PHILIP BRAHAM
KEEPING TIME

8 JANUARY - 1 FEBRUARY 2014

THE SCOTTISH GALLERY
CONTEMPORARY ART SINCE 1842

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cover: Between Worlds, 2007, oil on canvas, 111 x 152 cms
left: Dreaming Ophelia, 2012, oil on canvas, 91 x 61 cms
1 Upperhill Woods, 2012
oil on canvas, 91 x 122 cms
Foreword

Phil Braham had his first exhibition at The Scottish Gallery in 1985 entitled The Wilderness, an exhibition of expressionist works including Dreams from the Bridge in which the artist is the protagonist and the subject a cri de cœur, an existential paean, expressed in powerful and chaotic terms as the artist looks forward to a lifetime of engagement with the philosophical questions of existence. Three years later and after his inclusion in the seminal exhibition The Vigorous Imagination: New Scottish Art (SNGMA, 1987) he showed at The Scottish Gallery again with Fractured Landscape, an exhibition of landscape which demonstrated how his vision had matured and how he identified landscape as metaphorically rich. This investigation would become his predominant concern.

Our current exhibition introduces a new theme: Ophelia and the link is clear to his 2010 exhibition Suicide Notes but at the same time we have included work going back to 2005, inviting an audience to see the continuity of his vision, a continuation of his profound engagement with symbolic representation.

Guy Peploe

The Scottish Gallery
2 Young Ophelia, 2012
oil on canvas, 70 x 100 cms
Is beautiful still okay?

During a group critique with students, I had casually remarked that a particular piece of artwork was beautiful, and my colleague challenged me with the question, ‘But is Beautiful still ok?’

Behind this lay the bigger question of what constitutes art after Duchamp, and what gives it validity and authority? By pointing to a urinal and declaring it a ‘Readymade’ the focus shifted from the crafted art object, with its inherent and self-evident qualities, to the artist provocateur who bestows artistic merit upon it, and contests us to accept that this is indeed a piece of art. Duchamp challenged critical values through ironic gesture to deflate the intellectual snobbery that determined what was good or bad art, destabilising the pillars of modernism en-route, by suggesting that art is merely a game where developing good strategies is more useful than aspiring to make beautifully realised work. “Aesthetic delectation was the danger to be avoided!” he declared. This is the ‘Duchampian’ move. He was ultimately more interested in chess than art, and he understood the tactical importance of a good position. His legacy is that artists would become self-aware careerists manufacturing their celebrity status, rather than concerning themselves with making objects of beauty. One might review Damien Hirst’s career and acknowledge that he is clever at retaining a good position. My assertion that Beautiful is not only okay, but is vitally necessary, is therefore a form of resistance to the Duchampian hegemony that has ushered with it a cynical attitude towards the audience for art and accounts for much of the banal work that constitutes contemporary art practices today. Think of the kitsch work of Jeff Koons, or the irritatingly slight Turner Prize winning Work Number 227: The lights going on and off by Martin Creed, and ask yourself if you felt moved by it. Should we be moved by art? Does art still have the capacity to affect us psychologically, or are we world-weary from seeing and knowing too much to be touched again by art?

In his 1946 essay, ‘What are Poets for?’ Martin Heidegger reflected on a line from Holderlin’s elegy ‘Bread and Wine’ that asked “…and what are Poets for in a destitute time?” He mused that we were approaching the longest hour of the darkest night of the world’s history:

“The closer the world’s night draws toward midnight, the more exclusively does the destitute prevail, in such a way that it withdraws its
very nature and presence. Not only is the holy lost as the track toward the godhead; even the traces leading to that lost track are well-nigh obliterated. The more obscure the traces become the less can a single mortal, reaching into the abyss, attend there to intimations and signs. It is then all the more strictly true that each man gets farthest if he goes only as far as he can go along the way allotted to him.”

We are borne into a pre-existing world with preconceptions that precondition our experience of it, thus limiting the possibilities of our being in its purest state. The destitution is further compounded these days through information technologies that deepen our sense of alienation and rather than illuminating aspects of being, introduce more layers of mediated preconceptions that move us further away from truly being in the world. The only hope is through a return to a poetic apprehension of lived experience, to ‘attend there to intimations and signs’ and to journey along that path as far as one can go.

