

Peter Davis – Stillness in Motion

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Peter Davis is an artist who has spent a great many years mastering the use of his materials and chosen medium of watercolour. With what appears to be consummate ease and an intuitive dexterity with the physicality of water and pigment on paper, the landscape paintings that Davis produces reveal Shetland with stunning economy, for nothing is ever overworked or laboured in his watercolours. All the more reason, therefore, to be taken aback by the sheer impact that he makes with what is, after all, frequently considered a 'modest' medium; by some even a 'lesser' medium, though that is an utter fallacy. In the right hands, watercolour derives part of its power from being of the natural world, and especially when it is allowed to behave according to its own nature, offering up stunning results.

Peter Davis's current exhibition at the Birch Tree Gallery in Edinburgh is, without doubt, one of those 'must see' shows currently hanging in the city, and anyone able to get to see it before it closes on 23 February would be negligent for not giving his paintings even a little of their time. Including twenty-five new works that underline the fascination Davis has with Shetland, at the heart of the exhibition is the theme of "two extremes", described in the artist's own words as that of "stillness and flow". If one wanted an example of what the medium of watercolour can be allowed to do, Davis offers an exemplary insight, for sure. It is in his allowing of his medium to behave by its own rules that the real success of this exhibition lies.

Davis knows the landscape that he paints intimately now, and the defining elements of that landscape have thus provided him with an all-consuming subject matter that shows no indication of waning, so synonymous have he and his subject become. It is difficult to think of Davis's work without reference to Shetland, and vice versa if one has become intimate with that work over time. In part, this is due to the manner in which the islands lend themselves so well to the practice he has honed over the years. It also has something to do with the way (as Davis himself describes) "watercolour plays by nature's rules; it obeys gravity, in most cases, flows, puddles, desiccates, and finally dries." From this it seems clear that Davis considers his work and the landscape he paints to be one, in a curious symbiotic relationship.

It was this, among a great many other topics, that he recently explained to an audience who came together for his artist's talk at the Birch Tree, soon after the current show's opening (as is evidenced from the brief clips from the talk in the above video). Ultimately, though, Davis's work requires no words. While words may shed light on the process of making, the real power of that making rests with the artist's ability to show, rather than tell, and in this he must be considered one of the finest watercolour painters at work in Northern Europe today, proving that an often much-underestimated medium can convey the real power of a landscape, the ocean that surrounds it, and the ever-changing elemental forces that keep the artist's subject matter in a state of constant flux.

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From ART NORTH blog February 2019