait would be built up. He would make a space in his studio, furnish it with objects as if it were a room. Then onto the surfaces in the room – those objects, the walls, the floor – *somehow* he would paint each portrait, scaled up, projected into the space. From one particular point, by an optical illusion, a *trompe l'oeil*, it would come to life, look as if the figures were there in the room.

After some time, I went to visit his studio, see the work-in-progress. The studio was a black box like a theatre space, enclosed, with no natural light from outside. It was cold, with maybe a residual atmosphere from the years it had been used as a funeral parlour. Perhaps my own sensitivity to such things was heightened – I'd recently published my novel *Way to Go*, a black comedy about the funeral business, and my sense of mortality was strong.

As if picking up on this, Calum gave me a print with the Latin maxim – a *memento mori*, message from the dead to the living. *Sum quod eris, quod es olim fui*. As ye are, so once were we, and as we are so ye shall be.

As it happens, Calum has a series of stereoscopic images – 'Natural Magic' - which includes the image of a skull – *Vanitas* – and a self portrait in the same sequence also features a skull in the background. So he too is clearly driven by that awareness of mortality. I suspect it goes with the territory, being Scottish. It's bred in the bone. *Timor mortis conturbat me*. (The *memento mori* print has a Scottish theme – an old leather-bound book lies open at an article on the Darien disaster, a low point in Scottish history). The print also featured objects in the foreground – used paintbrushes, caked with oil paint, pairs of tacky, paper-framed 3D glasses, red and green (issued free with *The Sun*!) – the tools of the trade, the means by which the illusion was created and how it might be perceived. These were photographed, in sharp focus, and outside the main frame.

The framing is all-important. In one corner of the studio he'd built what was effectively a stage set, a room with no fourth wall. It was furnished with a big padded armchair, a table and kitchen chairs, a bookcase, an artist's easel, a hung mirror. On a desk was an old manual typewriter. As I walked round I saw the figures, painted in, my own figure broken up, lines on the back wall, on a low chair, on the floor.

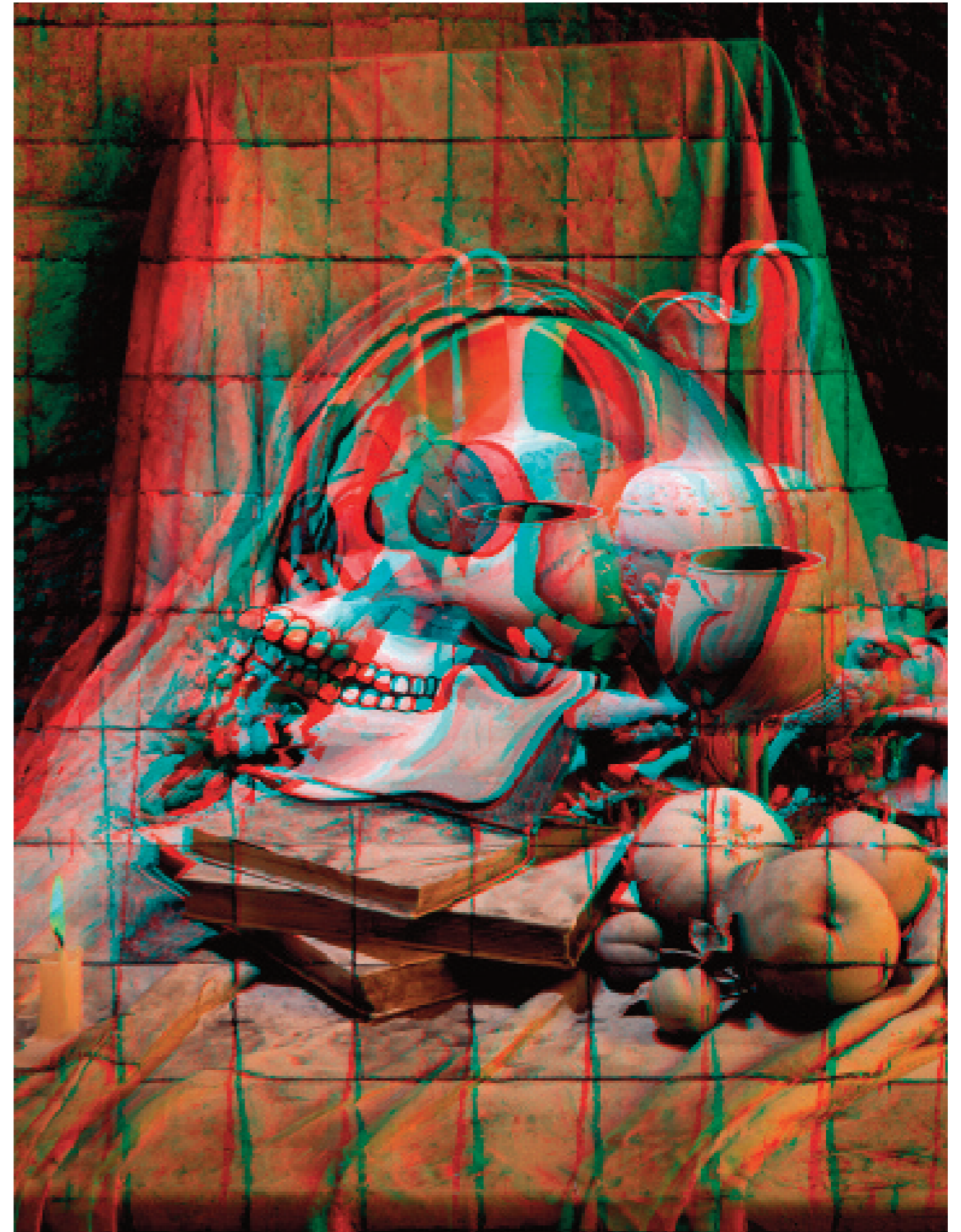
I remember as a child having this toy car – a police car – made of moulded tin with the driver's face painted on the front windscreen, profiles on the sides, back of his head on the back window. If you looked straight at any of the images, you'd see them just so, but if you looked at an angle

