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### What is the Scottish Endarkenment?

Curatorial method between binary and ecological approaches

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**The Sixth International Conference on  
Transdisciplinary Imaging at the Intersections between  
Art, Science and Culture**

# DARK EDEN

**Sydney, AUSTRALIA: 6 - 8 November 2020**

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**A shadow zone, a spectral landscape, a cemetery, zombieland.  
The debris of an old image culture, or compost for a new one?**

The cultural moment now dubbed “Contemporary” is defined by the networked saturation of images. By the diffusion, dissemination and inundation of frictionless image production. By image hacking, image consumption and image commerce on social media and in platform capitalism. By 24/7 crisis news, doom-scrolling and misinformation spread by web influencers. By CCTV and drone surveillance. By massive multiplayer online gaming. By “deepfake” hoaxes and simulations that augment reality and contribute to the relentlessly cynical campaigning of our 21<sup>st</sup> century political twitter “newspeak”. Is not this cornucopia and unprecedented availability of mediated imagery a kind of Eden? If so, it is a dark Eden. Metaphorically fertile as a forest that is so thick with its tentacular edicts that the light that penetrates cannot escape its web; or perhaps, and more likely, that its mutated growth is now dependent on a black rather than bright light. Its darkness might be that of the pall of ash-filled smoke shrouding a burning continent.

Conference papers addressed the general topic from any angle (direct or oblique), but were asked to consider at least one of the following areas:

- Expanded image
- Remediated image
- Hypermediacy
- Expanded film
- Imaging science
- Computer vision
- Networked image
- Immersion
- Speculative realism
- The invisible, the subliminal, the inaudible or subaudial
- Infraworld
- Enlightenment and the post-truth era
- Augmented reality
- Artificial intelligence, or intelligent systems



## What is the Scottish Endarkenment? Curatorial method between binary and ecological approaches

Andrew Patrizio

### Abstract:

*This paper revisits *The Scottish Endarkenment. Art and Unreason. 1945 to the Present*, an exhibition hosted in Edinburgh, Scotland in 2016. The ideas that drove the show represented a critique and alternative view of the idea of Enlightenment, particularly those pertaining to Scottish culture historically and since 1945 in visual art. A number of years on, this paper posits other ways, beyond binaries of dark/light to understand the show, specifically in ways that move those binary logics towards one that deals with themes of relationality and separation. What are the possibilities of making such a retranslation of this curatorial project?*

### Keywords:

‘There may be said to be two classes of people in the world; those who constantly divide the people of the world into two classes, and those who do not.’ (1)

‘Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant.’ (2)

### I

I revisit here *The Scottish Endarkenment. Art and Unreason. 1945 to the Present*, an exhibition of ideas and artworks that came together in Edinburgh, Scotland during the International Festival of 2016, curated by Bill Hare and myself. The ideas that drove the show were greeted enthusiastically by the artists and lenders we approached, and in turn the venue (Dovecot Gallery), the visitors and the wider community of journalists also saw the timeliness and power of the project. By most measures, the show was a success. A number of years on, however, this paper posits other ways to understand the show, specifically in ways that move the binary logics of dark-light that underpinned the curatorial approach, towards one that deals with themes of relationality and separation. What are the possibilities of making such a retranslation of our initial project?

*The Scottish Endarkenment* featured forty-two artists, from established iconic figures central to any narrative of Scottish modern art, such as William Johnstone, Eduardo Paolozzi, Joan Eardley and Alan Davie, to new names such as Shona McNaughton, Georgia Horgan and Kevin Harman. Between this range sat many of prominent figures who emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, such as Steven Campbell, Douglas Gordon, Alison Watt, Christine Borland and Richard Wright. (3) [Fig.1] If in 1784 Emmanuel Kant produced a clear manifesto in ‘Answering the Question: What Is the Enlightenment?’ then ours was a loose assemblage of responses to a more speculative question — What is the Scottish Endarkenment?

