

Erasure and Reinstatement: Gray the Artist, Across Space and Form

by Rodge Glass

Witnessing: The Unfinished Nation

In his home country, Alasdair Gray's art is highly visible. Though much essential work is elsewhere, its presence is most evident in Glasgow, the place he has spent his life. In terms of the visual practice, much of that life has been dedicated to doing two things. The first is preserving, in pictures and words, Glasgow's disappearing past. The second, also conducted across space and form, is imagining Scotland's possible futures, seeing as he does Scotland as a place with the unfinished business of national self-determination. In this chapter, I wish to look at the possible future, the unfinished present, also at the disappearing past. When studying Gray's visual archive that past is critical, not least because until recently the artist's own work has been disappearing too. Not that visitors to today's Glasgow would know it. In the West End, where he lives, Gray now seems inescapable. His work is not reserved for locals. You do not have to seek it out. Thousands witness it every day, simply by travelling there.

In the following chapter, I will argue that Gray's art has consistently suffered erasure of various kinds, for decades being – unlike his widely celebrated literary output – largely neglected, replaced or destroyed. Using his murals – now an integral part of Gray's Glasgow – as case studies, I will then trace how the 21st Century has seen a radical reinstatement of Gray's visual practice into the landscape. Some artists run from their early work. Not this one. For Gray, what appears to be new is nearly always deeply rooted in the past. Themes reoccur. Emblems reappear. Figures resurface. The artist seeks to reinsert his marginalized or lost works into his city once more, in new contexts, for new futures. He was always this way. Only now he has an audience.

With Gray's murals, witnessing is a good place to start. Seeing what the work looks like, close up. Considering its concerns and influences, also its commonalities with the artist's other visual, textual and hybrid work. During a Kelvingrove Art Museum exhibition in 2014/15, an Alasdair Gray West End walking tour directed visitors to the

artist's most viewed murals. Let us begin this study of the landscape by taking a walk in that landscape. Witnessing Gray's art in station, pub staircase, doorway and auditorium, as it is seen by visitors.

Hillhead Subway

Those disembarking Glasgow's subway at Hillhead will notice the first mural on our mini-tour greeting them on arrival, emerging as they rise towards ground level. Showing Hillhead in 2011, it stretches 40ft across the station's back wall, Gray's original pen drawing transferred onto ceramic tiles by collaborator and fellow artist Nichol Wheatley. The central section constitutes a panorama of the surrounding streets, replete with names sketched into the roads in Gray's handwriting, pointing out the University of Glasgow, Botanic Gardens and other landmarks. At the maps' edge are a workman in hi-vis vest, elderly woman in headscarf and some pigeons, scanning the scene. 'Hillhead 2011' is a good introduction to the area, also to the artist.

Visitors will notice the mural contains portraiture, text and landscape. In this way, it is typical of Gray's public works, each element in dialogue with the others. Multiple paired vignettes feature too, under the heading ALL KINDS OF FOLK. These are labelled with knowing identities, suggesting who you might meet round these parts. QUEER FISHES. FABULOUS PRANCERS. GREEDY RAPTORS. The intermingling of human and animal is another familiar trope, with the artist in the frame too. American journalist Evan Fleischer described this in *The New Yorker* as 'an image of a young Alasdair Gray writing while staring at his own head, which appears to have been decapitated from a second body' (Fleischer 2015). That image, drawn in 1967 while writing his novel *Lanark*, sits on the artist's desk looking up at its maker, above the label HEAD CASES, the image duplicated so in fact four Gray heads are portrayed. Fleischer notes Gray's murals 'convey a kind of muffled laughter', humour being particularly evident in that multiple self-portrait, suggesting a self-deprecating acknowledgement of the artist's process. But it is also an indicator of several identities, working concurrently. This is the heart of Gray's creative approach. Here, the FINANCIAL WIZARDS are presented as banker-spiders – stern, moustachioed heads centred in two webs, absurd stick legs sprouting from ears, cheeks and chin. Their emblem originates from the character Sir Arthur Shots in Gray's

little-known novel *McGrotty & Ludmilla* (Gray 1990). The LUCKY DOGS hail from his early story ‘The Comedy of the White Dog’, later collected in *Unlikely Stories, Mostly* (Gray 1983). This mural is peppered with recycled imagery, repurposed for a new context. Meanwhile, as is common in Gray murals, the accompanying text contains advice, this time for passengers rushing by: ‘Do not let daily to-ing and fro-ing/ To earn what we need to keep going/ Prevent what once felt when wee / Hopeful and free/’. Viewers may sense that muffled laughter, also a tangible sense of the unfinished individual, shaped by the past but looking to the future.