you'd see, say, front and side views separate. I always found the experience disconcerting.

I used that memory in *Way to Go*, allocating it to one of the characters who speaks of the strangeness of it, the discomfort, says he 'couldn't get his head round it!' He decides it was 'two parts of his brain working at once – the bit that wants to experience the illusion and the bit that wants to analyse, take it apart.'

Something very similar happened as I walked round Calum's studio set, the imagined room. At that focal point where the eye of the camera was set up, I saw my own figure and the others suddenly fit together, fall into place. It was strangely three-dimensional, at once realistic and dreamlike.

Recent developments in film and TV broadcasting – High Definition and 3D – seem to me to create the same kind of effect. When I first saw an HD broadcast, I was curiously disappointed, as the very heightening and sharpening of the images made me acutely aware the action had been filmed on a set, in a studio. It reminded me very much of early studio-based drama where you were conscious that the actors were moving around a set (in contrast to the illusion of the movies or of made-on-film TV). I don't begin to understand this, but mention it as Calum's work seems to create that stereoscopic (quadroscopic?) feel. Those 3D specs in the *memento mori* piece were an indication of the direction he'd take, and the 'Natural Magic' exhibition was made up of a series of diptychs, double images that had to be viewed through stereoscopic lenses, updating techniques pioneered by Victorian scientist David Brewster.



Vanitas (Anaglyph) 2007

It's all about the nature of reality and illusion, about how we perceive, about the multidimensional nature of any subject. To come back to that room with the images of eight Scottish writers placed in it, there's a constant Escher-like sleight of hand, a cubist sense of shifting planes, of objects behind the stage set and yet in front of it. What could be wallpaper is like clouds drifting through the room, and scattered around the floor are our books, the objects we chose.

*Fragments shored against our ruin.*

The objects, *our* objects, take on more significance – snapshots and postcards, an open book, sheet music on a stand, a whisky bottle, my dancing Ganesha.