Let me shine some light on this question (some moonlight in fact) through examples of exhibited work. This also serves to illustrate how an entirely unintended minor motif – moonlight – emerged through selection

and serendipity as the exhibition took shape with artists and lenders. Alan Davie's *Woman Bewitched by the Moon No.2* (1956) marks one of the highpoints of this prolific artist, steeped in global art, improvisation, ritualistic (anti)method all filtered through a Jungian collective unconscious. After all, it was Jung who sought to counter the anxieties around modernity 'by approaching the problem', as he put it, 'from the dark, biological side.' (4) Alison Watt's *Moon* (2014) is a work from a much later decade than Davie's, and occupies a place between figuration and conceptualism, through an oblique meditation on reflected light and sensual bodies absented from our gaze. In Jock McFadyen's *Calton Hill* (2014) [Fig.2] the gigantic moon hovering over Edinburgh picks out in ghostly form the architecture of the city's first observatory, adjacent stand neo-classical temple buildings and monuments to the great men (yes, men) of the Scottish Enlightenment. There are stellar alignments here that run along cultural as well as astronomical axes. Similarly, in a very different work but with curiously shared concerns is Katie Paterson's *History of Darkness (3,261,566 ly)* (2010) [Fig.3] a work which moves out of orbit, into the cosmos, comprising a slide archive of advanced telescope imaging of the furthest reaches of the known universe.

The exhibition held many such partial and oblique answers. We recognised early that the terms by which we set our question were not peculiar to Scotland alone, however much some of them have origins in our country. We started with the very immediate and powerful idea that one could revisit, through an exhibition of post-1945 art, the binary conditions of Scottish culture, which traditionally trades on notions of Manichean dualisms of dark and light, Old and New Towns, Enlightened reason versus gothic myth, Tartan Noir, sectarianism and so forth; a phenomenon caught so influentially by G Gregory Smith as the 'Caledonian Antisyzygy': (5) dualling polarities that reside within Scots literature and culture. The reason/unreason motif was brought to life most famously in Robert Louis Stevenson's pairing of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde within the same body. [Fig.4] We tried to catch the dialectical tensions that, we are led to believe, seethe within the Scottish psyche, and represent a post-1945 collective reaction to our Enlightenment burden.

## II

The Scottish Enlightenment (roughly from the Union of 1707 to the early 1800s) marked a period of radical change that moved Scotland from predominately rural and religious communalism (though one riven by feudalism and clan culture) into becoming a modern secular state. Its complex antisyzygic history saw this small country both at the two conjoined epicentres of the Industrial Revolution and British colonial expansion. [Fig.5] The institutions that are charged today with managing Scotland's tourism industry make less of a noise about such contradictions and violence and rely, still, on stereotypes that serve an untroubled international image.

Despite appearances, the Enlightenment's dedicated aim of the pursuit of rationalism, progress and profit was from its outset met by sceptical, influential and hostile voices, thus offering a prehistory to the notion of the Scottish Endarkenment — from the anti-industrialism of Thomas Carlyle and the anti-rationalism of James Hogg [Fig.6]. Hogg's novel *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) conjured up an image of a festering layer of psychotic Calvinism that resisted Enlightenment rationality. This was further bolstered by later Scots figures, stretching from James Frazier and his immensely influential anthropological account, *The Golden Bough* (published between 1890-1922), that revealed primordial non-rational forces of primitive superstition and magic still lurking just behind the fragile façade of civilization and reason in Western society: what he called 'the permanent existence of such a solid layer of savagery beneath the surface of society' (6) Whilst to today's ear, these are dubiously embodiments of race, it was nonetheless an assault on superficial layers of Western religion and culture, 'a thin crust which may at any moment be rent by subterranean forces slumbering below. From time to time a hollow murmur underground or a sudden spurt of flame into the air tells of what is going on beneath our feet.' (7)