Arcadia Stairwell

The next stop on our tour is The Wee Pub, the first entrance down bustling, cobbled Ashton Lane. This is one part of The Ubiquitous Chip, a Glasgow institution also containing a brasserie and Scottish cuisine restaurant. In fact, this venue houses three Gray murals¹ but today our focus is on ‘Arcadia’, housed in the unassuming stairwell between the Wee Pub and brasserie. First painted in the late seventies, it was updated incrementally in 1980, 1981, 2000 and 2006. For this artist, all pieces are in a state of continual flux. Even new work is rooted in the old.

In its present incarnation, ‘Arcadia’ covers four walls and a ceiling. The artist’s poetry intertwines with a natural background featuring a cloudscape, pattern of trees and multiple portraits. Some alone, looking outward. Others seated together, eating. Though painted decades ago, as of 2019 there are six portraits – including pub manager and chef – showing people who still work here. The collage of captured present moments sits under the words ‘To Tom Leonard’.² This is newly poignant since the recent passing of the great radical poet. A close friend of Gray’s for decades, Leonard is just one of those counted among the ever-growing, disappearing past the artist seeks to preserve. In a narrow sense, ‘To Tom Leonard’ refers to Gray’s poem, a 21st-Century addition reproduced in full on the largest wall, but its placement at the centre of the piece suggests the words also speak to the whole.

¹ Two others are in the restaurant – one water-damaged piece featuring wildlife and plants behind the indoor pond, another double portrait either side of a mirror by the entrance.

² There is no portrait of the poet here, though he is a recurring motif in Gray’s work, both visual and textual.

In 2017, Associate Editor at *The Paris Review* Caitlin Love noted, in an online piece accompanying a new Gray interview, that ‘his paintings...carry multiple perspectives’. ‘Arcadia’ shows these co-existing effectively, an approach that can be traced back to his earliest works, which often had multiple vanishing points. Also, to key oil paintings such as ‘Cowcaddens in the Fifties’ (1964), a technique Gray has referred to as ‘bent perspective’ (Gray, 2011: 118). But bent perspectives is evident in his murals too, just in a different way. In work created across decades, the artist has made a regular feature of presenting different historical moments in a single space. First, the mural reflects its landscape. Then that landscape alters over time. Then the mural is updated, reflecting changes around it, for example through the addition of new portraits, their juxtaposition with older ones suggesting new resonances. Then more time passes, and the relationship between the mural and its landscape alters again.

Visitors who know Gray’s habit of celebrating other artists may expect those featured to be cultural figures, and some are, such as the Canadian poet Dennis Lee. (Gray quotes Lee so often that his line ‘Work as if you live in the early days of a better nation’, itself so strongly suggestive of Riach’s ‘unfinished business’, is now engraved into the Canongate Wall of the Scottish Parliament, as if it were Gray’s own.)³ But other portraits, such as that of pub regular Vince Edkins, will be familiar only to those who know the pub’s life, past and present. Amidst the idyllic landscape suggested by the mural’s title sits Ronnie Clydesdale, the original owner of The Chip, as he was in 1977. A nearby portrait of Chris Kefalas raising a glass in the year 2000 is quite the contrast among the hairstyles of the 70s and 80s. This technique, of mixing locals with outsiders, past with present, is something the artist has since returned to, on a bigger scale.

Oran Mor Auditorium

Oran Mor is a large ex-church situated at the end of the Byres Road just a few minutes’ walk from Hillhead station and the Ubiquitous Chip. This cultural centre includes a concert venue-cum-theatre, restaurant and pub. Its upstairs auditorium features Gray’s largest work. Despite its size, it is the artist in miniature.

³ ‘Arcadia’ used to contain this Lee quote, above the poet’s head. In a later incarnation, that was painted over.

