

Transcript of Alasdair Gray, Spheres of Influence, 2014 - Glasgow Museums

Katie Bruce, Producer Curator, Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA) - KB

In discussions with Sorcha Dallas and Jenny Brownrigg about this show, we were discussing titles and when Jenny and I were chatting and visiting GMRC (Glasgow Museums Resource Centre) to look at some of the works, we came up with the title *Spheres of Influence*. So, the show here at GoMA is *Spheres of Influence I* and there is another show at The Glasgow School of Art in the Reid Gallery called *Spheres of Influence II*.

Alasdair Gray - AG

I am most aware you see of all the influences that I enjoyed I suppose before I was out of my teens. You know, liking Eric Gill's work and looking at it and thinking ah well he's along the same lines as me - very distinct ones. The artists I found tremendously exciting were all illustrations really. William Blake in particular. His rich colours and vision in his prophetic books - Songs of Innocence and Experience. Rudyard Kipling's illustrations to the Just So stories. I think Kipling must have been slightly influenced by Blake but his illustrations go through quite a variety of different styles and rather impressively. I am always inclined towards the exciting Hieronymus Bosch was one of my favourite painters for a long time. Only in reproduction of course because he was showing fantastic heavens and hells, earthly paradises full of fruits and fabulous monsters and very grotesque hells.

I was very fond of clear outlines, clear edges to things in art and Rembrandt's use of shadow, light and shade did not initially please me at all, not even his subject matters. But when I looked into the *Flayed Ox in the Cellar*, suddenly realising Rembrandt was a great draftsman. The underlying structure is very clearly delineated there between and among the shadows. But then as I looked into the shadows I realised he was a great colourist. These weren't just dull brown shadows they were bronze, greens, dull purples - a rich variety. Of course with the contrast with his use of the thicker paint and showing the lit areas and you know that was something I learned about comparatively late on, even in my twenties.

KB

We looked at Alasdair Gray's practice and the polymath nature of his work and it gave us an excuse to go back into the Glasgow Museums' collection and find works by artists that he would say would have influenced him. He would also say where some of his peers at the time like Alan Fletcher and Carole Gibbons were hugely important friends to him and, although he says he doesn't necessarily influence any artists we had work by Rob Churm and Chad McCail in the collection that we felt were more contemporary works.

AG

The *View on Hill Street* was of the monthly composition paintings and he [Alan Fletcher] was a great artist. Most surviving work, there's one in Kirkcaldy Museum. There's a scattering of very few. There might be two in public collections and some in private. The Hunterian owns one of his sculptures. His collection of paintings is now guarded I would say by Carole Gibbons, a friend and contemporary with me, who is approaching 80. There was an occasion a number of years ago in which she invited some folk up from the Arts Council to come up and see her work. She got a quite big arts council grant one year and on the advice of a friend very sensibly used it to buy a flat in St. Vincent Crescent. You could get fairly for a few hundred pounds then and where she has lived ever since. When the Arts Council arranged, they were going to come to see her at 11 o'clock they turned up at 2 o'clock in the afternoon. She said, "If I'd been David Hockney, you'd be punctual wouldn't you, but because I'm a woman and a Scottish artist and live in Glasgow you don't, you think you don't need to, you think you can break your word when it comes to making arrangements. As if my time didn't matter!" Ha ha. Now that's no way to speak to a senior Administrator. Ha ha ha. You want money from us! I'm afraid you don't sound like a person we'd need... hahaha

Jenny Brownrigg, Director of Exhibitions, The Glasgow School of Art - JB

I really enjoyed reading *Lanark*. It has that thing 'cause obviously it references Glasgow School of Art so it was so interesting reading it. Also just the way that it was designed as well. I really remember the illustrations of the book. I really like all the different storylines too. So it was a good as any experience of opening up your mind before you went and did something creative.

AG

I begin by drawing practically everything, that's what I do. And of course some of my work has been book illustration. Which has generally been purely in black and white. When my novel, the first novel, *Lanark* came out in 1981, I did a series of title page illustrations for each section of the book in black and white. Basing them on frontispieces by great works of sixteenth century bookmaking, **Vesalius - Study of the Human Fabric**, chiefly, and Walter Raleigh's *History of the World*. I redrew them with modifications to make them, well, appropriate to my style and my particular book. But they were in black and white and then it was decided in the Print Studio to make them into big versions to sell them as separate individual prints. And I did. Used up now. And then there has been the notion of Glasgow Print Studio bringing out a new edition but with them in colour. This is not easy because in fact it's not a simple matter of adding colour where you have black and white because I've put in so many, so much care and shading. Wee thin fuzzy lines, suggesting different tones.

JB

The first time I experienced Alasdair Gray was actually through a gift. I'd just finished up at Falkirk Tech and I'd found out that I'd got a place to be a student at The Glasgow School of Art. It was one of my brother's friends bought me the book *Lanark* and said you have to read this before you go to art school. So I actually just found the book, probably a couple of months ago, and read the inscription which said the same thing like 'this a must to read before you go to art school'. So that was my first experience of Alasdair Gray.

