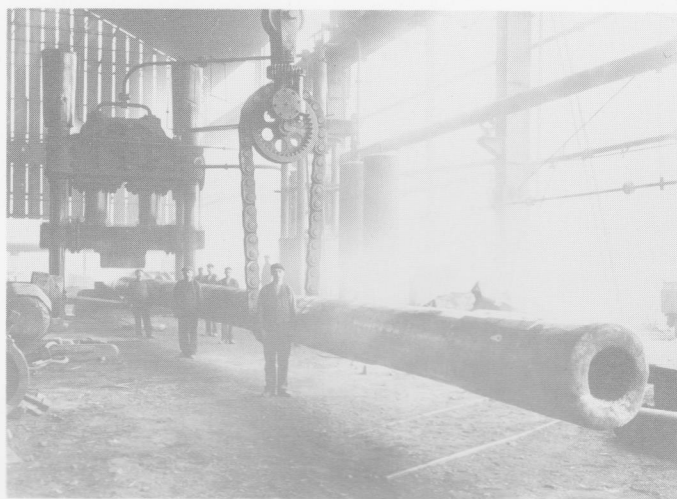


PHOTOGRAPHY ON SHOW AT THE 1987 EDINBURGH FESTIVAL

The 1987 Edinburgh Festival felt the busiest in years. I can always tell by the size of the crowd milling outside my flat near the castle from early morning until after midnight. Despite adverse publicity over soaring ticket and accommodation prices, thousands of tourists came to Edinburgh in August 1987, including the return of many Americans now that Reagan no longer discourages them from visiting Europe. Each year, for a very short time, the spirit of John Knox is exorcised – and Edinburgh feels more like a capital city than a grey provincial town. It is the time of year when long-lost 'friends' suddenly decide to come and stay. Edinburgh's yuppies take their annual vacations and rent out their flats at high rents to desperate performers.

An estimated million people descended on the International (official) Festival, the Fringe, the Book Festival, the Film Festival, the Television, and the Jazz Festival, and of course the Military Tattoo. In the midst of these competing activities, the largest number of photography exhibitions – 15 – ever seen in Edinburgh at one time took place. Scattered throughout various programmes and leaflets, and some not advertised at all, these exhibitions took place in a diverse range of venues – from the prestigious Gallery of Modern Art, to the Art College, to jazz and theatre venues, pubs and even the zoo.

Starting, then, at Stills – one of only two galleries in Scotland devoted to the exhibition of photography. Stills had brought together the Scottish photographs of Fay Godwin. Produced over the past decade, partly through commissions and a bursary, the 60-print exhibition included many not previously shown. In 'Land', her major retrospective, Fay Godwin's photographs of Scotland highlighted the beauty of empty, unpopulated areas of the country. Sadly, these breathtaking photographs of Glencoe, Strathcannard, Sutherland and Rannoch Moor, which portray a threatening and wild landscape, have in the main been omitted. 'The Scottish Photographs' at Stills presents a portrait of Scotland which is much more reassuring. Emphasis has been



T.N. Armstrong Hollow steel forging for propellor shaft, Parkhead forge, Beardmore & Co., circa 1905. From 'Made From Girders'.

placed on those photographs which compare wild and cultivated, cultural and natural, and appear to raise issues about the environment. Although people are never present, their presence can be read from signs she has carefully constructed – signs of the Highland 'clearances',

tourism, and the devastation carried out by the Forestry Commission.

One block away, the Talbot Rice Centre at Edinburgh University, showed 'Made from Girders: Photography in Industrial Scotland'. The exhibition took its title in

George Blair. The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoise.



humorous reference to Scotland's second national drink (Irn Bru). Billed as an exhibition which looks at the special relationship between photography and Scotland's industrial experiences of the 19th and 20th century, this was the most disappointing exhibition of the Festival. Despite having provided a selection of often stunning photographs, the exhibition's lack of structure gave no sense of coherence to either the history of photography or industrialisation in Scotland. The catalogue, however, did explain how photography became attractive to industrialists – the builders of ships, bridges and locomotives – who found invaluable the high definition afforded by large plates. Photographs were used as catalogue illustrations and in large contracts to satisfy customers on progress of work, and to justify payment for part completion. A photograph dated 1914, showing several hundred workers and apprentices sitting on top of a newly completed locomotive destined for South Africa is a poignant reminder of Scotland's key role in the empire.

