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Review

Boundaries of Perception

The cultural landscape of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland – encompassing history, memory, land and people – is a fertile ground for the imagination.

Reviewed by: [Georgina Coburn](#)

The cultural landscape of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland – encompassing history, memory, land and people – is a fertile ground for the imagination. Generating diverse and dynamic creative responses, many of the area's contemporary artists are actively redefining what poet and theorist Kenneth White describes as the region's "cultural cartography"¹. Ideas of territory, edge and centre are being actively explored, leading to wider questions about the relationship between urban and rural centres and the kind of culture we choose to build. This expansive "horizon of intention"² is richly evident in recent work by Julie Brook, Mark Lomax, Georgina Porteous and artistic collaboration DUFI.

Isle of Skye-based artist Julie Brook chose a familiar, but seldom visited location in the heart of a harbour town as the site for her work *Interception*, positioning her large-scale sculptural installation on MacDuff Pier for the inaugural *Coast Festival of the Visual Arts* (Banff & MacDuff, May 2008).

Responding to the brief 'revealing the unseen', Brook erected five uprights of mirrored steel, creating prisms of reference between the town and the seascape beyond. Movement of the spectator around these works, together with changing light and weather, created a line or edge of perspective that was self-reflexive and fluid. The surface qualities of these hard-edged industrial materials, arranged as formal geometry, heightened awareness of the surrounding environment; rendering the work strangely natural in relation to its location. A space of contemplation was created around the structures animated by natural light and



[\[enlarge\]](#)

Georgina Porteous, 'Eden Court', vaginal speculum chandelier with 10ft inflatable sphere, 2007.



[\[enlarge\]](#)

DUFI, 'Hot water will put out a

environmental conditions, reflective surfaces also placing the viewer within the work. The strong horizon line and vertical uprights created a dialogue in visual and sculptural terms, providing the viewer with an optical and spatial framework against which the land, seascape and human activity could be reinterpreted. The materials chosen embraced the changeability of the location and encouraged individual interaction with the work; the act of illumination facilitating an unexpected view of the surrounding area, and our place within it.

Responding to the elements is a reoccurring theme in much of Brook's work. On the isles of Jura and Mingulay, Brook uses fire, stone and the by-products of sculptural work such as earth and ash as a medium for drawing. The artist's work is both conceptual and painterly, her practice firmly rooted in the disciplines of drawing and painting.

Brook's most recent land works in the Libyan Desert (*Desert Drawings*, Southern Libya, 2008) extend her distillation of formal visual language into new territory. Inspired by remote and wild locations, her work reduces landscapes to formal elements; horizontal or vertical planes, three-dimensional boxes of chiaroscuro or pure elements such as light. In doing so, Brook reinterprets the landscape, expanding boundaries of perception in relation to our understanding of a particular landscape or locality.

A graduate of the Moray College of Art honours programme in June 2008, Georgina Porteous has exhibited widely in the past year; participating in *New Graduates* – with fellow MCA student Mark Creaney – at Eden Court Theatre, and the exhibition *Multiply* at SNH Headquarters; both in Inverness. She has recently been selected for inclusion in the RSA's Graduate Show 2009.

Her work explores perception through visual language, personal memory and experience. Porteous is not concerned with literal modes of representation, but with creating a space in which the viewer is free to explore their own associations with the work. Tension is created by the unexpected juxtaposition of found objects and materials in her installation and video work; testing our familiarity with and associations attached to objects. As part of the *New Graduates* exhibition Porteous situated works within the architecture of the theatre building and Bishop's Palace Chapel. Porteous placed the pure white sculptural form of *Untitled* – a 3m high inflatable sphere with speculum chandelier – against the dark angularity of the neo-gothic ceiling. Instruments of gynaecological examination were transformed by their arrangement, beautifully suspended beneath a lofty, aspirational balloon. Play of light through the clear, crystal-like plastic challenged perceptions of beauty and ugliness, a recurrent motif in the artist's work. Though not originally created specifically for the site³, her installation generated an interesting dialogue with the history of the building as a training facility for nurses during the 1940s and the ecclesiastical associations of the architecture.

The ability to create such dialogue outside the expected confines of a traditional gallery space is characteristic of many artists working in rural areas. When work occurs in unexpected places the parameters of what we expect from art expand, as does our perception of 'cultural cartography'. We create our own centre. Part of Porteous's strength as an artist is that she is able to bring an internal landscape of human experience and memory to the surface in her drawings, sculpture, installation and video work. She causes us to question that which we assume we see and the act of seeing itself.

In his solo show *Ephemera* at Inchmore Gallery, Inverness (July/August 2008), Mark Lomax explored the power of knowledge, language and memory through formal elements of art-

fire', sandblasted Caithness slate, 600x750mm.

Courtesy: www.finmacrae.com.



[enlarge]

Julie Brook, 'Interception', polished steel, 2008.