A later, broad front of post-Nietzschean nihilism reaches forward into the twentieth century, through, in their different ways, Heidegger, Benjamin, Adorno, Schmitt, Arendt, Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, and Kristeva. All express ideas broadly around the thesis that freedom comes at the price of moral certainty and must necessitate a rejection of Enlightenment values. They reject any necessary link between reason and emancipation and resist reducing society to contractual moral obligations based on individuality. (8) As one of our epigraphs states, 'the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant.' This is called the 'perversity critique', (9) namely that the Enlightenment failed on its promises (though, paradoxically, this feature might be precisely what artists in recent decades actually like about it). As Adorno wrote in *Aesthetic Theory*: 'The darkening of the world makes the irrationality of art rational: radically darkened art'. (10) In contemporary

literature, one can turn to the anti-Enlightenment naturalism of the *Dark Mountain* project, with its rejection of a model in which ‘History becomes an escalator, and the only way is up. On the top floor is human perfection. It is important that this should remain just out of reach in order to sustain the sensation of motion.’ (11)

Equally influential for the exhibition was anti-psychiatrist, R.D. Laing, a Scot whose cult classic study of schizophrenia in modern society, *The Divided Self* (1960), became in its day a touchstone of anti-rationalism, through empirical and empathetic work with patients but also as an assault on medicalised models of control and suppression. As Laing put it: ‘we can recognize two distinct selves in us: the “imaginary self” and the “real self”. The real and the imaginary cannot coexist by their very nature.’ (12) Laing concludes that ‘It is not possible to go on living indefinitely in a sane way if one tries to be a man disconnected from all others and uncoupled even from a large part of one’s own being.’ (13) [Fig.7] This was no abstract speculation in psychiatric theory but a real problem faced by real people. In describing the schizophrenia experienced by a patient named Julie, Laing wrote that ‘Reality did not cast its shadow or its light over any wish or fear.’ (14) On such a phrase turned our curatorial project and the exploration of reality as an agent containing both shadow and light.

The colonising modernity that has impelled Enlightenment thinking continues to make us nervous. Think of Walter Dignolo’s *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* (15) or, reflecting better the Australian context of the *Dark Eden* conference and this journal, philosopher and eco-feminist Val Plumwood dealt powerfully Enlightenment contradictions, offering an environmental turn:

...we’re still largely trapped inside the enlightenment tale of progress as human control over a passive and “dead” nature that justifies both colonial conquests and commodity economies. The real threat is ... our own inability to see past the post-enlightenment energy, control and consumption extravaganza we so naively identify with the good, civilized life to a sustainable form of human culture. The time of *Homo reflectus*, the self-critical and self-revising one, has surely come. *Homo faber*, the thoughtless tinkerer, is clearly not going to make it. (16)

This passage turns on a seductive double-entendre – to ‘make it’, as *homo faber* (and aligned to creative practice and artists as a whole) and to ‘make it through’, as part of an existential threat to the world of (un)civilisation and (un)reason that is our current condition.

### III

Vicki Kirby (17) and others have developed a critique of binary thinking that seems relevant to *The Scottish Endarkenment*’s treatment of dark/light problems. Whether one starts with post-structuralist formulations or more recent neo-empirical dives into the particular, (18) there seems now room retrospectively to consider *The Scottish Endarkenment* as an ecology of relationality and separation that troubles Enlightenment thinking in ways we had only vaguely intuited in 2016.

As has been pointed out in recent work by Erich Hörl, work that despite its theoretical abstraction is already impinging on curatorial thinking (19) – ‘There are thousands of ecologies today: ecologies of sensation, perception, cognition, desire, attention, power, values, information, participation, media, the mind, relations, practices, behaviour, belonging, the social, the political... There seems to be hardly any area that cannot be considered... open to an ecological reformulation.’ (20) His reformulation, moreover, is one that recognises the ‘denaturalised’ variants of ecology, beyond the organic ones usually associated with such an approach.