The extensive photographing of the building of the Forth Rail Bridge between 1883 and 1890, following the Tay Bridge disaster, was an act of propaganda designed to restore national self-confidence. As a result, the event is over-documented, and unnecessarily pads out the exhibition. Photographs of the launching of ocean liners on the Clyde, union meetings at shipyards in the early 1970s, women workers in munitions factories during the first world war, and numerous engineering works are often fascinating, but without a coherent structure and explanatory text the exhibition remained simply a collection of individual prints.

There was a Russian theme to the 1987 Festival, in advance celebration of the 70th anniversary of the revolution. One of the few exhibitions which responded to this was the National Portrait Gallery in Queen Street, with a showing of William Carrick's 'Nineteenth Century Photographs of Russia'. Sharing the gallery with an exhibition of paintings of Mary, Queen of Scots, Carrick's 'character' portraits of workers in the street, countryside and his studio,

made a delightful exhibition, and was presented with magnifying glasses for closer viewing. A Scot, who emigrated to Russia in 1827 with his parents, he worked mainly in St. Petersburg in the 1860s and 70s, from necessity selling these portraits as postcards to the Russian tourist market. His work earned him a reputation in his lifetime as a photographer of sensitivity, and as one of the founding figures of Russian photography.

At their usual Hanover Street venue, the Edinburgh Photographic Society held its 125th International Exhibition of Pictorial Photography. The catalogue gave a mathematical breakdown of the percentage of entries accepted, by nationality. Surprisingly, following the UK, most entries originated from Czechoslovakia (299), and the USSR (269). This information was followed by a listing of titles and names/nationality of the photographers. It was much more interesting to abandon the catalogue, just look at the prints (all uncaptioned, uncredited and unframed), and play a game of 'spot the cultural code'. It was depressing to see that the discourse of pictorial photography crosses all national boundaries. The successful entries on show consisted of landscape, documentary (black and white), advertising (titillating) and 'trick' photography. One section was held together by nothing more than the use of the common colour red – and the incidental device of women's bodies. Since this exhibition invariably attracts more people than most others, perhaps the independent sector should put some effort into a dialogue with the Photographic Society to encourage a rethinking of how the event could be conducted.

Down through the New Town, Edinburgh's upper-middle class ghetto of Georgian houses, to the new location of the Prescott Gallery, and a showing of Andy Goldsworthy's 'New Ground'. The gallery's owner, Ann Hartree, has moved the gallery from its High Street premises to her home at 5 Northumberland Street, where she will show visual and applied arts in a domestic setting. Andy Goldsworthy, one-time gardener now based in Dumfriesshire, works as a sculptor in nature, using ice, snow, and leaves. He then photographs these sculptures to record his fragile constructions which decompose back into the landscape. Concerns that traditional gallery spaces can dissuade the casual visitor are trebled here, the aura of an Edinburgh New Town residence, with art on the stairways and behind the grand piano in the drawing room, doing even more to intimidate.

A short bus ride away at the



Fay Godwin. Caldá House, Loch Assynt, 1986.

Scottish Gallery of Modern Art, the official Festival held its first ever exhibition of contemporary Scottish art in its 40-year history. It has taken the international success of artists such as Steven Campbell, Adrian Sizneski and David Mach to bring about this revolutionary step by the Scottish art establishment. In a celebration of 17 young Scottish artists (4 of them women), who have become prominent in the 1980s, 'The Vigorous Imagination' included two photographers – Calum Colvin and Ron O'Donnell. The photographers have exhibited together before in 'Constructed Narratives', produced and toured by the Photographers' Gallery. Colvin's work has matured since 'Constructed Narratives'. Still using comic book material and Scottish memorabilia, he focusses more directly on male desire for women and the precariousness of masculinity. 'Narcissus' deals with male narcissism and the cult of the body beautiful. Based on a drawing by Ingres, the male figure looks at himself in a mirror; a teapot, strategically placed, suggests a self-centred sexuality.

Ron O'Donnell, in characteristic humour, has taken a stab at divisions north and south of the border. His work is becoming bolder, bigger and even more

extravagant, earning him increasing success and popularity on both sides of the Atlantic. Entitled, 'The Great Divide', a massive colour print (10' x 6') records an installation of a sitting room divided in two by the eastern edge of the map of Britain. One side is dirty and peeling, as in his earlier tableaux of Scottish tenements, the other is MFI-smart, with a deluge of junk mail coming through the letterbox. A bottle of HP sauce marks London on the map; a Tom Jones album near the fireplace marks the location of Wales. More a comment on divisions between employed and unemployed than geographical location, the work speaks of a spiritual as well as a material poverty. The exhibition was the highlight of the Festival for me, and is a sign of Scottish art's growing self-confidence, and so it's particularly frustrating that it will not tour outside Scotland.