*No ideas but in things.*

There's an added poignancy in that Jeff Torrington has passed away since the portrait was made, and the rest of us will follow, one by one. One day this will be a portrait of eight people who once were, like the poets in the pub portrayed in Sandy Moffat's painting. (Eddie Morgan, the last survivor from that group, passed in 2010). This transience gives a certain ghostly quality to the images of *The Kelvingrove Eight*. We're like Stevenson's 'child of air' - an afterimage.

*As ye are, so once were we...*

A few years ago I wrote a piece called *Time Capsule*, imagining what I'd leave in a tartan biscuit tin, to be buried for future generations. Objects – lists of them, things and things and things, then concepts, ideas, atmospheres. (Writer James Robertson heard me read it and said, *That would have to be a gey big biscuit tin*).

*This swirl of particles coalescing as me. This wider configuration that knows itself as Scotland.*

The tartan tin would not be out of place in Calum's work, which celebrates everyday objects that have an iconic function, or have personal resonance in terms of his own life.

He says, *'They are all essentially real objects. I mean...these are objects in a constructed set for a photograph, but they are also evocative of memory and of time. For me they are evocative of childhood memories...the type of object that people would have on their mantelpiece, in their living room. Of course they must also function as formal compositional devices...'*

He's a great believer (as I am) in the *found* in art – the found object, the found poem, the very thing. He welcomes the randomness of the given, but at the same time, finding is selecting. There's the seeing eye and the shaping intelligence, making order out of the chaos.

To use my favourite quote from Ansel Adams: *'Chance favours the prepared mind'*.

As Calum puts it: *'It can come quite kind of unexpectedly. These ideas. Sometimes if you try and hunt something down too steely-eyed, you just can't pin it. Then you wake up in the middle of the night and you think – that's what I need to do'*.

I went with him once on a foraging trip to Sam Burns salvage yard in Prestonpans, when he was very definitely hunting something down. He was working on his 'Ossian' series, in particular a piece called *The Twa Dogs*, referencing (the other) Burns and exploring the iconography of sectarianism. He'd trawled the Rangers and Celtic shops for various bits of ephemera – rugs and mugs, a baby bottle (!), a jar of orange sweeties. They would be placed in the room, the stage set, in front of an old-fashioned electric fire with grey brick surround.

It needed something more. Sam Burns yard is a world in itself, a wonderland of discarded stuff (and stuff, and more stuff). Machinery and furniture and crockery, books and paintings, bric-a-brac. Mountains of it all, piled high. Stuff.

Calum knew what he was looking for, or he would know it when he found it. And *it*, on this occasion, was a low coffee table, on three legs, with a built-in lamp. Could have been from the 50s or the 70s, still had its flex and its lampshade, in working order. Check it out in the picture. It's there, doing its work, the lamp lit, light catching the brassy rim of the table holding two mugs and a bottle, an integral part of the composition, just right.

*The seeing eye, the shaping intelligence.*

*God is in the details.*

His work seems the opposite of minimalism – the spaces he creates are filled, he embraces clutter, multiplicity. And yet their composition gives them a mandala-like quality, a pleasing wholeness. He sees them as *objects of contemplation, starting points on visual narrative journeys, hoaching with double entendres, visual puns and symbolic associations*.

In *The Kelvingrove Eight*, there's a black-and white photo lying, not quite randomly, on a cushion on the floor, near where my left hand seems to be leaning. It's an early photo of Calum's, from the 1980s, titled *Breakdancer*. It shows someone walking away from the camera, down a Glasgow street, completely hidden, apart from the legs, by a huge square panel of wood (or a canvas?) which he's carrying, hands just visible, clutching it at either side. It's an arresting image, one that makes you smile, and I used it on the back cover of my poetry book *Glasgow Zen*. On my print of it,

Calum had written *Nama Rupa* – which is Sanskrit for Name and Form, something he'd found in one of my short stories. It translates as mind-body, inner and outer, transcendent and phenomenal. Scribbled on the back of this Glasgow breakdancer's board, and somehow linking back to my little statue of Ganesha dancing his cosmic dance.

There's a haiku by George Bruce (dedicated to Elizabeth Blackadder) which contains the lines, *'The more I look / the more I look'*.

Calum's work is like that. God in the details. Unity in multiplicity. Name and form.

The more you look, the more you look.