I used to walk my dog along the banks of the Water of Leith, and dog walkers will know the quiet joy experienced when one recognises the little changes that signify the turning of the seasons. The daily routine brings us momentarily closer to the gentle cycle of death and rebirth that continues around us unbounded. Occasionally, if the air were still and the current slow, the water would become a clear mirror, reflecting the sky above. Leaves, feathers and other debris would move past forming ever-changing constellations across the surface, in clusters or apart, moving closer or breaking away to form new conjunctions. I recall the photographic series *Songs of the Sky* by Alfred Stieglitz, in which the framed drama of the heavens acted as ‘equivalents’ to human emotions. In the *Drift* paintings I similarly sought to present the reflected sky as a revelatory mirror, while the changing constellations represent the shifts we experience in our relationships with friends, relatives and lovers over time. In other paintings the metaphor is extended as falling snow, as stars and fireflies, or as foam suspended on the water’s surface in *Ophelia Floating*.

On early mornings I sometimes saw a homeless man undressing to bathe in the Water of Leith just as the city was waking. I remember the bashfulness I felt as a witness to this private act, and the shy greeting we exchanged as he hurriedly dried himself on the bank. The vision of the figure in the cold water, overlooked by homes where residents were beginning to stir in their beds, remains vivid in my mind: he lives in our midst yet is outside, different, beyond reach. The image became the model for *Ophelia Bathing*. The character of Ophelia can be understood as a cipher for alterity. She is virginal and naïve, yet later appears worldly, singing bawdy songs and distributing the herb Rue, used to stimulate abortion. Her madness parallels Hamlet’s, although his was induced by melancholia, whereas hers was brought on by erotomania, peculiar to women alone. Her death was reported but not described as action in
the play, so we are left to deduce whether it was accidental, or an act of suicide. Her identity is thus ambiguous throughout, which inspired me to portray her as different women, absorbed in their own world. Even when we confront her gaze, in *Young Ophelia* and *Ophelia Waiting*, she remains distant and anxious. For me, she embodies the Freudian themes of Thanatos and Eros, the primal unconscious parallel desire for death and procreation, existing in a state of flux between the two, otherworldly and remote.

Distance is the recurring subject that resonates through the entire body of work presented in *Keeping Time*. As the title suggests, we mitigate distance with cherished love, while memory returns love to us from a distance. Sorley MacLean brilliantly evoked the poignancy of love remembered in the poem ‘The Woods of Raasay’, opening with a distant view of the Cuillin Ridge, its rugged façade broken down by the gentle smir that trickles between the cracks, sending great shards of rock tumbling to lie in ruins at its base. The austere mountain is contrasted with the playful, verdant wood teeming with life and vitality. We recognise his wistful regret at the loss of youth, that carefree abandonment to life that only the young enjoy, and yet there is warmth in its recollection as though the embers of love still glow in his heart. Echoes of these sentiments are present in the mountain and forest paintings selected here, particularly in *Love Letter* and the small-scale *Peak* and *Climber*. The process of painting is durational, and ideas are inflected into the work rather than depicted literally: a seepage finds its way into the forms and palette as the painting evolves, through constant revision and orchestration of the emergent image, until finally a voice sounds that seems to correspond to the inner calling at its genesis. This is how I try to ‘attend there to intimations and signs’ on the path allotted to me.

Duchamp was right to mistrust aesthetic delectation as a dangerous mistress, but aesthetic sleight-of-hand is not the same as Beauty. When Kant attempted to define what constitutes the Beautiful, he was careful to insist that the witness was ‘disinterested’, seeking no personal gain or involvement, but instead was content to wonder about the unquenchable qualities present in a tangible object. These qualities are over and above the rational and describable, beyond individual taste or fashion: Beauty is the grace with which the very texture of life unfolds before us, an inexhaustible charge reaching deep into our psyche to touch us poetically.

Is Beautiful still okay? I think so.