Frédéric Neyrat, writing in Hörl’s book *General Ecology*, goes further and reminds us that:

every relation is founded on a separation. In other words, it is concerned with causing the repressed content of ecology, and of the thinking which inspires it, to resurface. This repressed element is the following: interconnection must leave room for separation and must metabolize, symbolize, recognize it, if it is to avoid falling into the confusion resulting from the abolition of differences. For a confusion is not a relation, but its opposite—an indistinct jumble. (21)

Everything is not necessarily as in process, interconnected and ‘entangled’ as we might imagine. Neyrat’s posits, usefully for an exhibition with a national starting-point, that: ‘Rather than being a totality, nature should be understood locally, as a means of allowing the creation of a temporal procedure of mediation, as detour—spatial and temporal—allowing us to measure the relations we produce and the material limits belonging to these relations.’ (22) It would take more space than available here but the poetics of curatorial work allows just the sort of possibilities of *both* connection and separation that Neyrat proposes on the level of nature/culture.

Let’s look at *The Scottish Endarkenment* through this ecological lens. The nuclear, the medical, the colonial, the botanical and the technological all can be analysed under the ‘temporal procedure of mediation’ that is an exhibition and the ‘detours’ contained therein. For example, Kenny Hunter’s *I Love Rapid Change* (2005) [Fig.8] presents a classical, modest-scaled and local, rather than sublime, reminder that the threat of annihilation comes in many forms. Nuclear threat has not gone away, despite our forgetfulness and is a catastrophe that simultaneously combines the environmental, the colonial and the military. Christine Borland’s *SimBaby* (2007) [Fig.9] is a film-work, using a slow scanning gaze that glides across an artificial infant mannikin, every pore of the ‘skin’ visible. The awkward pump noise and movement, in simulation of breathing, and eerie ‘blue lips’ tell us that this is an apparatus, training tool employed in midwifery and medicine. It is an unsettling humanisation of a dummy, a Frankenstein baby caught between the flesh and virtual worlds. Simon Starling’s *Rescuing Rhododendrons* (1999) [Fig.10] is a series of five photographs, documenting the artist’s car journey from Scotland to Spain, carrying a cargo of rhododendrons. He repatriates plants of Spanish origin, brought to Scotland during the Enlightenment, which spread so much when planted in the north as to be nicknamed the ‘scourge of Scotland’. He recalls still life genre painting, set to conceptual ends - the car is both the mode of transport and the power supply for the photographic lights.

These are sketches within a queer ecological framing, which Timothy Morton would characterise not so much as ‘organic, coherent, or authoritative’ but ‘catastrophic, monstrous, nonholistic, and dislocated’. (23)

#### IV

Both the oldest manuals and the most recent theories of the curatorial recognise the open encounter that is an exhibition. The artwork remains its own knot within the meta-knotted structure of the exhibition itself. Perhaps Jean-Paul Martinon was getting at this when he speculated, in *Curating as Ethics*, that ‘by retaining the importance of the finite limits of any encounter, these limits that exceed the living present; we effectively present the other with more than he or she can think, thus keeping both absolute silence and total darkness (death) and absolute light and total rationality (tyranny) at bay.’ (24) I think this idea of ecology being as much about separation as about relation brings us to a point for future reflection, and places *The Scottish Endarkenment* in a new light.

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1 Robert Benchley. ‘The Most Popular Book of the Month: An Extremely Literary Review of the Latest Edition of the New York City Telephone Directory’, February 1920, *Vanity Fair* (New York: Conde Nast), p. 69

2 Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, (Stanford UP, 2002) p. 3