## Ossianticity

Reflections on Calum Colvin's

'Ossian: Fragments of Ancient Poetry'.

Frédéric Ogée

The first images of the series are about traces, traces of Ossian's fantasised face, of Runciman's rendering of that face, traces of a lost yet present culture, traces of an identity, traces of the fingerprint of Scottishness, of its genetic map, traces of original truth – historic, scientific, philosophic, artistic. The dominating visual paradigm of the ruin endows the sequence – and the quest it suggests – with a strong sense of irretrievable loss and accumulating mess.

The series ends with two other sequences, of expectedly unequal length. The first one shows a 'typical' Maori warrior's head fading into the face of a 'typical' Highland Scotsman – from one 'noble savage' to the next – itself fading on into the common paradoxical traces of nothingness, dust and an empty shroud. The main subject of that series is not so much the faces and what they may mean or represent, but fading itself, the erasure of all life into that dust and the final repulsive shroud, both proposed here most unreligiously (not the least 'dust-to-dust' suggestion) as a bathetic memento mori. The second, shorter sequence (even shorter when you know its last picture is actually not by Colvin) presents us with portraits of Ossian's own cultural progeny, in reverse chronological order: Walter Scott as a neo-classical bust (the return of the past), Robert Burns as a well-fed, Elvis-like preromantic dandy (this man could own a football club), and James Macpherson, the true forger of it all, as a well-satisfied chubby Lowland-type (ha!) gentleman.

Somehow in the middle of the work comes the *Twa Dogs* image, Colvin's take on the famous Burns poem, a wonderful and hilarious description of the often ludicrous polarisations that have formed the backbone of recent Scottish culture, and metonymically of so much of (western?) human existence - high and low, Catholic and Protestant, Celtic and Rangers, Highland and Lowland, Scottish and British (and English, and Celtic, and Irish), bad taste and good taste, Luath and Kaiser, Nike and Adidas, etc.

Yet, in the overall atmosphere of ruins and decay, the two figures of the dogs appear as surprisingly stable icons, perhaps the only *living* traces in Colvin's *Ossian*, warming not uncomfortably by the fire (one of the very few warm hues in the whole work – may there be light among the ruins?), pointing in opposite directions, like visual hyphens or enjambments linking with the previous and the next sequences of images, and suggesting a form of pleasurable continuity in all this (*plus ça change...*). Besides, unlike Burns's 'dog o' *high degree*' and 'dog a *ploughman's collie*', and despite the clearly confrontational context recreated by Colvin through the profusion of the rival clubs' (strikingly similar) emblematic gadgets, the two animals here look most serene and possibly unconcerned, more mates than foes – their digitised 'one-on-top-of-the-other' position more suggestive of coupling than fight or dis-junction – and now possibly happy to go their separate ways, off their blue and green territorial mats. Kaiser seems nostalgic of the music once played on the dusty phonograph at its feet, while Luath lifts its head to welcome the air of a wide elegant fan, a stylish balance act to the lower warming of its genitals. The simplistic binary opposition of their Burnsian brief is also disturbed by the photograph of a third dog on the mantelpiece, the Cocker Spaniel meant

by Colvin as a reminder of William III and the Pope's manipulation of the Stuarts and the Scots at the time of the 'Glorious Revolution', yet another wonderful instance of historical trickery.

Somehow the kitsch and random dissemination of the various objects – *Twa Dogs* is the most cluttered picture of the whole series, its items echoing as fragments in many of the other pictures – acquire some of the refrained gentleness and dignity of the two dogs, and strike the beholder as vibrantly and movingly authentic, as so many signs of life, here and there and then and now, a surprising homage to the catching liveliness of Burns's idiomatic poetry, and of Scottish culture at large.

