

# perception

ARTISTS WORKING WITH  
RHUEART

mary bourne

mhairi killin

helen denerley

james lumsden

james hawkins

katy spong

tobias hodson

peter white

6 - 16 April 2011

DOVECOT STUDIOS  
INFIRMARY STREET  
EDINBURGH EH1 1LT

[www.rhueart.co.uk](http://www.rhueart.co.uk)

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Paul Cézanne's reputed comment that 'Monet is only an eye, but my God, what an eye!' may be one of the most famous statements made by one artist about another, but it is also one of the most misleading. Cézanne may have meant to contrast Monet's apparently effortless facility with his own titanic struggles to render 3D space on to a 2D surface through stereoscopic vision, but he can't really have believed that Monet's paintings were the result of a direct route from eye to hand, bypassing the intellectual faculties.

And yet this is a remarkably common trope, the notion that if only the artist could convey exactly what they see, without analysis or emotion, the result would hold more truth. This is not what the psychology of perception suggests. For that great writer on all matters to do with the mind, Richard Gregory, 'perception involves making inferences about what we see and trying to make a best guess'. That's as neat a summation of the artist's role as I've come across in a long time. The mind is unavoidably, and fully, engaged in the process.

So let's see if it works equally well for the viewer. Confronted with a painting or sculpture, the viewer has to hold two irreconcilable concepts in their head: the thing depicted, and the means of depicting it. The almost sculptural impasto of James Hawkins' paint, and the airy, spacious landscapes that it renders. The disconcerting vitality of Helen Denerley's sculptures, and the scrap metal from which they're constructed. The meticulous accuracy of Tobias Hodson's botanical renderings, and their extraordinary scale. Peter White's simplicity of subject matter and complexity of rendering. Mhairi Killin's constructions that elide the boundaries between painting, sculpture and jewellery, art and craft. Perhaps we would all be less self-conscious about our reactions to art if we felt that all we had to do, was to make inferences about what we see, and then make a best guess.

The artists in this exhibition employ a huge diversity of means and technique in their work. But one factor that unites them, is that their works need to be seen in the original to be truly perceived. No reproduction, no matter how multi-pixel, will do justice to their tactility, to the crucial role of scale, to the way they interact with the viewer. In this sense these artists are at the opposite end of the spectrum from 'conceptual' art. The purest conceptual art does not really need to be experienced at all. Once you've read about the concept of projecting *Psycho* so that it lasts twenty-four hours, actually seeing it happen adds little or nothing. I know, I've been there.

So, bringing these artists together in an exhibition in Edinburgh is doing the art lover a favour. And that brings me to one final aspect of perception. RhueArt is an agency for artists based in one of the more remote corners of the UK. All of the artists on its roster are based in similarly rural settings, or at least well away from large centres of population. Not so many years ago, one visual arts mandarin stated baldly to me that any artist who chose to live outside one of the major cities was also choosing to work outside the contemporary mainstream, and was therefore less worthy of consideration. I hope that is one perception which is now truly dead and buried. The glory of art lies in its diversity. This exhibition therefore offers for your consideration the luminous abstractions of James Lumsden's paintings and Mary Bourne's sculptures, and Katy Spong's vibrant images caught 'on the wing', each in their different way a response to a perceived environment.

The Wikipedia entry on 'perception' states that 'the processes of perception routinely alter what humans see'. Another damn good definition of art. Let the artists in *Perception* alter your way of seeing.

# mary bourne

**Perception:** Apprehension, understanding with the mind and/or senses

When I make sculpture I make it with my mind, hands, eyes and heart. It is informed by a sense of weight, density, balance, space, fragility, endurance and an understanding of the passage of time. It is coloured by my own value system and emotional view of the world.

There are so many words even to begin describing the process of making art, but all these can ever be is a list of fragments of experience. They cannot possibly encompass the entirety of that intellectual, emotional and physical thrill we experience when we make a piece of art. Neither can words fully describe our experience when we as beings, each with a body, mind and soul, perceive art. Words are great descriptive tools, but we have become so reliant on them that other means of perception have become secondary. Words are abstract representations for physical things. Just as the supermarket distances us from food production, so words can distance us from the physical reality of the objects they name.

We exist in a physical world and, if we are to survive the challenges ahead as the climate changes and resources become scarcer, we need to understand the uncompromising, immutable rules that govern it. We need to understand again the importance of perceiving things, not only with our articulate minds but also with the intelligence gathered by our senses. This intelligence tells us what we can achieve in a physical world, a world that is indifferent to persuasion by words.

Art, where the physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual come together in a unified experience, is one place where the physical takes its place as an equal, where the perceiver experiences so much more than words can ever describe.