3 The exhibition ran from 13 May – 29 August 2016 at the Dovecot Gallery, Edinburgh. Selected artists: \*John Beagles & Graham Ramsay, John Bellany, Christine Borland, Boyle Family, Joyce Cairns, Steven Campbell, Robert Colquhoun, Fred Crayk, Ken Currie, Alan Davie, Kenneth Dingwall, Pat Douthwaite, Joan Eardley, Graham Fagen, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Helen Flockhart, Luke Fowler, Douglas Gordon, Lys Hansen, Kevin Harman, \*Louise Hopkins, Georgia Horgan, Kenny Hunter, Matthew Inglis, William Johnstone, John Kirkwood, \*Shona Macnaughton, Chad McCail, Jock McFadyen, Wendy McMurdo, Jonathan Owen, Eduardo Paolozzi, Katie Paterson, Julie Roberts, David Shrigley, Simon Starling, Kerry Stewart, Peter Thomson, William Turnbull, Alison Watt, Richard Wright. (\*= new work made for the exhibition)

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- 4 Carl. G Jung, *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*. Aniela Jaffé (ed.). Translated by Richard Winston and Clara Winston. London: Flamingo, 1983, p. 175
- 5 See George Gregory Smith, *Scottish Literature, Character and Influence*. London: Macmillan, 1919.
- 6 James Frazer, *The Golden Bough. A Study in Religion and Magic*. Wordsworth Editions. Ware, 1922, p. 56
- 7 James Frazer, p. 56
- 8 See for example K. Racevskis, 'Michel Foucault's Defamiliarizing View of the Enlightenment'. *French Review* 85, no. 6 (2012), pp. 1056–67
- 9 See James Schmidt, 'What Enlightenment Project?' *Political Theory* 28, no. 6 (1 December 2000), pp. 734–57
- 10 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, London: Bloomsbury, 2013, p. 27
- 11 <https://dark-mountain.net/about/manifesto/> Accessed 28.1.21
- 12 R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960, p. 84
- 13 R. D. Laing, p. 139
- 14 R. D. Laing, p. 203
- 15 See Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2011.
- 16 Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*. London: Routledge, 2003, p. 1
- 17 For example, see Vicki Kirby, 'Initial Conditions'. *Differences* 23, no. 3 (1 January 2012): 197–205 and Vicki Kirby, (ed.) *What If Culture Was Nature All Along?* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017.
- 18 See for example, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Heather Anne Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt. *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.
- 19 Since 2018 the Serpentine Gallery in London has run an extended project *General Ecology*, at which Hörl has spoken. See <https://www.serpentinegalleries.org/general-ecology/>
- 20 Erich Hörl, 'Introduction to general ecology: The ecologization of thinking', In Hörl, Erich, and James Burton. *General Ecology: The New Ecological Paradigm*, 2017, p. 18.
- 21 Frédéric Neyrat, 'Elements for an ecology of separation Beyond ecological constructivism', James Burton (trans.), In Erich Hörl, *General Ecology: The New Ecological Paradigm*, 2017, p. 118
- 22 Erich Hörl, p. 138
- 23 Timothy Morton, 'Queer Ecology'. *PMLA* 125, no. 2 (2010), p. 275
- 24 Jean-Paul Martinon, *Curating as Ethics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020, p. 11

**Author:**

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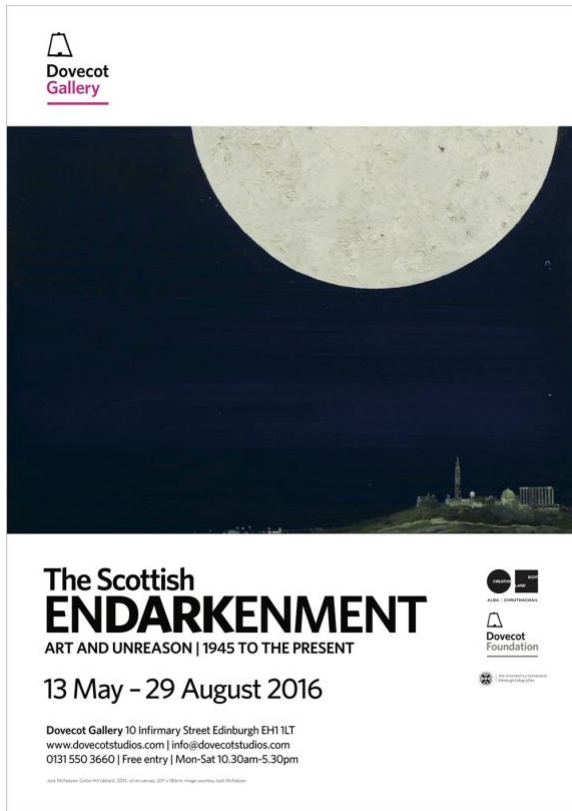


