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## **EXHIBITION REVIEW**

***The Scottish Endarkenment: Art and Unreason, 1945 to the Present*, curated by Bill Hare and Andrew Patrizio, Dovecot Studios, Edinburgh, May 13 – August 29, 2016**

**Reviewed by Nina. J. Morris**

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Accounts of the Scottish Enlightenment generally tend to emphasise the movement's cherished ideals of rational scientific thought and utopian progress. Less attention is paid to the period's "darker side," which influenced the reactionary Romanticism of writers such as Walter Scott, James Hogg and Robert Louis Stevenson who focused instead on individual, emotional responses, and a national historiography rooted in the pre-modern era (Hare 2016). There is scant evidence, however, to suggest that artists of the time paid any heed to the challenges laid down by these authors. It was only in the 1950s, as art historians Bill Hare and Andrew Patrizio (2016) contend, that Scottish

artists begin to express a shared concern with “areas of human thought and human action that challenge the dominant idea of the rational and the logical.”

In *The Scottish Endarkenment*, Hare and Patrizio brought together over 40 works by established artists, emerging artists, and two commissioned works to shed light on the under-explored vein of darkness within Scottish art.<sup>1</sup> Dealing with a “wide range of disturbing and provocative topics, from ever-escalating international conflict, social inequality and unrest, [to] gender identity and sexual prejudice,” the exhibition dealt with the “dialectical struggles” that seem to haunt “the Scottish psyche between good and evil, Self and Other” (Dovecot 2016). In the North Gallery, the works were concerned with human psychology and, in particular, internal fears, desires and moral struggles; John Bellany’s *The Ettrick Shepherd* (1967), for example, paid homage to James Hogg’s classic novel *The Private Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824). In the South Gallery, the works connected more to “social and historical expressions of Endarkenment realities” (Hare and Patrizio 2016), with an anteroom devoted to meditations on medical science; in Joyce Cairns’s *Shoes from Majdanek* (2002), for example, heaped footwear from the forenamed concentration camp was suggestive of what one reviewer called “the piles of corpses now ingrained on modern consciousness through photographic record” (Sutherland 2016). In the connecting space, a small group of artworks referenced the moon and the extra-terrestrial realm in a conscious attempt to counter the Scottish Enlightenment’s obsession with light, the sun (often deified by the god Apollo), and the reification of human (specifically masculine) intellect. The moon, often deified by the goddess Selene, represents the other side of the coin being associated with madness, hysteria and the female body.

Several critics argued that “dark” was too nebulous a theme to unite this group of artists with their many different styles, messages and methods (from expressionist paintings and sculpture through to textiles, film, photography and performance). One blog noted, for example, that some works only seemed to have a “dark message” when considered within the context of the exhibition (Eve’s Apple 2016). For me, it was not so much the *content* of the artworks that I found troubling, but the type of artworks included (or indeed not) and the manner in which they were displayed. In essence, I felt that in featuring predominantly “visual” works within a space that exhibited many characteristics of the “white cube,” in its execution the exhibition failed to acknowledge some of the key tenets of the endarkenment thesis (e.g. up-close personal encounter, a valuing of the senses beyond vision) whilst continuing to adhere to many enlightenment tropes (detached spectatorship, excessive illumination).

It is not uncommon within Western society for art to be considered only in terms of the visual sense. David Howes and Constance Classen trace this “single-sensed understanding” of art back to sixteenth century Protestant reformers who railed against the “idolatrous” touching of Medieval artworks (2014, 17). But it was in the modern period that ocularcentrism fully matured. In the eighteenth century, Enlightenment luminary Immanuel Kant “drained” Alexander von Baumgarten’s original philosophy of aesthetics of its “sensory plenitude” declaring that “only sight, the noblest of the senses, [had] the detached ‘purity’ necessary” for the “‘disinterested’ contemplation and judgement of beauty.” By the nineteenth century, the reification of artworks as objects “exist[ing] only to be looked at and not touched” had transformed the art gallery from an arena of multi-sensory exploration into the highly-regulated space so familiar today

(Howes and Classen 2014, 19-20). It was perturbing then that *The Scottish Endarkenment* did so little to challenge these now conventional approaches to art appreciation. For example, the artworks were lit with powerful spotlights, and touching (the antithesis of Western predilection to conserve artworks) was strictly prohibited. More surprisingly, little reference was made to artists who address or incorporate the more neglected senses -- taste, smell, touch -- in their work, or to the work of installation artists.<sup>2</sup>

The paradoxical nature of the exhibition was thrown into sharp relief by a one-off torch-lit tour held toward the end of the exhibition run. Guided by the Dovecot Exhibitions Curator Kate Grenyer, the tour was billed as a “unique opportunity to explore *The Scottish Endarkenment* in real darkness [...] an atmospheric and intimate, up close encounter with the dark side of Scottish art” (Dovecot 2016).<sup>3</sup> For a brief hour, a small group was led through the darkened gallery space, stopped at intervals to hear synopses of selected artworks, and had time to explore the show individually at the end. Participants were each provided with a small metal torch to use at will.