Time for a detour on the way through town, past the Scottish Council for Development and Industry offices, which showed 'Orcaidian Eye', an exhibition of photographs by Michael Hockney. Co-sponsored by Occidental Petroleum, this exhibition was concerned to justify Orkney's use of natural resources. Ever vigilant of their image in terms of the

environment, oil companies are increasingly becoming sponsors of prestigious exhibitions (Shell sponsored 'The Vigorous Imagination'; Mobil sponsored 'Made from Girders'). Sam Ainsley, one of the women artists at the Gallery of Modern Art, appears to be the only participant who voiced doubts about such sponsorship – in particular over Shell's involvement in South Africa.

The cafe space at Theatre Workshop in Stockbridge showed 'The Castle and the Woods' by the Edinburgh-based photographer, Patricia Macdonald. Equipped with a Nikon, colour slide film, and an aeroplane, she makes ambiguous and intriguing images of Scotland. Her work is concerned with the landscape from the air, and especially the marks made by humans. Connections and contrasts are seen from the air which aren't apparent from the ground. As yet her work has been seen mainly in publications and group exhibitions. Hopefully 1988 will bring her the showing she deserves.

The Gateway Exchange in Abbeymount, the self-help centre successfully run by Jimmy Boyle and a team of unpaid workers, recently advertised exhibition space in Artists' Newsletter. The



Patricia Macdonald. Woods and Killchurn Castle, Loch Awe.

response was massive. They chose to show the work of recent graduates from photography courses in England, and also the photomontages of London-based George Blair. Produced over a number of years, Blair's meticulously constructed montages use the imagery of colour supplements. His concerns are war, the state, and the third world. But he also deals with themes such as frustration, the difficulty of relationships, and dissatisfaction at work. An attack on the government's unemployment policy shows job

centre doors echoing along a corridor to a brick wall. In 'Marriage a la Mode', a bride in white smiles whilst South African miners struggle to lower a gold ring over her head. Women's complicity in capitalism is often the object of his satire, but is made in an unsexist way. In these jaded times, when ideology seems to have slipped from the photography agenda, and Thatcherism has stunned us into silence, I found this work uplifting in its uncompromising directness. Blair chooses to work in smallish prints and postcards. What power

these images would have at Colvin's and O'Donnell's scale! George was so enthusiastic about exhibiting at the Festival, he spent the evenings in the cafe discussing his work with anyone interested.

'Ten Years of Popular Struggle' - Edinburgh 1977-87', at the First of May bookshop, also marks their own 10th anniversary. This collectively run alternative bookshop assembled all kinds of Left ephemera from the period. Interesting material, but categorised into those static headings of the Left - the women's movement,

peace, anti-racism, Ireland, etc., etc. It was fascinating, however, to scan the oldest of the photographs and find familiar faces of activists (long hair, flared trousers) and realise many of them are now part of the state as local councillors, MP's and barristers. But it was also clear that the Left in Edinburgh seems to have only recently discovered the power of photography. The miner's strike marked the first serious attempt to use photography for propaganda purposes, and even then more likely as a response to the massive onslaught of media images at the time than a new-found awareness of photographic representation.

And last, but by no means least, the work of Colin Baxter, whose photographs through a rose-coloured lens perpetuate a mythology of Scotland as a country of castles and glens, mists and forests. Not surprisingly, he has a ready market at this time of year for his calendars and books. Racks of postcards line the streets and tourist shops, giving him the free publicity which must be the envy of every other exhibitor.

The Edinburgh Festival Fringe, which came into being in 1948 when many performers were unable to get into the official festival, has now grown so large and expensive that 1987 saw the beginning of a 'Fringe Fringe'. This general expansion and the increase in the number of cafes, bars and theatres in Edinburgh which now regularly show photography throughout the year, have guaranteed photography a growing audience. But what was on offer in 1987 was fragmented, categorised under various headings, and divided amongst numerous programmes and leaflets.

For example, Peter Cattrell ran a two-day workshop for 20 people to coincide with his exhibition of landscapes at the Royal Museum, Fay Godwin gave an illustrated talk, and George Blair chatted with dozens of people every evening. Elsewhere, Ron O'Donnell and Calum Colvin were in town, John Davies, Thomas Joshua Cooper and other photographers visited. But nothing was organised to bring everyone together, and most of this activity escaped the programmes and the impact was dissipated. The sad, and costly, lesson of Salford Conference in 1987 was that things can be too structured. With even a small amount of structuring (and money) perhaps a lively and spontaneous celebration could be presented each year in Edinburgh, and might for once bring together photographers and photography lovers with diverse and conflicting interests. Anyone out there interested?

Gloria Chalmers