On arrival, visitors will notice the artist's bagpipe-playing, upright lions on the walls just beyond the threshold, under the translation of 'Oran Mor', meaning 'the big song' in Gaelic. They stand over greetings rendered in twenty-four languages, each lettered underfoot in Gray's own font, Oran Mor Monumental. Hebrew 'hello' paired with Arabic 'hello'. Mandarin 'goodbye' with Tibetan 'goodbye'. The juxtaposition is no coincidence. Now, let us take the spiral stairs to the auditorium. More than any other piece, it is Gray's legacy. Started when the artist was already in his seventies, it represents the culmination of a life in art. It draws on decades of influence and practice, erasure and reinstatement, with some of its most distinctive fragments being rooted in disappeared murals. Reimagined here, as if for the first time.

Visitors entering the auditorium will notice a rainbow in the centre of the eastern gable, between two arches. This arcs above a portrait of Gray's Bella Baxter from his novel *Poor Things* (Gray 1992), here renamed Bella Caledonia, a Scottish heroine depicted with tartan draped over her arm, holding a thistle. The words LET US FLOURISH BY TELLING THE TRUTH accompany her. But that textual message, adapted from 'Let Glasgow Flourish', the motto on the city of Glasgow's coat of arms, is just the beginning. Above them, visitors will see Gray's vast night sky, containing zodiac figures and contrasting shades of blue clearly demarcated in cloudscapes backgrounding messages on the beams: BETTER NATION / FOR EVERYONE. ALL WHO WORK / WELL HERE. Again, looking to the unfinished nation. Opposite Bella, above a balcony sitting on top of the auditorium's bar, is another world.

If visitors climb one more flight of stairs they can witness the auditorium from the gallery above. From this vantage point, they will be close to Adam and Eve who are entwined at the centre of a globe. They are portrayed among animals, each figure gazing upward at the stars and the text writ large on beams. WHAT ARE WE? sits above ANIMALS THAT WANT MORE THAN WE NEED. WHERE ARE WE GOING? above OUR SEED RETURNS US TO DEATH'S REPUBLIC. The theme is, like most Gray murals, the Triumph of Death. The location is part-natural, part-industrial – both Glasgow's West End and the Garden of Eden, rendered in exquisite greens and blues. The approach is to mix the fantastic and realist as if they belong together.

Close to Adam and Eve, framed by two cherubs climbing out of skulls, is a midwife ushering a child into the world. Above them, a huge earth goddess dominating the figures

below. Framing them all, on the north and south walls, are reproductions of both sides of a bridge over the West End's River Kelvin, including two statues - one signifying Philosophy and Inspiration, another, Peace and War. Across from these, visitors approaching the balcony will see Bella surveying all below her, including a series of portraits walking along the walls. As with Hillhead Subway, these portray 'all kinds of folk'. In this context, the folk are those who make this building function - Oran Mor employees, drawn at Gray's artist's desk then presented on framed mirrors. The owner and funder of the enterprise, Colin Beattie, warrants the same space on one of these mirrors as 2007's bar staff, 2008's cleaners, the chefs, also theatre-makers including Scotland's ex-Makar, Gray's long-time friend Liz Lochhead. Also included are Nichol Wheatley and assistants Robert Salmon and Richard Todd, each on a designated artists' mirror. But Gray himself only warrants a partial portrait, half his face out of frame. This foregrounds the joint effort, urging viewers to perceive him as just one of many working towards a common goal.

This juxtaposition - figures from biblical landscapes, intermingled with Gray's characters and contemporary Glaswegians - is what gives the auditorium its charge. By presenting them together, he suggests the commonalities shared by Adam, Eve, Bella and the West End's headcases, rather than accentuating their differences, encouraging worship or marginalization. I have called Gray a democratizer, something I believe is clearest in his large visual statements. Even their location and availability matters. These key works are not in collectors' homes or entrance-fee museums, but painted into free-to-enter, public spaces. Gray's auditorium here has become the most prominent example of this.