Fig.1 Poster, *The Scottish Endarkenment*, designed James Brook © James Brook. Courtesy Dovecot Studios, Edinburgh.



Fig.2 Jock McFadyen, *Calton Hill*, 2014, oil on canvas, 206 x 183 cm ©Jock McFadyen RA, presented by an anonymous donor to the National Galleries of Scotland, 2016. Courtesy Dovecot Studios, Edinburgh.



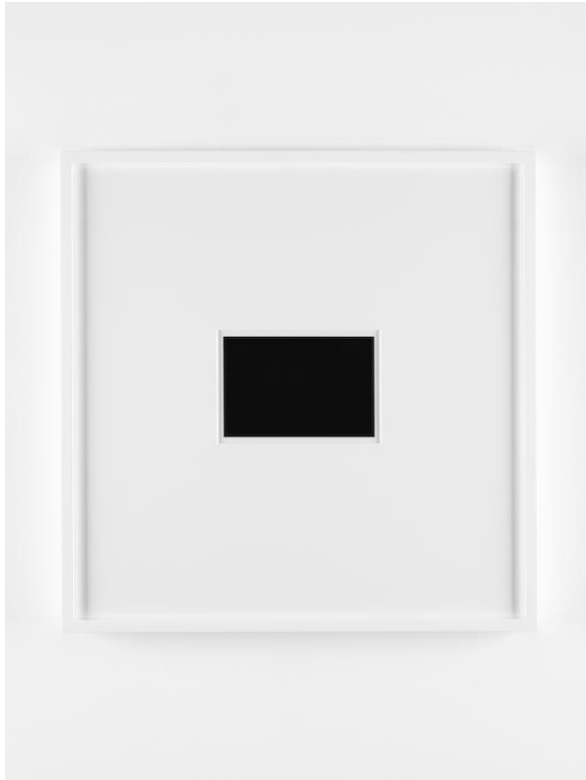


Fig.3 Katie Paterson, *History of Darkness (3,261,566 ly)*, 2010, embossed archival silver gelatin print, 48 x 48cm ©Katie Paterson, photo courtesy Ingleby Gallery, the artist and Dovecot Studios, Edinburgh.

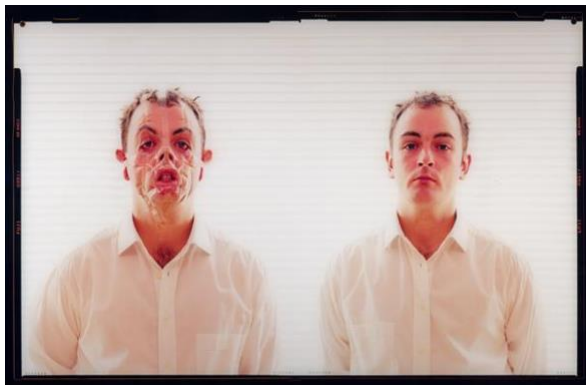


Fig.4 Douglas Gordon, *Monster Reborn (1996/2002)*, 70x113cm, purchased with assistance from the Patrons of the National Galleries of Scotland, 2006 © Studio lost but found / Douglas Gordon / VG-Bildkunst, Bonn and DACS, London 2019. photography Antonia Reeve, courtesy Dovecot Studios, Edinburgh.