As has often been noted about Colvin's 'Ossian', the visible manipulation and digitisation of photography (*of* artificial installations and *into* fake paintings) as an impossible recorder of 'truth' plunge the beholder into an experience of the ways and means of falsehood, of falsification, of fabrication, of re-creation, all at the heart of the Ossian affair. Yet Colvin's images also constitute themselves as convincing recorders of ontological traces, whether they be deliberate inscriptions or destructions, or the chance consequence of loss, carelessness or decay. As Voltaire wrote rhymingly to Samuel Johnson, in the midst of the famous controversy, 'Vainquons par valeur ou par ruse, le succès sera notre excuse' (whether we conquer by fair or foul means, success will be our excuse). The whole sequence of 'Ossian' suggests a passing of time as we *truly* experience it, the inescapable, beginning-to-end narrative of our own *tracing* and mental recording, while the artificiality and undecidability of any chosen past (who came first: the 'white stranger', the Picts' fingerprints, the Maori warrior, the Homer of the North?) and the

omnipresent, cryptic bric-a-brac present in all the pictures are disturbingly and comically evocative of both the overall futility of our own beginnings and ends and of the reality and awareness of our post-Freudian existence as an increasingly unmanageable collage of fragments (did it feel different in Homer's, Ossian's or Macpherson's times?). Ultimately, the reconstruction and manipulation at the core of 'Ossian: Fragments of Ancient Poetry' (whose title is this anyhow?), be it by Macpherson, by Scott, by Colvin, by you or by me – offer themselves as desperate, ludicrous, mediocre, but profoundly moving traces of human authenticity.



Blind Ossian I 2001



Blind Ossian IX 2001



Fragment I 2002



Fragment IV 2002



Fragment VI 2002



Fragment VII 2002

## Trying to See...

Kirsty Gunn

What is it to come up close? To life? To art?  
To move from the edge of perception to a place  
that brings us face to face with the person, the  
painting, the image? What is it to open wide our  
eyes and hearts and minds to whatever is there  
before us? To allow the colours and shapes and  
effects of what is seen play out as a whole in the  
context we have created by stepping forwards  
and letting what is there be very near to us,  
be very, very near?

In 'Camera Lucida', Calum Colvin's profound  
series created for *In Memoriam*, an ongoing  
project that explores the mysteries of death and  
dying and finds expression in scientific, artistic and  
philosophical deliberations the process of coming  
close, an allowance of an intimate, untested space  
that might exist at the centre of experience, is at  
the very centre of our experience of looking here.

For from light to dark, lucida to obscura, colour  
to black, in Calum's shades and shapes and  
arrangements, we are being invited to enter into  
the very midst, it feels, of the images that are right  
before our eyes, to come right inside the frames  
of the pieces, into this sequence, this story...

And closer we go... And closer, and closer,  
so our eyes are being trained to see...

Gradually...

The mysteries, second by second in our seeing,  
of a slow occlusion, a gathering blindness...

A deepening of sight that will end in  
sightlessness entire...

And yet, from that same dark, how much can  
be gleaned? These glimmerings, in areas of light  
and gold....

How much is seen:

The work itself, a chamber.

The work itself a place of sight.

.

So 'profound' is exactly the word, here,  
to describe the effects of this series upon the eye.  
For this is a series that trains us to see as though  
with an inner eye ... That wants to bring us into  
blindness so as to be able to see.

In the end, here are pictures that, piece by  
piece, frame by frame, deliver us into the mysteries  
of the end – of painting, of making, of thinking,  
being... That deliver us into a place where there  
will be no more colour, or image, or arrangement  
of detail or pigment or mark. Where there'll be  
no more of that 'Head of The Apostle' whose  
lineaments we may make out and remember from  
the Dürer original; where there'll be no more of  
the artist himself, Calum Colvin himself, standing  
behind this set of pictures he has created...  
For he, too, by the end of our seeing, is absorbed  
by the darkness now.

All dark by now.

And yet...

There... marking like low lit candles our passage  
into night this series is here before us.

The pictures will remain.



Camera Lucida I 2011



Camera Lucida II 2011



Camera Lucida IV 2011



Camera Lucida V 2011



Camera Lucida VII 2011



Camera Lucida X 2011

## An afterword from Calum Colvin – some thoughts from a dark room.

Welcome to my world! And, I'm delighted to have the opportunity to present here some of the works I've produced over the last twenty-eight years. I'm especially delighted, privileged even, to have these works presented in this particular form. For this publication is styled as an artist's book and as such it has a special kind of quality; neither a catalogue, nor a critical commentary, but an object and one that parallels my works and their creation. And so it was never the intention to provide a comprehensive account of my work and oeuvre. This isn't anything like a *catalogue raisonné*. Nor is this book weighted with the familiar details of catalogue paraphernalia; biography, exhibition list, collections list, print-edition numbers, medium, or any of the other minutiae of image production - including the vexed question of sizing the various photographs.

