The Society of Scottish Artists 118th Annual Exhibition

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Keith Bruce, Arts Editor / Saturday 26 December 2015 / Arts & Ents

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AS regular readers of this page might know, I like a history lesson served up with my art. With this in mind, after visiting The Society of Scottish Artists (SSA) annual exhibition, I dug out the handsomely illustrated The Society of Scottish Artists: The First Hundred Years from my bookshelf. This book, published to celebrate the SSA's centenary in 1991 is packed with images and anecdotes which tell its collective story.

In a comprehensive introduction, former Glasgow Herald art critic and champion of the visual arts, the late Cordelia Oliver lays its history bare. The way Cordelia tells it, there weren't many artists of note who didn't get a look-in at the SSA's annual exhibition. From early on – alongside internationally feted living artists such as the sculptor, Auguste Rodin, and much later, Edvard Munch, it set out its stall as a place where art stars of the future would receive all-important exposure for their work. In 1902, an unknown 19-year-old called Francis Cadell had a painting accepted. Two years

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later, his friend Samuel Peploe entered the field. Jessie M. King, who would go on to make her name as a designer and illustrator was another early exhibitor, proving the organisation was female-friendly from the outset – not a given in an era which saw women artists barred from the all-important life drawing class in art schools. Her friend, Charles Rennie Mackintosh also exhibited his delicate botanical studies.

As Cordelia comments in her introduction: “Only to glance through the list of exhibitors over the years is to realise what a nursery this Society has been for much of the finest creative talent out country has produced in the visual arts.”

The definition of visual art may have moved on, but the SSA ethos remains the same. This year you’ll find sculptures made of shadows (Jenny Smith), 196 specimen jars of interactive water and plant life gleaned from 150 miles of coastline from Fraserburgh to Dornoch (Lynne Strachan), two short films influenced by early German cinema playing with concepts of Scottish identity, heritage and language (Charis Edward Wells) and a playfully hilarious installation which turns Farrow & Ball on its head called Blackburn & Breich (Ewan John).

Ten invited graduates from Scotland’s art schools are represented – and this includes a strong showing from the often-overlooked Elgin-based Moray School of Art in the shape of Strachan and Wells.

The outward-facing nature of the Society is writ large in the handsome upper galleries of the Royal Scottish Academy, with around 20 artists associated with Minneapolis Gallery, Rosalux, showing work as part of an exchange with the US gallery, which showed work by SSA artists earlier this year. Another ongoing partnership is highlighted in the work of this year’s Engramme prizewinner, Lise Vézina from Quebec. Her delicate work on the subject of memory in le Tendre le tissu du temps is an exhibit which consists of hundreds of prints and matrices as well as musical boxes.

An eye-popping 1,254 artworks were submitted for consideration this year and of these, 236 works were selected. Of this number, 18 prize-winners were announced earlier in the week; including three recent art college graduates (Abi Baikie of Duncan of Jordanstone, Dundee, Kayley Meldrum of Gray’s School of Art, Aberdeen, and Moray's Lynne Strachan), demonstrating the SSA’s support of those just embarking on their visual arts careers.

You will also find many familiar names on the Scottish art scene, who have earned their SSA spurs (as demonstrated by their inclusion in the centenary book), but who continue to make fine work. There’s work by artists such as Paul Furneaux, whose Spilling Water: Falling Seed mixed media work is a thing of delicate yet robustly joyful beauty, and Dawson Murray, who has made a gorgeous etching/aquatint called Drifting Triptych, which defies categorisation. It’s abstract yet not. Murray may be assailed by MS in body but his creative spirit remains joyful and free.

Kate Downie’s pastel on paper, Steel Web, is another belter which marks her out as a genius draftswoman. I also liked Joyce Gunn Cairns’ visceral oil painting, Ghosts of the Past. Clearly others did too as it won The Pauline Fay Lazarus Prize for work using the human form.

Edinburgh-based Ruth Nicol is on cracking form with a HUGE work, Stromness, 2014, George Mackay Brown, painted as part of a major project to chart the places which were important to leading Scottish poets of the 20th century. Nicol has been awarded The Glasgow Art Club Prize for this work, which serves up an exhibition opportunity at the famous club as well as year’s free membership.

Another simple yet beautiful work is Kirsty Lorenz’s Votive Offerings. An altar-like prize-winning installation consisting of 45 paintings and five drawings on paper. Lorenz’s depictions of posies of wild flowers made around Scotland over the last couple of years, are all painted to scale in watercolour. They are pinned to the wall at each corner with insect pins. The piece explores the significance of the posie as an offering to the Gods, to the living and to the dead. The spirit of Charles Rennie Mackintosh lives on.

Other stand-out work includes Andrea Geile’s vast yet delicately designed haybales, Level the Field No8 - No12, made from corten steel with their sensual rounded sides, and Inge Panneels’ Off the Map, which is a zig-zagging sea of glass on which a wee glass ‘paper boat’

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floats. The spirit of the late George Wyllie, a pioneering president of the SSA from 1986-1989, and architect of The Paper Boat (1990) lives on.

To quote Cordelia Oliver, "I realise that I am now entering invidious waters: there are so many names deserving of mention and so little space to serve me."

Whatever floats your boat, there's a lot to see (and buy) in this exhibition.

The Society of Scottish Artists 118th Annual Exhibition, Royal Scottish Academy, The Mound, Edinburgh until January 18 (closed today)

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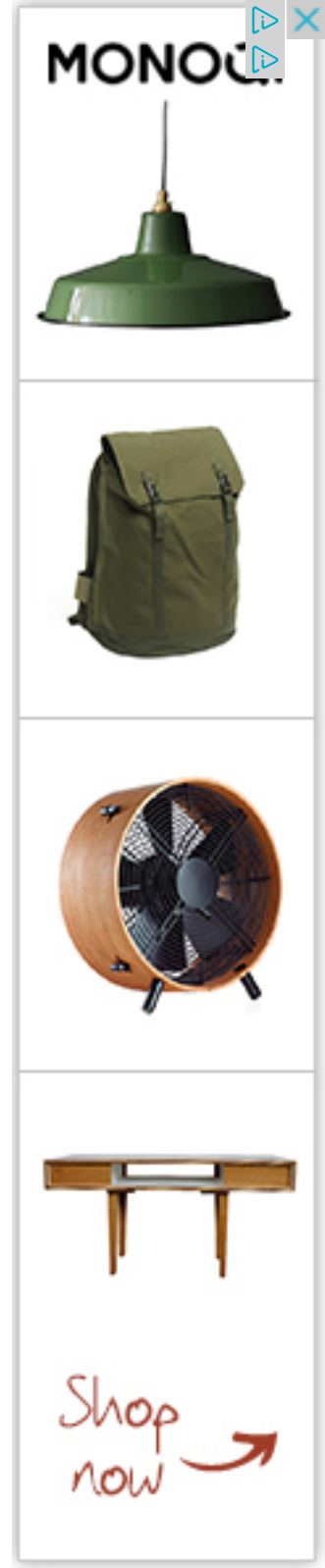

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