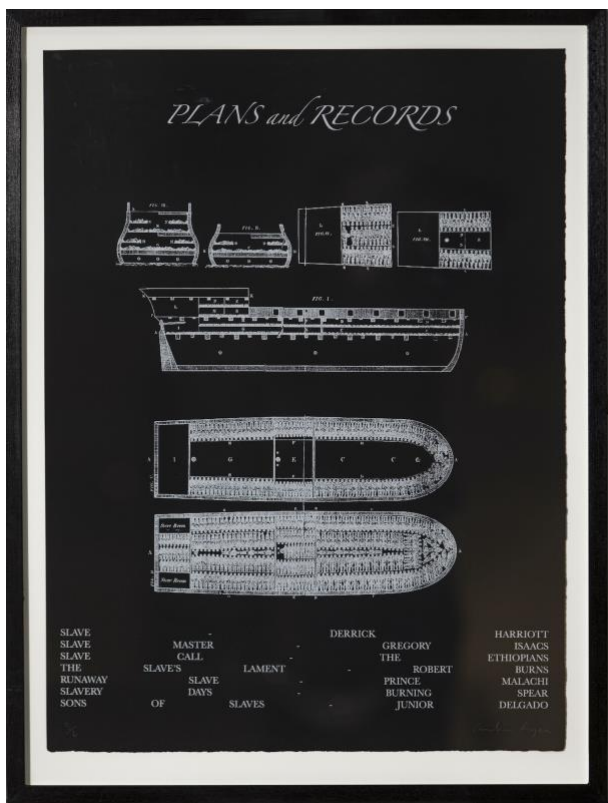


Fig.5 Graham Fagen *Plans and Records*, 2007, silk screenprint, 55.5x76cm, ©Graham Fagen, photography Stuart Armitt, courtesy the artist, Matts Gallery and Dovecot Studios, Edinburgh.



Fig.6 John Bellany, *The Ettrick Shepherd*, 1967, oil on canvas, 155x151cm, ©The Estate of John Bellany, photography Stuart Armitt. Courtesy Dovecot Studios and Fleming-Wyfold Foundation.



Fig.7 Lys Hansen *The Divided Self: Grip* (triptych centre panel) 1985, oil, 183 x 152cm ©Lys Hansen, photo courtesy the artist and Dovecot Studios, Edinburgh.



Fig.8 Kenny Hunter *I Love Rapid Change*, 2005, glass reinforced plastic, marble dust and table ©Kenny Hunter, photography Stuart Armitt. Courtesy Dovecot Studios, Edinburgh.

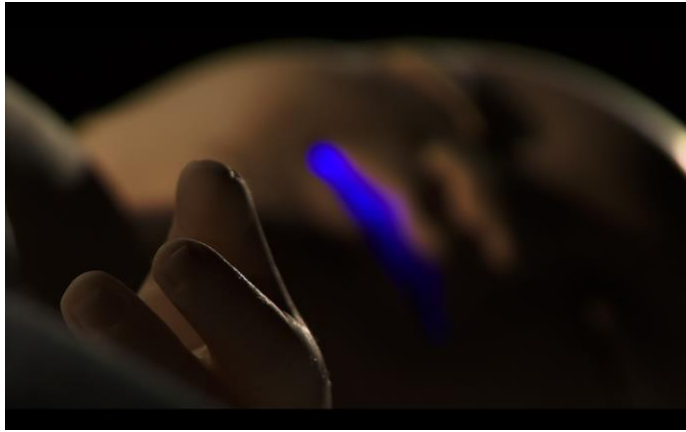


Fig.9 Christine Borland, *SimBaby*, 2008, single channel digital video, colour with sound.  
Duration: 9 minutes. Camera work & editing: Dave Dunbar ©Christine Borland, photo courtesy the artist and Dovecot Studios, Edinburgh.



Fig.10 Simon Starling, *Rescued Rhododendrons*, 1999, one of five C-Type prints, 76x98.5cm © Simon Starling, photo courtesy the Modern Institute, the artist, Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow and Courtesy Dovecot Gallery, Edinburgh.