Oran Mor is now a significant part of Scottish culture, across music, literature, art and theatre. From plays to gigs, performers have been as diverse as Amy Winehouse and Gray himself, playing Lucifer in an all-author read-through of his play *Fleck*. The auditorium holds regular events from the personal to the political. If you want your wedding here, there is a two-year wait. Some attendees to these occasions know who painted the walls. Others don't know Gray's name, or think of the auditorium design at all. Rather, it is simply part of their cultural landscape. As is Gray. At the same time, his work points both to the disappearing past and the unfinished business of the future.

A History of Erasure

A casual visitor to Glasgow might imagine, from this whistle-stop tour, that our subject's visual practice has always been an integral part of the landscape of his city. But it has not always been this way.

Fifteen years ago, when I was embarking on Gray's biography, the reality was different. Then, Oran Mor was just opening its doors and his night sky was in early development. Meanwhile, despite working in it all his life, his visual practice was virtually absent from the city. During the second half of the 20th Century, few galleries had showed Gray's work, and those who had were local, small-scale. Sometimes he self-funded exhibitions, notably paying for one in 1986 by selling his diaries to the National Library of Scotland. At most of his exhibitions, just one piece was sold. Many times, Gray had to approach his first benefactor, Professor Andrew Sykes, who bought paintings whenever the artist needed money. He needed money often.

Meanwhile, few voices inside the art world were prepared to interrogate Gray's visual practice, or praise it, something I came across when writing my book. Gray had no art agent. He routinely referred to himself as 'one of those interesting second-raters'. There were some supporters though. Glaswegian painter Lucy McKenzie was a young, internationally-recognized artist inspired by Gray's 1970s murals, his influence reflected in her own early work. But even as recently as a decade ago, she was a rarity. Serious critique was rare too. There was work in public collections, such as the Hunterian and Collins Gallery, both in Glasgow. Also, the Smith Gallery in Stirling. But these works were considered marginal not just in terms of contemporary British art, but Scottish art too. Gray said so himself.

A decade on from my Gray biography being published, I realize now that I could have done better. I had been drawn, like many others, to Gray through his literature first. I had no background in the visual arts and lacked the confidence to interrogate it as I did his books. I could have tried harder to immerse myself in the art world, searching out supporters that were surely there. But I found that most enthusiasts keen to discuss his visual practice were already admiring of the literature, more interested in books than pictures. Either that, or they were friends of the artist. I found this process so frustrating that I included 'Yes Yes But Is It Any Good?', a tantrum of a chapter. But it was rooted in

something real. That there seemed, during my years of research, an odd void where I had assumed Gray's artistic reputation would be. His literary reputation seemed to dominate.

Given this lifetime of marginalization, there seemed, at the turn of the century, little prospect that anyone would ever write a detailed critique of Gray's visual practice. So he set about doing it himself. This eventually became *A Life in Pictures* (Gray, 2010), an auto-pictography now widely considered one of his most remarkable publications, and another example of a 21st-Century work rooted in the 20th. It documents Gray's visual archive, walking first-person through the life, from early influences such as Blake, Beardsley and Kipling to latter-day work in Oran Mor, exploring the gestation, process and intention of key pieces. The archive in *A Life in Pictures* is vast. It comprises hundreds of life studies, figure sketches, landscapes, murals, graphic work and illustrations. It includes sixty years' worth of imagined things. Necessarily, any summary will be reductive, but patterns can be identified. These show that for most of his working life, with a few notable exceptions such as 'Arcadia', Gray's public works were being erased as fast as he could produce them.

There were reasons for this. Gray always worked far from the commercial art world, without financial security or professional help. His archive grew chaotically, pieces lost, forgotten or unacknowledged. Meanwhile, as argued by curator Elspeth King in *Alasdair Gray: Critical Appreciations*, the 20th Century was unkind to many Glasgow-based practitioners, it being impossible to make a living from art without leaving the city. I was especially difficult for Gray given that, as a muralist, he had 'no market for his creativity' (King in Moores 2002: 107). He may have, as King stated, 'seen the future in the restoration of the medieval practise of commissioning works of art, a system in which artists were engaged and rewarded as other journeymen'. But for many years, few others were interested in making that future a reality. Perhaps it is not surprising that a working-class Glaswegian with no desire to leave home, no market and little audience would be working first in poverty, then obscurity. But it is a kind of erasure. What is surprising is that eventually, as in the medieval tradition he identified, Gray would be commissioned to create big public works. He would be rewarded financially like any other journeyman. Erasure would slowly, eventually be undone. Though it would take a lifetime.