PHILIP BRAHAM
November 2013
Droma, 2005
alkyd on paper, 28 x 38 cms
Drift (Studies 1 - 4), 2007
alkyd on paper (set of 4 paintings), 19 x 28 cms each
Drift (Studies 1 - 4), 2007
alkyd on copper (set of 4 paintings), 15 x 20 cms each
Between Worlds, 2007
oil on canvas, 111 x 152 cms
Drift 4, 2008
oil on canvas, 137 x 183 cms
Rapefield with Crows, 2009
oil on canvas, 50 x 70 cms
Rapefield, 2010
alkyd on paper, 33 x 41 cms
10  Frozen Stream, 2010
     oil on canvas, 25 x 31 cms
Ridge, 2010
alkyd on paper, 33 x 41 cms
12 Corstorphine Hill, 2011
oil on canvas, 91 x 122 cms
The Hermitage, 2011
oil on canvas, 91 x 122 cms
The Black Woods of Rannoch, 2011
oil on canvas, 91 x 122 cms
Stars and Fireflies, 2011
oil on canvas, 122 x 91 cms
16 Love Letter, 2011
oil on canvas, 70 x 100 cms
17 Softly Falling Snow, 2011
oil on canvas, 46 x 61 cms
Windyhill Woods, 2011
oil on canvas, 61 x 46 cms
19  Ophelia Floating, 2013
oil on canvas, 61 x 91 cms
Dreaming Ophelia, 2012
oil on canvas, 91 x 61 cms
Ophelia Bathing, 2013
oil on canvas, 183 x 137 cms
Ghost Trees, 2013
oil on canvas, 91 x 122 cms
23 Ophelia Waiting, 2013
oil on canvas, 91 x 122 cms
High Summer (Remembering Ophelia), 2013
oil on canvas, 91 x 122 cms
oil on canvas, 91 x 61 cms
26  Ophelia Fading, 2013
    oil on canvas, 46 x 61 cms
Young Ophelia (Study), 2013
oil on canvas, 61 x 46 cms

27
Moving Shadows in a Rapefield, 2013
oil on paper, 33 x 53 cms
29  Peak, 2013
   oil on linen, 25 x 36 cms
30 Climber, 2013
oil on canvas, 46 x 61 cms
Small Mountain 1, 2013
oil on linen, 25 x 36 cms
Small Mountain 2, 2013
oil on linen, 25 x 36 cms
Small Mountain 3, 2013
oil on linen, 25 x 36 cms
Winter Path, 2013
oil on linen, 25 x 36 cms
35  Night Song, 2013
     oil on linen, 25 x 36 cms
Fallen Leaves, 2013
oil on canvas, 20 x 15 cms
Philip Braham in his Edinburgh Studio, November 2013
BIOGRAPHY

1959    Born in Glasgow
1976-80 Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art, Dundee. DA (Painting)
1980-81 Royal Academy of Fine Art, The Hague, Holland
1981-82 University of California at Los Angeles, Visiting Artist
2000-  0.5 FTE Lecturer in Fine Art, DJCAD, University of Dundee.
        Course Director for Art, Philosophy and Contemporary Practices

SOLO EXHIBITIONS
1984    Main Fine Art, Glasgow
1985    The Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh
1987    The Glasgow Arts Centre
1988    The Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh
1989    Raab Gallery, London
1993    Compass Gallery, Glasgow
1994    Raab Boukamel Gallery, London
1994    Galleri Christian Dam, Copenhagen
1995    Raab Boukamel Gallery, London
1997    BCA, London
1998    Galleri Christian Dam, Oslo
1999    Compass Gallery, Glasgow
2000    BCA Gallery, London
2000    Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh
2003    BCA Gallery, London
2005    The Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh
2006    Osborne Samuel, London
2010    Royal Scottish Academy, Edinburgh
2011    Union Gallery, Edinburgh
2011    Raab Gallery, Berlin
2014    The Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh

COLLECTIONS
Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museum    Life Association of Scotland
McManus Art Gallery, Dundee        Fleming Collection, London
Lillie Art Gallery, Glasgow         Standard Life, Edinburgh
Sunderland Art Gallery             The City Art Centre, Edinburgh
BBC London                         Royal Scottish Academy, Edinburgh
Contemporary Art Society, London   Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh
Royal College of Physicians, Edinburgh The Richard Demarco Archive, Edinburgh
Educational Institute of Scotland   
Published by The Scottish Gallery to coincide with the exhibition
PHILIP BRAHAM: KEEPING TIME
8 January – 1 February 2014

Exhibition can be viewed online at
www.scottish-gallery.co.uk/philipbraham

ISBN: 978-1-905146-87-1

Designed by kennethgray.co.uk
Photography by Philip Braham
Printed by Barr Printers

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right: Windyhill Woods, 2011, oil on canvas, 61 x 46 cms