So, for now, enough of words.



Mountain Flower

colorado marble on flagstone

diameter 80 cm



Shore 2

cumbrian slate

60 x 20 x 1.2 cm



One Loch, Two Days

caithness flagstone

each 60 x 50 x 6 cm

# helen denerley

**Before** I begin a sculpture I try to observe and draw the animal if possible. With an old friend like my dog Molly or with my chickens, then there is less need as they are so familiar to me. When I began the enormous task of creating the giraffes for Edinburgh's Leith Walk I had to start from scratch. I had come across giraffes many years ago in Uganda but it's not that easy to see animals in the wild at close quarters.

In January 2005 I spent two days in the giraffe house at Marwell Zoo, Winchester. It was a very cold month and there were very few visitors so, for most of the time, I had the fourteen giraffes to myself. I went through the usual procedure - photographing, measuring, drawing and, for the most part, just sitting observing and absorbing them; the way they moved, the angle of their spines, the way they held their heads.

The zoo keepers, who had other work to do, had locked me in on the giraffe house balcony. The balcony put me at giraffe-head height and eye-level with their feed, and I spent a few hours watching their prehistoric heads, crooked jaws and eyes blinking in slow motion. There was no need to photograph or draw that, better just to remember it. I set up a table and a long roll of paper to make quick charcoal sketches of moving giraffes. They watched me, curious, until they couldn't resist finding a way to squeeze their enormous heads and long necks through the railings to take a closer look. Several of the drawings are smudged with giraffe saliva. I will never forget the smell of giraffe and straw, the steaming warm breath and the sound of contented giraffe chewing.

Perception is the combining of sensations into a recognition of an object - *Chambers 1972*

My two January days in Marwell Zoo could not have been richer. I came away with a true perception of giraffes and an impatience to start welding.



Giraffe                      galvanized scrap metal                      life-size



Toad                      scrap metal and brazing                      life-size



Hunting Dogs    scrap metal    life-size

# james hawkins

**Walking** in the hills and looking, I experience the landscape with all of my senses and let my mind's eye inform and focus my observations. In the studio I make drawings and paintings in response to what I have seen; often how they feel is as important to me as how they look.

I build up thick textured surfaces of paint and grind them back down when the pigment is dry, revealing layers and colours buried in the ground. Painting on top of this ground and then repeatedly sanding the marks down again is like the erosion and transformation of the geological process.

Weaving dragged and spattered marks through these textures of rock and stone introduces a history of changing weather and records the cycle of the seasons.

Through this dialogue of mark making and observation I develop my perception, how I perceive the land informing my paintings and how I make the paintings informing how I perceive the land.



Rocks and Snow on Rhue Hill

acrylic on canvas

92 x 92 cm



Cnoc an Odhar, Reay Forest

acrylic on canvas

92 x 92 cm



Loch Hourn

acrylic on canvas

123 x 166 cm

# tobias hodson

**Perception:** The combination of senses into a recognition— A discernment made against the measure of experience - *Chambers* 1955

**'It's what you bring to the table'**

## 1. Drawing a rose 1969

'Draw what you see, not what you think you see.' The dining room table is a picture of industry. Piled with pen and ink illustrations. My father is working to a deadline, which he loves, and, oddly, has chosen this moment to give me a drawing lesson. The air is sanctified with shellac and cigarettes, with topnotes of India rubber and pencil sharpenings.

## 2. Propagating hellebores 1983

'When I can't see I close my eyes,' says Dave as he teaches me to separate the cold root blocks with blade and fingers using the potting bench to lever them apart. The December sun sets Indian red and an airfrost sidles down the escarpment from Hidcote. As the light goes the last of the divisions is pressed home into its own whalehide pot.



Gloriosa

watercolour

107 x 95 cm

## 3. Tidetable 1997

'At Kinsale the young flood  
sets along the eastern shore  
all up the harbour'

In Ballyandreen the young are asleep  
and dreaming of videos and milk  
before a coal fire

'It begins about half an hour before low water'

Low water accompanies me tonight

'The ebb begins on the western shore  
And runs from Money point to Preghaine point'

The world slyly turns  
and beckons with an oily finger

'The flood tide sets strong from the Old Head  
to the south east and then turns  
to the north east  
forming "the race";'

How can I trust a fickle moon  
that strokes the sea unseen?

'and the ebb sets in the opposite direction'

Much time is spent facing in the opposite direction

## 4. Riding a rail 2011

When the ocean swell comes from a distance it has  
time to become perfectly formed. The lines of waves  
string the sea like a harp. With no wind the water is  
glass. Four hundred yards from the shorebreak it is so  
quiet as I glide that I can hear a blackbird singing.