Made and Unmade

Gray started at Glasgow School of Art in 1952, working towards a Diploma in Design & Mural Painting. This was an unfashionable specialism, both then and now, with Gray being described by current *Guardian* art critic Jonathan Jones as ‘a rare modern exponent of an art that was seen as the noblest branch of painting in the 17th and 18th centuries’ (Jones, in *Guardian*: 2009). Jones also labelled his work ‘quirky’. This sums up the view taken by many observers since Gray’s Art School days. That he was quirky, certainly. Promising, definitely. But fantastically out of touch. In 1954, the Scottish-USSR Friendship Society in Belmont Street was looking for a mural. They asked Percy Bliss, Alasdair’s Art School Head, for a recommendation. Bliss had seen Gray’s potential and suspected he would work without pay.

The work was titled ‘Horrors of War’, a combined Glasgow crucifixion and apocalypse that took as its theme ‘man’s inhumanity to man’. It also depicted the Fall of the Star Wormwood from the Book of Revelations, interpreted here as a prophesy of nuclear war. In the artist’s words, this was intended to be an answer to ‘*Brueghel’s Triumph of Death* landscape, also Dürer’s *Apocalypse* woodcuts’ (Gray, 2011: 61), though it also bore the influence of 19th Century writer and illustrator Aubrey Beardsley and the paintings of 15th Century Dutch master Hieronymus Bosch. Gray was young, inexperienced, and dissatisfied with the result, one much later described by Edwin Morgan charitably as ‘a jagged and colourful panorama’ (Morgan in Crawford & Nairn 1991: 64). But his ambition was clear, as was subject matter that would always occupy him: large-scale, hybridized biblical scenes, relocated to modern, industrial Glasgow.

In a sign of the future, ‘Horrors of War’ had an opening ceremony despite being unfinished. Another sign was that it was ignored. (A brief mention made the early morning edition of the *Glasgow Herald*, but no more.) It would be a long time before this piece received any serious attention. Indeed, this came more than three decades after ‘Horrors of War’ was completed, and long after it was destroyed.⁴ Unfortunately, few ever

⁴ ‘Horrors of War’ was assessed in Scottish art critic Cordelia Oliver’s chapter in *The Arts of Alasdair Gray* (Oliver in Crawford & Nairn 1991: 22-36)

got to judge it for themselves. Still, it was useful. Gray has been practising his *Triumph of Death* ever since.

Gray's next mural was in Greenhead Church of Scotland, Bridgeton, in south-east Glasgow. The ceiling was called 'Six Days of Creation', the wall 'The Seventh Day of Creation – Eden and After'. Started in 1959, this process was later immortalized in *Lanark* – a novel about the impossibility of surviving as an artist in Scotland. As with most future murals, Gray worked unpaid over long, erratic hours, often sleeping on-site. But the work was a leap forward. That had been cluttered, many competing ideas battling for attention. This was the opposite, being both thematically consistent and aesthetically coherent, each day of creation interwoven with the next, the seventh a contrast to the drama of the first six. This was a portrait of humans and animals living in harmony before the Fall. God overlooked the scene, His creations free under the Tree of Life.

In 1960 Gray took time off Greenhead Church to work on 'The Firmament', a cloudy ceiling mural in Belleisle Street Synagogue on Glasgow's South Side. Until much later, this was his only paid mural, others employed to fill in between Gray's 'fierce pattern', which was, he said, 'intended to blend with the Hebrew script on the marble tablet.' (Gray, 2011: 79) In 1961, Gray also painted 'Jonah and the Whale', a text and picture mural telling the story of Gray's favourite biblical book in a private flat in Glasgow's West End. This was done for friends Rosemary and George Singleton. The same year, he also painted designs for the CND nightclub at the Edinburgh Festival, where he met his future wife Inge. This shows the Greenhead Church period was full of activity. However, most work created lived only for a short time. Five years after he completed 'Jonah and the Whale', for example, new owners covered it over with wallpaper. Belleisle Street Synagogue was soon knocked down. A pattern of erasure was being established.