Fig. 1 Installation view with Kevin Harman’s *Optician 4* (2001) to the left. Photo: courtesy of Stuart Armit

Using a torch to negotiate the artworks, other participants, and the dark spaces in-between, it was noticeable that the beam focused one’s vision far more acutely than under normal gallery lighting conditions where a multitude of potential sights compete for one’s attention. Instead, artworks were encountered one at a time. Surface texture,

grain and depth were more readily apparent, and viewers were encouraged, as Harriet Hawkins suggests, “to contemplate the image as a material presence rather than as representation, or part of a narrative” (2015, 168). Kevin Harman’s *Optician 4* (2001) demonstrated such a material presence by appearing differently under torchlight. Described by Grenyer as an artwork that “ate light no matter how many spotlights were used,” my experience in the dark revealed luminously rich colours glistening against the crisp shadows cast by the individual components. Created from wood shards “chiselled off old tools and objects that have had a hands-on labour intensive life” preserved in resin (Ingleby Gallery 2016), the work literally and metaphorically bristled and one could imagine the sound and smell of splintering wood during the process of its creation.

Fig. 2 Kevin Harman, *Optician 4* (2001), view during torch-lit tour. Photo: courtesy of the author.

The strength of the torch beam necessitated moving closer to the artworks and, in so doing, one obtained a greater appreciation of qualities encapsulated within the artworks that were difficult to perceive under normal lighting conditions. Kenneth Dingwall’s *Between Dark and Dark* (1977) seemed impassive under spotlights; up-close with the torch, however, one could discern hidden depths within the painting. The paint, for example, which viewed from afar appeared to have been administered by a roller, had actually been applied with multiple tiny brush strokes in layers like geological strata. Such a process of creation was a vital part of the work’s beauty and power.<sup>4</sup> Grenyer revealed that *Between Dark and Dark* had been crafted in response to the death of

Dingwall's father and this insight into the painstaking act of making became as important as the end result giving an embodied sense of pent-up emotion.

Using torches to navigate through the darkness also encouraged a more active and engaged consumption of the artworks. The materiality of light is known to alter human experiences of space; for Katherine Sorrell, light “creates atmosphere, highlights and sculpts areas, and opens up spaces, influencing not just how you look at them but also how you feel about them” (quoted in Bille and Sørensen 2007, 271). Tim Edensor likewise confirms that artificial lighting “conditions environments, bestowing manifold moods or tones of feeling that influence notions about how to operate within particular spatial and social settings and provoke apprehensions and responses that further contribute to atmosphere” (2012, 1108). The darkness of the torch-lit tour transformed the familiar space of the gallery and altered its affective conditioning by creating an unusual ambiance that allowed participants to subvert their conventional art-going behaviours.<sup>5</sup> For example, by shining a torch through the cage-like skull cavity of Owen's sculpture *Untitled* (2014), one could create a variety of silhouettes on the wall behind, thus bringing a dynamic, corporeal dimension to the normally staid gallery.

Fig. 3 Jonathan Owen, *Untitled* (2014), installation view. Photo: courtesy of Stuart Armitt.

In *The Scottish Endarkenment*, intense illumination in the form of spotlights -- coupled with a dearth of artworks dedicated to, or engaging with, the “lower” senses -- served to reinforce the primacy of sight and the drive for detached evaluation that so

enamoured Enlightenment thinkers. In the endarkened circumstances of the torch-lit tour, however, one gained a sense of the aesthetic loss that occurs under excessive ocularcentric conditions. As such, the tour highlighted what Martin Welton describes as “the significance of darkness as a medium for seeing and being differently” (2013, 6). By fostering a closer, more attentive, and embodied engagement with the artworks, darkness provided an opportunity to explore the complex materiality of the works on display and to contemplate their more-than-visual aesthetics.

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<sup>1</sup> The category of "Scottish artists" was understood here to be individuals born, trained and/or living in Scotland. The exhibition was also accompanied by a series of films screened at the Edinburgh Filmhouse.

<sup>2</sup> The exceptions were Christine Borland’s *SimBaby* (2007) and Beagles and Ramsey’s *Parallel Incremental Sophistication (Head Lung Dead)* (2016), both of which used sound.

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<sup>3</sup> Such “after-hours” explorations are now relatively common, although this was a first for the Dovecot Studios; notable events in the UK include Light Night (established 2005), the Museums at Night festival (established 2009), and the After Dark project (2014) at Tate Britain.

<sup>4</sup> As Jim Drobnick and Jennifer Fisher highlight, even visual artworks are always in some way multi-sensory, “both in production and reception as artists are affected by the worlds they encounter through their bodies both within and without the art studio” (quoted in Straughan 2015, 410).

<sup>5</sup> See Löfgren and Ehn (2007, 13) and Edensor (2012, 1108).