

Questions from St. Andrews Museums and Galleries Studies Course

Science and Art

1. You seem drawn towards the question of authenticity, especially when concerning the works of controversial figures such as McPherson and Brewster. Was it Brewster's technological experiments within the field of photography itself, or his character that first inspired you to study/focus on him in particular?

Both, though I would not have known of him if he had not invented the lenticular stereoscope.

2. By focusing this exhibition on Brewster, Byron and Burns you seem to aim to raise questions as to who they really were and what they represented in their own time and today. Do you feel that you are biased in your portrayal? Do you feel responsible for defending Brewster and McPherson in this portrayal?

Everyone is biased in their portrayal of everything. Both these characters deserve defending, as do all the flawed characters who appear in my fictions.

3. Have you considered placing the sets that you photograph in gallery spaces to enable visitors to interact with them and discover the completed image for themselves?

I've done that a few times, but they are made to be seen through the conduit of a camera.

4. Do you agree with art historian Tom Normand that the debate as to whether photography is art or science is now redundant?

Broadly, yes. It's both art and science.

5. You were asked to use a digital camera in 2005 for 'Digital picture of Britain'. Is your reluctance to use digital cameras in the majority of your own work, and in this exhibition in particular, due to practical or aesthetic reasons?

I like the feel of film. You can hold it up to the light and see what is on it. I would feel disconnected to my work if it only existed as data on some kind of data storage device. I see digital interventions as a conduit rather than an end.

5. Before the invention of the camera, the written word was the dominant means of recording history. Now, especially with the popularization of photographic technology, it can be argued that recorded history is moving more and more into the visual realm. How do you think this shift affects your role as an artist, especially in terms of the use of historical references in your work?

I don't know. I tend to follow my instincts and whatever linked fact, story, picture, I stumble across in my researches. Hopefully the pictures feed in to historical ideas and provide new avenues for debate.

7. Do you think recent technological advances in photography- such as digital photo manipulation- has reopened the debate on whether or not photography should be considered a 'fine' art? Is this kind of debate even relevant to today's art world?

No, I don't. Photography as a practice, strangely, is disappearing into the art soup.

8. The photographic experiments of Sir David Brewster and his contemporaries were thought of as more scientific than artistic; what do you think were some of the things that changed this perception of photography?

The perception of a photograph by an audience is not, I think, a static thing. Photography from the beginning was considered as, and alongside, 'art'. The pencil of nature. Incidentally, Brewster had interesting ideas regarding the kaleidoscope and its relationship to painting.

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9. How does the concept of 'perspective' factor into your work, both in your technique and subject matter?

In one way or another, it has always been a dominant subject/theme in my work. It links the painted and photographed elements together.

10. Your work has many layers of meaning, it seems like its interpretation always has the potential to change; is there a connection between this fluid sense of interpretation and the way you present historical themes? Is your method consciously supposed to reflect the way that the interpretation of things in history is always subjective, and often changes from one person to the next?

Yes.

11. Pioneering photographers of the mid nineteenth century such as Hill and Adamson teach us that photography has the potential for romantic depiction and can be traced back to the development of the Romantic Movement in painting and literature. Is this the reason why you choose Byron, one of the most important figure of Romanticism, to be in one of your portraits? Why not Shelley or Keats?

Yes. I chose Byron, because everyone in this body of work has some connection to Walter Scott, the great, invisible hand in the creation of Scotland (and also the person to whom Sir David Brewster addressed his book 'Letters on Natural Magic). Byron has, also a certain nationalistic ambivalence.

12. Do you also recognise parallels between you and Brewster or Byron for this series of work? Do you recognise parallels between yourself Brewster and Byron and, if so, did this influence your choice of subject matter for this series of works? For example, Brewster originally trained to be a minister but turned his attention to the study of optics and the development of scientific instruments. Likewise, you studied painting and sculpture but became a photographer. Are there some characteristics of the Byronic hero, a distaste for social institution, being an exile, that similarly influenced you?

I'm way too old to be Byronic! I wouldn't admit to parallels such as that very easily. Both Byron and Burns are mythic people, creations beyond the reality of their lives. Both their experiences are shaped by their national identity (somewhat ambivalent in the case of Byron). In ways they are opposite, in others, uncannily similar. They are the ghosts in the stereoscope, as suggested to me when I was making the portrait of Sir David Brewster.

Cultural References

12. You previously lived in London during the early years of your career, something that is reflected in your work of the time. Do you feel that living in Scotland is just as important to your current output?

At the moment, yes. We are definitely shaped by our surroundings.

13. The view of 'Scottishness' has played a key role in some of your works, (Portrait of Sir Walter Scott, for example) do you think that the international perception of a Scotland of kilts, shortbread and the like is a healthy one?

Scotland is seen differently from place to place. It is sometimes difficult to catch that kaleidoscopic perception, especially if you are Scottish.

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15. Your early work is extremely colourful, often full of cultural references from Scotland and the wider world. Your more recent pieces are more minimalist and monochrome; was this a deliberate move or did it happen organically? If deliberate, what inspired the change?