Greenhead Church was finished in 1963, virtually unnoticed. Given its location, and unknown creator, perhaps that was to be expected. In fact, the little attention the mural did receive was unwelcome. The artist remembers the service of dedication thus:

...Tom Honeyman, former Curator of Glasgow Art Galleries and Museum and certainly its best, spoke highly of the work, but no art critic reported it. One newspaper mentioned it

because the tall Garden of Eden panel depicts Adam with a darker skin than Eve, also because I had said I was agnostic, which produced a small ATHEIST PAINTS GOD headline.⁵

This result was as shame. A shame, also, that Greenhead Church was destroyed to make way for a motorway in the early 1970s. All that remains now are a selection of photographs taken when the mural's colours were already tarnished by damp, by which time the building was derelict. The photos give a sense of the work but cannot convey the true scale of it, nor the relationship of the details to each other.

In 1965, Gray got another commission from the Singletons. Asked for something in black and white, he painted a four-metre-high, untitled phantasmagoria in the stairwell of their new home at Kelvin Drive. This did not have an overarching theme, instead containing what Gray has since called 'a brooding earth goddess drawn in Hollywood cartoon style' (Gray 2010: 128) similar to the earth goddess in Oran Mor. This also contained a number of smaller figures recycled from earlier works. The artist has since explained he was again inspired by Albrecht Dürer, the 15th and 16th Century German painter and printmaker, responding here to his engraving *Melancholia* and *The Great Fortune*. Though this mural was not erased, again it was in a private building. Again, it was seen by few.

Another soon-to-be neglected mural was his 25ft by 4ft 'The Falls of Clyde', painted in 1969, in what was then the lounge of The Tavern pub in Kirkfieldbank. This natural landscape showed the Clyde River flowing from its source towards the town of Lanark. In an indicator of the artist's reputation, Gray had to agree that if owner James Campbell didn't like the result, he could simply paint over it. Happily, it did please Campbell. But as with most other Gray murals, it soon lay mouldering anyway. Again, it was wallpapered over. Again, few mourned its loss. Though this mural too would have a future life.

Part-Made, Part-Unmade

By the end of the sixties, having established a small reputation as a playwright and writer for radio, Gray's literary life was changing. But artistic work still brought in little or

⁵ *A Life in Pictures*, p114

nothing. In the early 70s, publicity around Greenhead Church's destruction led to a commission from the similarly-named Greenbank Church south of Glasgow's River Clyde. Though he was paid, the new mural based on the biblical Book of Ruth was beset by common Gray problems. Lengthy delays. A frustrated congregation. That said, this mural included warm, welcome depictions of Gray friends and family – his son Andrew, friends Philip Hobsbaum, Tom Leonard, Liz Lochhead, Archie Hind and the American-British writer Anne Stevenson. As elsewhere, the biblical and the contemporary intermingled. Next was 1974's Palacerigg conservationist mural, featuring the landscape depicted under another tree of life, this time an oak tree. As ever, struggling with deadlines, Gray finished painting this minutes before the opening of the Nature Reserve it was part of, having taken a break from Greenbank, where he was feeling unwelcome. As discussed in *A Life in Pictures*, it was only years later, bumping into the minister's wife, that he discovered another artist had been commissioned to finish the job Alasdair started, his completion money going elsewhere. Gray had not even known about its official opening. Not quite erasure, but a kind of disappearance, nonetheless. And another sign of the lack of value put on Gray's visual practice.

Gray Studies

In 1981, Alasdair Gray was 50. After decades of working in obscurity, suddenly he became a feted literary artist, his sprawling, experimental debut novel *Lanark* receiving widespread acclaim that soon transformed the author's life. From this point on, the gulf between the reception to his literary and visual practice widened. By the mid-1980s, articles and critical chapters on Gray's oeuvre began to be published. Soon, chapters became books.

