

Elemental: New watercolours of Iceland, by Peter Davis, Bonhoga Gallery, Weisdale Mill, Shetland, 30th July 11th September

A review by Janette Kerr PRWA

Peter Davis works from landscape. A watercolour painter, he has painted the Shetland and Orkney landscape for a number of years. Recently his paintings have become more and more abstracted and experimental. A trip to Iceland in 2015 made a strong impact upon his perception of environment, generating a body of work that forms the basis of his exhibition at the Bonhoga Gallery.

Iceland is a place of extremes; a topography that changes as you travel through it. In *'Names for the Sea: Strangers in Iceland'*, novelist Sarah Moss tried to find a vocabulary to describe a landscape so strange that it simply doesn't make sense. She found a *'constantly changing geology ...passing fells of naked lava and rock...like seeing the world before it was finished.... mountains being red as if the cinders haven't yet cooled.. the black of embers, carved by valley ... where it seems... rock is still flowing..'*. Peter Davis' paintings too exist in a state of flux - which sums up this new work. Mirroring/reflecting the effects found in the environment, paint has been allowed to flow, shift, settle, much as sheets of ice move slowly across the Icelandic landscape.

Traversing Iceland, Moss suggests, is like passing through geological time. Lava formations around bubbling mud pools, plumes of steam and sulphurous smells hanging in the air. Iceland wears its age on its sleeve and Davis's watercolours reflect evolution of the landscape. It is a painting method in which paints are made of pigments suspended in a water-based solution. And they spread, shift and flow like glacial lakes and oceans.

As an oil painter accustomed to building up oil paint and marks over each other I find watercolours tricky and demanding. You have to get it right pretty much first time; it cannot simply be painted over. The paper support is both absorbent and delicate, so paint can't simply be scraped off, like oil paint from a canvas.

But for Peter Davis, watercolour is the most natural form of paint. *'I wanted to take watercolour painting far from its association with genteel sedate topography... to take my painting practice back to basics'*. His studio is like an alchemist's laboratory - rows of pots containing raw pigment, glass bowls and heavy pestles for grinding down pigments, jars of Gum Arabic, glycerin and honey in which to suspend pigments and fix them to the painting surface.

He has spent time experimenting; pushing the water-based medium as far as he can. Working wet into wet, pouring diluted paint onto surfaces, using a brush - even a scrubbing brush - spraying with salt water, judiciously tilting the thick paper, to allow wet areas to gently merge and mix, for paint to flow across paper and find its own level. But the most essential ingredient is the artist's imagination, together with eye and hand.

Visitors to this exhibition will recognize the natural colours of the landscape. Pale washes sit beside pools of luminous colour; textures of rocks and ice are echoed in

the grain of paper and pigment. Light permeates the work; the pure white of the paper acting as a foil for washes of handmade paint applied in bold, dramatic strokes.

Responding to Iceland's glacial lagoons where icebergs float sedately across the surface, to batter one another, melt and disappear, Davis has infused lumps of iced seawater with pigment, just as icebergs capture the colours of sky and land. These have been allowed to slowly melt and move across the paper, making his own glowing lagoons. Washes of colour suggest mountains of cinnamon and turmeric, with tiny fragments of intense blue, purple and orange dropped into their wet surface. Tidal marks on the surface of the paper remind us of the sea, receding from the sand, to leave lines and patterns on the beach.

Davis is fascinated by the tension between representation and abstraction, of the ambiguity of scale and image in landscape. While some of the images are clearly more representational, in fact it is all abstract. In the words of painter, Lucien Freud, '*...painting, in order to move us, must not merely remind us of life, but must acquire a life of its own*'. Davis' evocative compositions, while based on real places - *Sólheimajökull, Frostastaðahals, Skaftafellsjökull* - are not topographical; they reference the landscape through recollection and experience. As abstractions, they literally re-present landscape. He describes the material effects of watercolour as intensely variable, '*almost a microcosm of the natural world*'.

Some images speak as much about the process of making as the place that inspired them. Single colour images work best where they sit in the white space of the paper, and make their own journey across it. It is very easy for watercolour to become muddy – but here it is avoided. Colours push against each other but retain their individual hue.

Iceland's landscape takes human form in these paintings; we perceive movement, limbs, bodies in the rocks and ice. *Svartagill* for example, evokes the skeletal frame of a creature found deep in the earth.

In *Icefall (Öræfajökull)*, his most representational work, and the largest piece in the exhibition, and in *Vatnasvið (meltwater)*, the structure of ice is recreated with an almost mathematical precision (in fact it is made by using cling film pressed into wet paint).

Edges and ledges are words that come to mind when looking at this work. *Jökulsárlón* is almost dissected by a strong dark line as colour flows beneath and above. Are we looking at a vertical slice through the landscape? The image takes us deep below the surface of the ice and above to evaporate into a mist of air and light.

Davis's practice requires the acceptance of risk and a partial loss of control. It takes nerve, but here it has paid off, and, with characteristic modesty, Davis remarks '*watercolour with its characteristically unpredictable behaviour did the rest*'.

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