When my career first started in London, the perceived wisdom was that if photography was to be seen as 'fine' art, it should be in black and white. I was drawn to make large, colour images as a rebellion against that notion. The work I make now is still colour, just playing with it differently.

16. Certain symbols and icons recur in your work. For example, a ladder is represented in the image of Brewster, as it was in *Jacob's Ladder*. Could you expand upon your reasons for including this symbol in the apparently secular Brewster image where it is removed from its traditional, iconographic role.

I was thinking about the ladder as a symbol of intellectual, rather than spiritual, growth in this instance. Though, of course, Brewster has a foot in both camps.

17. Brewster is surrounded in this image by certain symbols relevant to his scientific pursuits. Are these symbols purely representative of his interests or do they have further resonance, to what extent do they function as metaphor? Could you expand upon your own interest in including such symbols in your work.

They are metaphors for art and science. My work is painting and photography. To make the works function as a whole, I try to work objects in to the picture, alongside the painting, becoming somehow more than their constituent parts. That's the alchemy.

18. *Ossian*, the subject of a recent series, was influenced by the work of James McPherson. McPherson was Brewster's father in law. To what extent did this connection influence this series of works? To what extent was the ambition and reputation of the two men similar?

The characters I paint are all connected to each other in some way. My mind seems to work that way. I haven't given too much thought to the relationship between Brewster and Macpherson. It seems a more of a strange coincidence than anything to me at the moment.

19. There are multiple interpretations made on your existing body of work. Similarly, there are many ways in which to view your work, both literally and metaphorically. Do you consciously encourage interpretations of your work or would you prefer the interpretation of your work to conform to an original idea?

An artwork is often considered under a different light at a different time by a different person. The original idea is the beginning, not the end.

20. Your subjects, Ossian and Brewster in particular, have somewhat tragic histories. The works of Ossian were disclosed as fakes and Brewster's achievements were hobbled by his own mistakes and difficult personality. As a proud Scot, what influenced you to choose these two subjects? Do you consider them to be emblematic of Scotland in some way?

They are, I think, more emblematic of human experience universally. Most of our heroes are flawed. That is not unique to Scotland, although we tend to be drawn to these more in this part of the world. It's how we look at them, and ourselves that interests me.

How the Subject is Identified with St. Andrews

21. St Andrews was the stage for much of Brewster's early experiments with photography, how has this influenced your work for this exhibition, being set itself in St. Andrews?

Synchronicity!

21. What kind of an impact do you think Brewster's work had on the local community?

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Brewster's contemporaries such as Hill took many striking and well known photographs of St Andrews itself and local residents, did these images influence how the St Andrews community perceived itself? How it was perceived by outsiders?

I don't know.

23. What initially intrigued you about David Brewster? Are you more interested in his role in the development of photography or in his invention of the lenticular stereoscope?

I was interested in both, but more the lenticular stereoscope invention. He seemed an interesting character. Brooding (like Byron!). I was curious in the mindset of the scientist when they were 'Natural Philosophers'.

I was also interested in the 'Chimenti drawing' dispute with Wheatstone, because it was a work of art, caught up in a scientific argument. Used to prove a 'truth' in the way that a photograph is (or was?).

24. Did any stereoscopic image in particular resonate with you and inspire this exhibition?

'The Ghost in the Stereoscope as suggested by Sir David Brewster'. That's a good one.

25. Much of Brewster's work and his passion for photography developed here in St. Andrews and in Edinburgh. Do you feel Brewster and his contemporaries have had a lasting influence on Scottish art?

I don't know. In some ways, I think.

26. In conversation you spoke of your interest in the colleague/competitor relationship between Brewster and Talbot, and the significance of Talbot being from England, Brewster from Scotland. How is this portrayed in your work?

Brewster and Wheatstone. Sir Charles Wheatstone invented the mirror stereoscope, Sir David Brewster invented the lenticular stereoscope. They had a long dispute about the origins of the underlying concepts. I have painted them both, over the same set, alongside the Chimenti drawing(s).

27. What was the main reason you chose to compare Brewster and Byron. Why those two individuals?

I am not, as such, comparing Brewster to Byron (I would imagine Brewster had a dim view of Byron). I am comparing poet(s) and scientist(s), or poetry and science. Photography is, of course, both.

Scientific Instruments

28. The idea of perception was important to the early practitioners of stereoscopic photography. Had you always been interested in 'ways of looking' before you learned of this technique or was it something you found to be fascinating once you had learned of it?

What they seemed to have believed was that you could experience the world with a stereoscope. From your own front room. You didn't need to go to Egypt to see the pyramids. I was initially interested, I suppose, because I hadn't realized how much stereoscopic photography had dominated the early days of photography.

29. In what way, if any, have the works of early photographers inspired you in your own work? Are there any images you found particularly powerful or was it more the philosophy and ideas behind the work which interested you?

I like the formality of early photography. The difficulty, the cumbersome cameras, long exposures, lethal chemicals, magnesium explosions. It was like theatre. You've got to be serious

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about it to go those lengths. I would have.

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