**'We are guests at the table'**



Semper Augustus Tulip

watercolour

71 x 74 cm



# mhairi killin

**My work** evolves from an intuitive response to the remains of the past as they exist in the present; from cultural remains to the personal archaeology of memory and experience.

The work in this exhibition has come from my experience of the spiritual, cultural and physical landscape of the Isle of Iona and is therefore a very personal perception of Island life.

The overlay of traditional craft skills and heritage with my contemporary art practice is an intrinsic part of the work and this is exemplified in the textile and silversmith techniques used in the making of some of the pieces.

The work explores themes of pilgrimage, faith and emigration and has drawn on songs, stories, letters and prayers created by Islanders and visitors alike, each adding their own layer of experience to the deep creative strata of the Island's landscape.

It is this landscape that continues to capture and stir my imagination.



Starlings pen and ink on paper, etched silver and brass stitched detail 34 x 74 cm



Precious Cargo (detail) etched silver, woven copper scrim, silver wire, wood 200 x 12 x 8 cm



Blessing of the Ship wood, silver wire, etched silver 100 x 70 cm

# james lumsden

I **create** paintings where perception and the experience of viewing are primary. My work is primarily concerned with the creation of an illusion of light - building multiple translucent glazes of paint until an atmosphere and sense of light and depth is achieved.

My working process involves the application of multiple (up to 40 or more) thin glazes of acrylic paint and gloss medium on a fine gesso ground. Each layer is dragged, pulled or squeegeed with various implements - the process being repeated layer upon layer until the final painting begins to emerge. Arrived at by both chance and deliberation, this final painting reveals varying chromatic strata, which can be seen through the translucence, pentimenti and depth of the work.

The series Liquid Light continues the formal compositional simplicity of my earlier work, yet the restrained minimalism of these earlier works has given way to paintings of greater richness and depth, to seductive surfaces rich in incident.

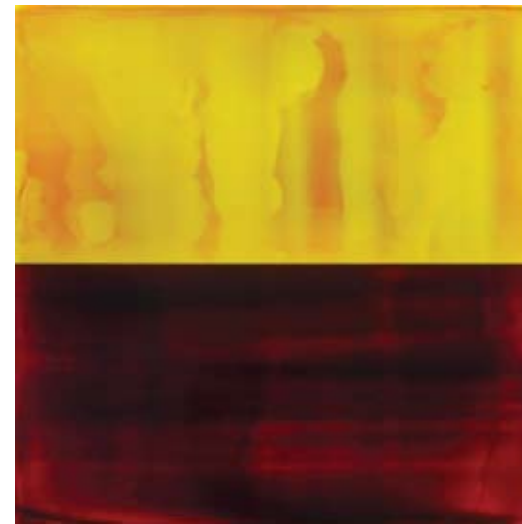
I am interested in how the depiction of light and space, depth and feeling can be rendered purely through process, controlled chance and accident within the application of paint.

I aim to make paintings which are luminous, seductive, sensual and atmospheric.