Macduff, Aberdeenshire, public art commission for COAST arts festival.

making. The exhibition combined sculpture, painting and installation in a series of site-specific wall and floor works created for Inchmore's upper gallery space, a converted church.

The central installation, *Sticks and Stones*, comprised of one hundred cloth-bound books, sealed enigmatically shut and hovering above the floor. The layering and contrasting of organic and man-made materials implied the traces of humankind through the generations, rather than solely the mark of one artist. The frieze-like two-dimensional works constructed from layers of plaster, filler, paint, pigment, soot, sand and rust were like rock glyphs or graffiti, and an act of psychological, emotional and spiritual archaeology. Delicacy and sensitivity of individual marks, rendered in layers of painstaking application, contrasted with the timeless monumentality and "implied history"⁴ of the finished work. In his most recent works, including *Altered Europe*, *Mapcase* and *Homeland* (2008), Lomax alludes to boundaries – those that contain us, define who we are and where we belong – by altering natural contours and national borders to investigate the pictorial nature of mapmaking and its identification with landscape.

In modifying maps "integral to our notion of cultural identity and all that that implies"⁵, Lomax's borders become products of the imagination and reflect on this idea of "cultural cartography", in an expansive, unexpected way. With subtle shading in grey, Lomax transforms a familiar and trusted form of charting and documenting the world from a state of certainty, to a radically new position of possibility.

In September 2006, a focus event *Imagining the Centre* in the Highland capital heralded the start of the *Inverness Old Town Art Project*; a series of temporary and permanent public artworks and events in a £6m programme of ongoing redevelopment. Engaging with the changing identity of Inverness as a city, the project raised questions about the relationship between the growing city and surrounding countryside.

Initiated in a run-down area of the city, IOTA is redefining the region's cultural value. Qualities unique to the location, its people and history are being examined and reclaimed, at the very point when the city's development is overtaking its old town identity. Phase 2 of the 'streetscaping' project includes *Street Texts* (2007-2008), a series of twenty-four multilayered site-specific texts, embedded in pavements, created by DUFU (artists Fin Macrae and Alister MacInnes).

In this project, temporary stencilled graffiti techniques are developed in the medium of stone. Layers extend beneath the pavement in a relationship between the chosen surface text – drawn from personal memory, recollection, historical, archival, poetic and biblical references – and the hidden subtext.

Adopting the tradition of burying objects within built structures, DUFU have placed personal responses by local residents, recorded on degradable cardboard, beneath each of their text-covered paving stones. Objects such as ceramics and knitting have also been added to some of these personal responses to place, contributing to a foundation of local human history, loss and aspiration. As an act of public expression the works are curiously open; initiating a range of possible meanings and associations with each site, evoking the notion of uncovering an unseen history of the cultural identity of the area. Word emphasis, highlighted visually on the horizontal axis of the main text, provides a focus for

contemplation.

The element of water is a strong conceptual and physical link between the texts, city and surrounding countryside through the River Ness, Caledonian Canal, Moray Firth and the ever-changing weather. The artists explore emotional resonance of water in their designs for a series of footway gullies, part of the city drainage system in Baron Taylor Street, in which they use poetic text, in the form of Haiku. "Themes of washing the city clean, of water stripping back layers of history and carrying hopes away were some of the things [DUF] had noted"⁶ during their research for the project. Unlike many works of public art in stone the *Street Texts* project resists definitive monumentality. As a series of works scattered within the mapped grid of city streets they form points of reference as to how the city and its inhabitants perceive themselves.

To date, public interaction with the *Street Texts* has produced some imaginative creative responses. Anonymous stencilled graffiti has appeared, coins have been stuck to one of the stones as a kind of offering and, as each stone slab is put in place, a game has developed in finding them. Redefinition of the territory of Inverness beyond that of a landscape defined by market values, administrative borders and Victorian myth is central to its psychological transformation from town to city.

At its best, art alters and expands the boundaries of our perception. Engaging the imagination of the viewer is central to this exchange. Initiating powerful and contemplative creative responses from the spectator, the work of Brook, Porteous, Lomax and DUF] are redefining the northern cultural landscape. Although the visual culture of the far north lacks documentation, individual practice, research and art in the public domain is raising awareness about the depth and breadth of contemporary practice in a region fast emerging as one of the most exciting creative territories in the country.

www.juliebrook.com

www.ephemera.in

www.myspace.com/georginaporteous

www.dufi-art.blogspot.com

¹ Kenneth White lecture 'A Return to the Territory – A Highland Reconnaissance', Inverness, 30 October 2005. An audio recording of the lecture can be accessed from

www.hi-arts.co.uk

² *ibid.*

³ Untitled vagina speculum chandelier with 10ft inflatable sphere by Georgina Porteous, first seen at the Moray Art School Degree Show, 2007.

⁴ 'Ephemera' exhibition introduction by Mark Lomax, Inchmore Gallery, 2008.

⁵ Conversation with artist Mark Lomax, August 2008.

⁶ 'Street Text Interim Report' by DUF], May 2008.

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