Rather this *artist's book* has been conceived as a loose narrative of my career and output, and thinking on this I have invited responses from a wide range of creative individuals, writers all – poets, storytellers, academics, thinkers. These individuals kindly agreed to reflect upon my works in various ways, seeing it 'differently'. And the joy of this is that the book becomes a kind of construction, a 'constructed narrative' even – to reprise the title of my debut 1986 exhibition in The Photographers Gallery. For it presents images, ideas, poems, essays, texts, all designed to complement and explore and 'expose' the photographs.

I have mostly used the first-person singular in the above, but really I should be searching for a collective pronoun. For, naturally, art is social in its presentation and everything is created in some kind of collaboration. In my career I've been honoured to collaborate with a wide range of artists and scholars and creative people and a number of these have contributed to this book. I'd like to thank, and acknowledge, them here.

Not least Tom Normand, who has edited this publication. I have known Tom since my days as a student of sculpture at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art in Dundee, where Tom taught art history for a few years in the early 1980s. I would sit in the back row during his lectures on 20th century art, mainly looking at an array of images, some of which would seep into the photography I was beginning to develop even while studying sculpture. For years now Tom has taught at the University of St Andrews, and he has written and lectured on my work for decades.

Tom is an academic and other scholars have engaged with my work here, offering many stimulating insights. My thanks then to Naomi Stewart, a Masters student in the history of photography at the University of St Andrews, and surely an individual of great promise. Frédéric Ogée is Professeur in cultural studies at the Université Paris Diderot and has shown a fascination with my work on Ossian. I'm grateful for his thoughtful and even elegiac piece. Equally Fiona Stafford, Professor of English at the University of Oxford, who has shown such insight into my fixation with Robert Burns and the layered symbolism in my work.

One of the joys of this book is that it gave me the chance to reunite with many of the creative writers I've had the honour of working with in the past. Janice Galloway and Alan Spence both sat for me when the Scottish National Portrait Gallery commissioned a group portrait that I titled, with some irony, the *Kelvingrove Eight*. Our friendship was cemented during that time, and I've had many informative, pleasurable conversations with both since. Hugely gifted writers, Janice and Alan write about a Scotland – and a world – that I recognise, and they write about this world with a depth and passion that I so admire.

This, too, is evidenced in the extraordinary contributions from Rab Wilson and Kirsty Gunn. Rab and I worked together on the recent 'Burnsiana' project and his superb verse, in Scots, did more than complement my photographs but it gave them life in a parallel universe. And my deep thanks also to Kirsty – my colleague at the University of Dundee and collaborator on the 'In Memoriam' project – for her subtle and beautifully crafted meditation on my 'Camera Lucida' works. A piece of writing that has surely gifted a glorious finale to this book.

My sincere thanks to all these friends and collaborators, and salutations.

As I review the photographs in this book, and the evidence of the writing that they've inspired, I recognise the sense of time and closure that is prevalent in the work – an uncomfortable feeling for me. While my work dwells on a shared past and embodies some sense of history, I'm not in the habit of thinking over-much about the arc of my own history as an artist. But the photographs do seem to create a kind of chronology: beginning with my earliest works, made in the corner of a one-room loft apartment in central London in the middle years of the 1980s, and on to the most recent piece, 'The Pretender' series – that is gradually being dismantled in my Edinburgh studio at this very moment.

So there is a kind of journey shown in these images, and one that records the sweep of my creative obsessions. Overall, they encompass 'the noise of the world'; the objects, the clutter, the wild raw physical material of life. And, they seem to reflect on aspects of art and of photography, on history and identity, on ethics and morality, on love and life and mortality. Hopefully they do this with an equal weight of intensity and of humour: and will continue so to do in the future.