AG

Well I greatly enjoyed being at Glasgow School of Art. I made very good friends there. I was friendly with the painting teachers and, in fact, I went to it - this was in the early days of the welfare state and I hadn't realised then that as a result of the Butler Act my fees would be paid for by the government and that I would also get a bursary to live on. So I was expecting to go into the Library Service, but before then I wanted to do life drawing and to get into life drawing you had to bring a portfolio of work. To show you didn't just want to go up and see bare, naked ladies as an excuse. So I took it in and Barrons, who was the registrar then said wouldn't I prefer to come to day school full-time. Well I said it's not my business. It's up to my Dad. That was why I got to art school 'cause in those days like almost all the other students they were all there on welfare state grants. No matter how rich or poor their parents were. Haha. It had to be made good for the middle classes, otherwise they would have complained if it didn't. Hahaha.

But that worked and so it was a good time for me. I found the 1st year teaching a bit discouraging because you were only allowed to draw from plaster casts and solid objects. Oh and sorry but of course you got training, you got in architecture, 2 afternoons a week in architecture. Drawing from plant life, design in nature, lettering and a craft. It was quite a good thing that broad general course and, again, the point was that most of the painters didn't, the painting teachers didn't like my style because it was too graphic. I didn't like painting cast shadows, and they thought it rather important.

It was therefore one of the students. Each month you had a monthly competition. You were given a subject for composition, a subject for painting. Which you painted in your own spare time in any way you liked. It was hung up in the assembly halls at the end of each month and I liked that. Many of my pictures in that book are some of the earliest, are from that competition. A Still Life; A Tam O'Shanter; A subject of illustration of 3 people setting a table; A washing day with a minimum of 3 figures; An episode from the summer holidays. I found that something a bit, I wanted to paint a resurrection in Glasgow, the Necropolis or something like that. And I did eventually. One of the themes was religious. I did a crucifixion and luckily lost. But I liked that and the teachers would, or a particular teacher would go and explain what he liked in some paintings and what he thought wrong in another. I was one in which they would stop in front of it and look at it, then not say anything at all about it. I discovered I was felt to be a bad example.

A friend of mine, who was a really great, a great painter and sculptor. Eventually before he left, well in his final year, after he left art school he became, Benno Schotz, took him on as an assistant. He also was, his work was regarded as far too, well to show modern influences far too thoroughly. I am sure it was only some of the teachers. I think, what's his name, David Donaldson, would have been friendlier to the more experimental, if you could call it that approach. But Alan Fletcher, our

first subject was drawing and painting, my second choice was murals. So I was put into the Mural department for my last two or, as it turned out, three years and Fletcher was accepted for sculpture. That caused a bit of delay as far as I was concerned in my ..., because mural painting is not just a large small painting or a painting enlarged. The thing was I found inspiration in the building, though oddly enough in our course of architecture, the architecture teachers in our department never mentioned Rennie Mackintosh. We went from Art Nouveau to the Bauhaus without mentioning Rennie Mackintosh. Hee hee he.

JB

For our part of the exhibition. We are going to be looking at Alasdair Gray's visual art work but through the prism of other people, historical and contemporary works. So really just exploring different themes of his practice by reading his work through others. It's most like think of it as Alasdair Gray at the centre and then the works orbiting his pieces. Kind of providing different readings as you move around the gallery. So we have from the historical side we have artists like Eric Gill. Eric Gill, Alasdair Gray sited him as actually, he was inspired by Gill's typography, 'cause Eric Gill created Gill Sans which is a font. We are borrowing works from the **Ditchling Art and Craft Museum** which holds a lot of Eric Gill's work. So those are some of the historical works we will have. We've got other works that will include **Dorothy Iannone**, who is a, she's an American artist. She's now in her 70's and her works are quite autobiographical. She really has an interesting approach - including image and text within her works. This is something Alasdair Gray does too, you know, in amongst his drawings he often has these bits of text and writing that give you a different interpretation of the work. So we are going to be including her work as well, just to explore that aspect.

AG

Of course the thing was in earlier work from school days onward, drawing and ink with watercolour, acrylics wasn't in the picture then. But oh of course there was gouache and I liked working with gouache. Painting directly in colour, in a way painting quite thick in gouache. At art school then there was oil colour. The problem with oil colour is that you keep getting unexpectedly rich, glorious colour effects that you never intended. You think, Oh I must catch that. Then in fact you've put yourself at the mercy of accidental effects. Thinking no you've got limit it, you've got to limit it.

For years I've wanted to make a painting of the resurrection at the Glasgow Necropolis. In modern dress of course. Like the Renaissance artists mostly did it. I have decided at last that I am blending an idea from Gauguin's **Vision of the Sermon** in which, during his phase when he was living in Brittany and painting landscapes and images there, the notion of a painting on the theme of Jacob wrestling with the angel, which is actually I think tackled by Delacroix, and I think his vision of the Jacob wrestling with the angel is much based upon Delacroix's painting in a church in Paris. But he had this Jacob and the angel appearing when Breton women have just come out of church after a sermon on the subject. Which is a quite odd composition because there's the heads of the Breton women in their white caps and the head of a tonsure priest framing an area of a more sandy colour in which the Jacob and the wrestling angel. Anyway I decided I would have St. Mungo preaching to a crowd of early Glaswegians peasantry in the sixth century beside the Molendinar Burn and he would be preaching on the subject of the resurrection of Jesus in which the tomb is discovered to be empty by the women who come. Ach well it's quite a complex story was the idea of him preaching on it but his vision of the resurrection being one that happens in the twentieth century, or if you like the twenty first.

I thought it very condescending of **Dali** to put Jesus in the position of which we could look down on him. Hahaha. Giving us a God's eye view! Well the poor bugger.. we he got out of the problem of painting his face, didn't he. That's .. hahaha her her . Not an easy subject. Hahahah