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Edinburgh art festival review – the dark side of Robert Burns

A Pablo Bronstein folly, Rabbie in ruins and a fond Māori farewell are among this year's standouts, while Inverleith House is sorely missed...

Laura Cumming



Douglas Gordon's Black Burns at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery. Photograph: Jessie Maucor/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2017, courtesy Studio lost but found, Berlin and Gagolian

Robert Burns stands tall, a white marble hero dominating the great hall of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh. He holds a scroll – as if Burns used parchment for his poems – and his plaid has become a classical toga. An ideal man, or so John Flaxman's famous statue would have it back in 1824. But now look down and find his dark double – his exact inverse – lying broken on the floor. Carved out of black marble from the same mine, all his pristine aspects turned to night, the national poet is ruined and fallen. This is Douglas Gordon's *Black Burns*.

It is a shattering sight, not least because the monument is now unrecognisable. Head and body parted, Burns is a divided self. From the balcony above he looks like a fallen angel; on ground level, like mangled body parts jutting from a trench, one foot still polished like a dead soldier's boot. So the poet is brought down to earth. The inner man is revealed as dark and flawed – literally, a fault line running through the stone defined the way the figure cracked – at the same time that the innards of a marble sculpture are exposed in all their dark and twinkling beauty. Rough jewels: both statue and poet.

Doppelgangers, doubles, divided Jekyll-and-Hyde selves – as an artist, Gordon has long been heir to his compatriots James Hogg and Robert Louis Stevenson. But here he has gone further and liberated Burns even as he appears to destroy him. Gordon's tremendous anti-monument

finds tragedy in the life that Flaxman's statue altogether ignores, as if Burns had not died young and poor, a drinker and serial adulterer. And a man, moreover, once so desperate that he booked a passage to Jamaica with the aim of becoming a bookkeeper on a slave plantation, which is the subject of Graham Fagen's four-screen installation in the gallery next door.

Three screens show Scottish classical musicians performing an exquisite setting, composed by Sally Beamish, of Burns's *The Slave's Lament*; the fourth screen shows the reggae artist Ghetto Priest singing the lyrics to a 5/4 rhythm. The merging of the two traditions is captivating, filling the air with a sorrowful beauty that unites Enlightenment Scotland with contemporary Jamaica and does not forget, in its dark undertones, that Burns might once have become involved in the very suffering that inspired the lament.

Anyone visiting the Edinburgh art festival this summer would do well to visit the SNPG straight away for Gordon and Fagen (and for the incomparable photographs of Newhaven fishwives and New Town intellectuals by those pioneering Victorians, Hill and Adamson, continuing until 1 October). But the festival is itself divided this year. It has always been hard to define, this loose confederation of museum surveys, contemporary shows and pop-up events in curious places, but 2017 has even less focus than usual.

There's a theme of sorts in the writings of the Scottish sociologist and city planner Patrick Geddes (1854-1932), with special commissions in gardens off the High Street and a performance in which children carry the green dragon of "Profit, Private Ownership and Corporate Greed" down the Royal Mile in a spirit of gleeful mockery. A larger version of this dragon, by Neil Bromwich and Zoë Walker, sits glumly in the gothic shadows of Trinity Apse, the phrase solemnly lettered on its sides as if this was some kind of radical protest.

Further down the Mile is the newly opened venue of Gladstone Court, a former home for "fallen women" now aptly transformed with banks of shrubs and grasses into a kind of meadow for the screening of another potent lament, this time by a 19th-century Māori princess who caught leprosy from her foreign lover. Her song, or waiata, handed down through the oral tradition, forms part of an exceptionally intense soundtrack of wind, words and electronic music that unites two separate films, screening above and below a platform. One shows two Māori women dancing at dusk, on and on until twilight turns to night, locked in some final farewell. The other shows the landscape of central New Zealand, cloud-racked, gale-blown and deserted, as if all the Māori tribes were now gone. The work of Shannon Te Ao, who recently won New Zealand's prestigious Walters prize for contemporary art, this is a mysterious piece that lingers in the mind with its doleful vision and strangely Whitmanesque lyrics.

Jupiter Artland has the most spectacular commission of the year in the grand and stunning folly designed by Pablo Bronstein (late of the Duveen Galleries at Tate Britain) and built by master craftsmen in the grounds of Bonnington House outside the city. Walking through the woods, you come across a clearing in which stands the facade of what might be a gothic mansion or church, all Puginesque buttresses, arches and piercings, rising up three floors among the beech trees. This is connected to the facade of a Chinese pavilion by a long pergola lined with red and white rose bushes: a scene straight out of Alice's *Adventures in Wonderland*.

And sure enough, on certain days a mad ballet will take place that further fuses the elements of east and west. But Bronstein's dream is sufficiently wild as to be a wonderland in itself. Here

you are, like Alice, walking between two different worlds through these peculiar perspectives, a performer in some outlandish postmodern play.

Jupiter Artland is a miniature festival in itself, with the German artist Michael Sailstorfer's Volkswagens turned into kilns, sending out papal smoke signals into the summer sky, and an avenue of carnivalesque creations by Marco Giordano – porridge ears, salt heads, hair made of sponges, all emitting a fine mist that settles like a blessing on the passer by. Back in Edinburgh, one keenly feels the lack of an Inverleith House show, now that Paul Nesbitt's marvellous programme – who can forget Agnes Martin, Joan Mitchell, Philip Guston et al? – has been so ruthlessly cancelled by philistines. A collection of botanical images doesn't cut it.

But the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art has an eye-opener of an exhibition in *True to Life: British Realist Painting of the 1920s and 1930s*. This must be one of the most forgotten chapters in art, a period of realism that includes all sorts of neglected names, from James Cowie's poised inquiries into contemporary existence to Gilbert Spencer's shrewd *Rat Catcher* and Meredith Frampton's super-smooth but merciless portrait of a university rector, a tin of weedkiller as his telling attribute.

These are paintings from which one can deduce the time of day, the temperature, the kind of fish on the dinner table. They go very hard and direct into subject matter, from the broken love affair to the city park in autumn. But the facts always come with a stylistic jolt – realism in brusque dabs, renaissance linearity or enamelled clarity – or with a sharp twist on the past. Oddest of all is John Luke's bizarre 1928 painting in which Judith hacks the head off Holofernes in a spotless suburban sitting room.

It's a scene that can also be found – painted by the great Artemisia Gentileschi – in *Beyond Caravaggio* at the Scottish National Gallery. With six works by Caravaggio and many masterpieces by Gentileschi, De la Tour, Ribera and more, this show (first seen in London last year) is the crowning glory of art in Edinburgh right now, and on until late September.