Yes, welcome to my world!



Pretender I 2014



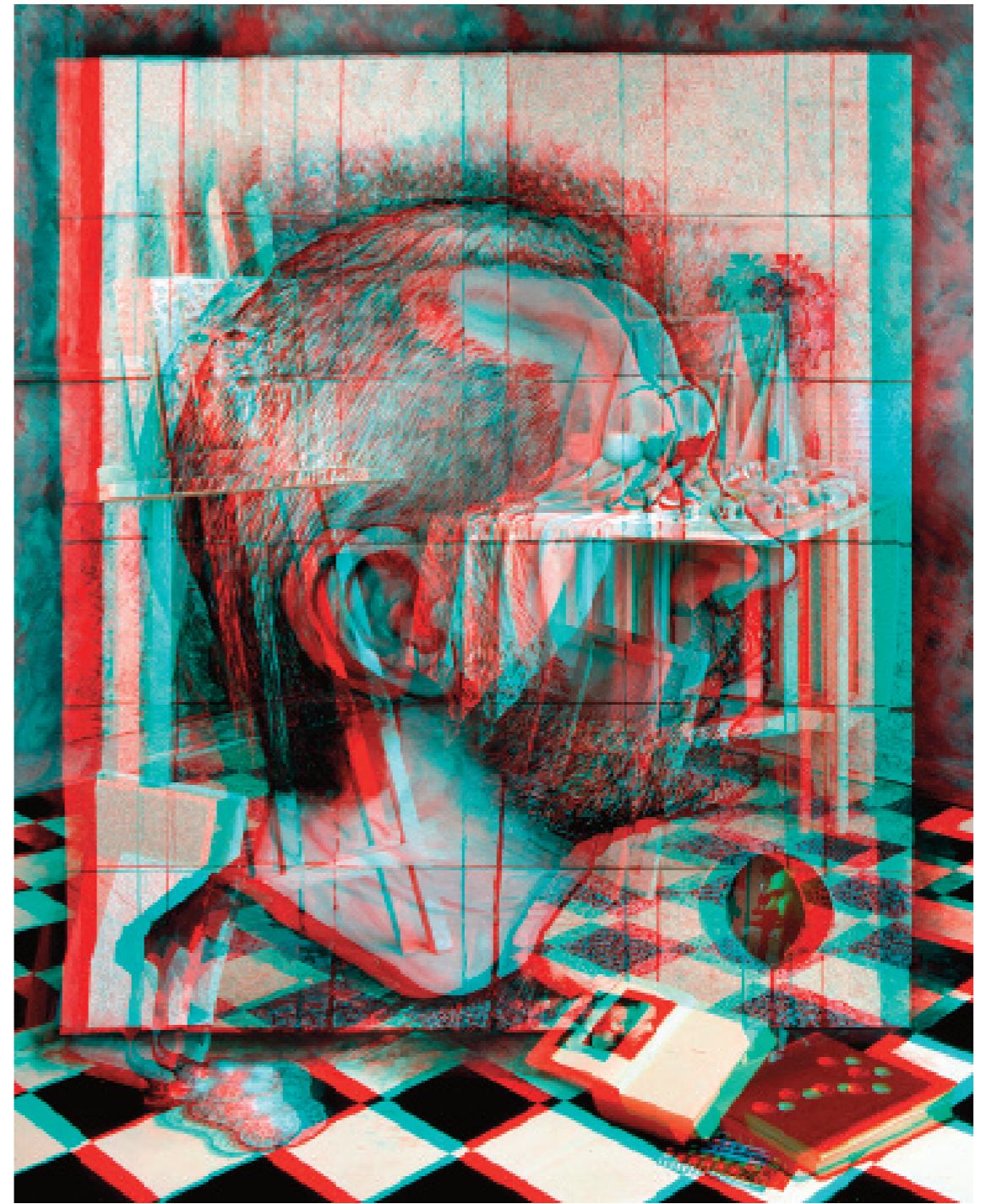
Pretender II 2014



Pretender III 2014



Pretender IV 2014



Self Portrait (Anaglyph) 2004

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