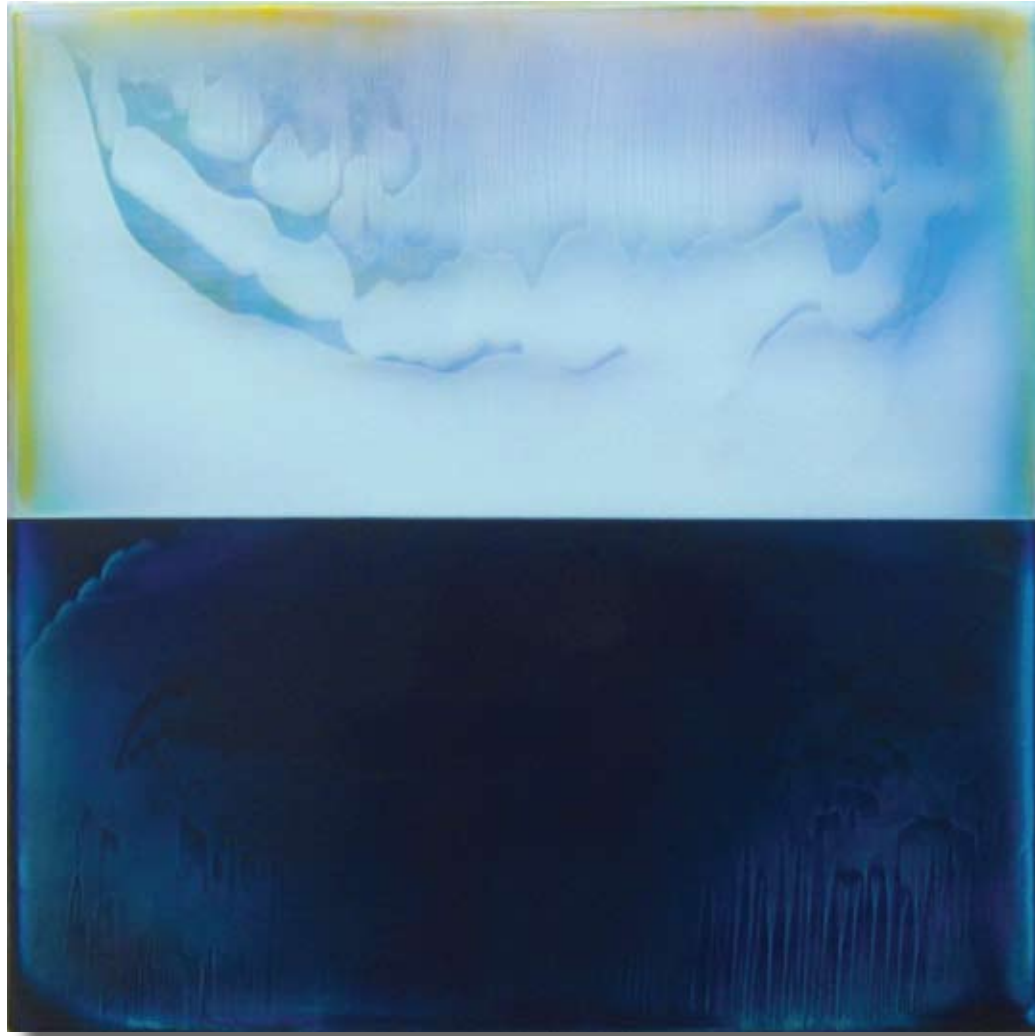
I am fascinated in how the basic materials innate to the medium - stretcher, linen, pigment suspended in medium - can be turned into something poetic; an object filled with light, feeling and emotion. The struggle lies in attempting to reach that stage.



Liquid Light 20/08 acrylic on canvas 100 x 100 cm



Liquid Light 1/09 acrylic on canvas 30.5 x 30.5 cm



Liquid Light 19/10 acrylic on canvas 30.5 x 30.5 cm

# katy spong

The significance of nature draws me and I have come to be fascinated with this particular place on the west coast of Scotland. The sea has a great influence on the nature of the land, the four and a-half bays with their rocky outcrops hold a particular attraction and here I do encounter something of the original wild nature of our country. I explore with my dogs, and my encounters with the elemental creatures and the landscape continually inform my understanding of this place.

For me birds have inherent grace. I spend many hours mesmerised by birds in flight, their astonishing speed: their movements appear effortless as the wing changes shape in flight. Life here is surrounded by birds and I see how they adapt to and make use of the man-made elements in the environment.

It is a presence in something I see that inspires my painting. My attention is often drawn by the sudden movement of a bird, certain colours, the rhythmical grouping of trees or pattern created. A flock of shorebirds for instance can appear to be synchronized as they feed; their alignment is often in relation to the elements. These all stir an aesthetic emotion in me, one which I try to depict true to life as I see it, but my paintings are not naturalistically accurate.

I use monoprinting initially to help develop a composition and lead the mark making. Whilst the composition is key to starting, the painting's balance evolves through layering and experiment. I usually start off with a dark colour ground which helps me to create a space. I am always experimenting with paint as a medium for mark making and I like to give the viewer a lot actively to see.

The vitality and spirit of this place is what I look for and try to understand. Through my experience of its cyclical nature and by painting its trees, its patterns in the landscape and vigour of its birdlife so my perception of this place is continually evolving.



Gulls along the Far Point

acrylic on canvas

152 x 67 cm



Geese with Heads held High acrylic on canvas 100 x 100 cm

# peter white

## Singing Bowl

sky iron, stars' tinsmith  
sheen of metallised light  
under a spun rim  
struck

circling the ear  
your head  
in its hood of listening

a silent mouth  
holding all that falls  
in cycles of emptiness

and the note  
held in the way our body folds  
the note we sing and  
in which we are  
conducted under  
the stirring rim  
unsung

time's still point travelling  
in the sound your life makes

struck  
like some standing bell  
hung in an empty sky

*Jon Miller*



Bowl oil, acrylic & wax on board 90 x 100 cm



Book 2 oil, acrylic & wax on board 58 x 122 cm



Garment oil, acrylic & wax on board 170 x 190 cm

## credits and contacts

Highlands and Islands Enterprise | [hie.co.uk](http://hie.co.uk)

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