The first of note was *The Arts of Alasdair Gray*, edited by poet Robert Crawford with Thom Nairn, then-Managing Editor of literary magazine *Cencrastus*. Crawford and Nairn did dedicate an entire chapter to his visual practice, commissioning the Scottish art critic for *The Guardian*, Cordelia Oliver. This retains value today, not least because it explores the visual practice through interrogation of the artist's major works, murals included, rather than focusing on illustrations contained in his books. It was a rare piece of critical depth which took the visual practice seriously, and on its own terms. Crawford is Glaswegian, and knew of Gray's art from growing up there, so it seemed natural to include it in a book discussing his work. That said, *The Arts of Alasdair Gray* was a sign of

things to come. Crawford and Nairn's project was commissioned as part EUP's *Modern Scottish Writers* series, so writing was its primary focus, with chapters written by the likes of Edwin Morgan, also Randall Stevenson, now Professor of Twentieth Century Scottish Literature at the University of Edinburgh, and an early-career Cairns Craig.

So Gray had been noticed in Scottish literary academia, but no one was commissioning a book on his visual practice. This was the start of another pattern, then – the visual work gaining limited critical attention it would otherwise have not received had it not been produced by the man who wrote *Lanark*. But this praise had consequences. Art was now one small room in a house of literature. Over the next ten years, Gray's reputation as a writer inflated considerably. In the decade following *The Arts of Alasdair Gray*, he became widely translated, won further literary prizes and published at speed, with the collection *Unlikely Stories, Mostly* (Gray 1983), also novels *1982*, *Janine* and *The Fall of Kelvin Walker* (Gray 1985) cementing his reputation.

An updated assessment, *Alasdair Gray: Critical Appreciations* was published in 2002, edited by Phil Moores. Again, art was a small part of the whole. Chapters were mostly written by literary critics, long-established supporters such as historian Angus Calder and Philip Hobsbaum, also major novelists such as Jonathan Coe and Will Self, reflecting Gray's growing reputation in England. Again, the book contained much worthwhile critique, with space found for the many forms Gray's creative practice has taken over the years. There were chapters on poetry, the minor novels, his non-fiction and one on his literary influence by Kevin Williamson, founder of Rebel Inc. However, though Gray's artwork peppered this book, considered discussion of the visual practice was again limited to a single chapter – this time written by Elspeth King, a long-time supporter who had secured him a crucial post at the People's Palace nearly a quarter of a century earlier as Artist Recorder. The opening of her chapter demonstrates how little she felt perceptions had changed since the late 70s:

'The art of Alasdair Gray is as original and as creative in its conception and execution as his novels, short stories, plays and poems. Sadly, this is a view that is not widely shared, otherwise this piece would be being written by a professional art historian, our galleries would be rich with Gray's works, and his international reputation as a muralist in his native land would be as secure as that of Diego Rivera in Mexico and John Singer Sargeant in the USA. (King in Moores 2002: 93)

In the introduction to *Critical Appreciations* Will Self noted Gray's 'integrated politico-philosophic vision' (Self in Moores 2002: 1), but largely this book reflected the wider neglect King identified. Her frustration was evident as she critiqued Gray's notable absence from major collections, decrying several ways he was currently being misrepresented, or absented, in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery. By then working as Director of the Stirling Smith Art Gallery and Museum, King was a notable exception – a vocal supporter of Gray's visual practice in the art world in a time when 'Alasdair Gray, writer' [is]...the only aspect of the man that is understood.' (King in Moores: 94). Twenty years later, King's turn of the century assessment reads as prescient.

In the years since, this pattern of assessments become more nuanced. As a new generation of artists grew up in Gray's literary Glasgow, the value of his visual practice started being reappraised, by artists as well as critics. His own generation of supporters and friends, once marginal, were now dominant, even senior cultural figures. (Gray had met Liz Lochhead on a train in the early 70s when they were both unknown Art School graduates. Forty years later, she was Scotland's Makar, the national poet.) Meanwhile, the Oran Mor auditorium had helped recontextualize Gray for a new generation. However, examples of the visual practice being assessed on its own terms, independent of the literature, were still rare.

Camille Manfredi's *Alasdair Gray: Ink for Worlds* (Manfredi: 2014) grew out of the 1st International Alasdair Gray Conference at the University of Brest, France, in 2012. Like the conference, the volume collating the papers largely focused on his literature, but it reflected the interests and perspectives of a Europe-wide field, with a more developed, nuanced sense of Gray the artist evident in chapters discussing his various interleaving worlds. A contributing chapter interrogating Gray's optical illusions was written by Liliane Louvel of the University of Poitiers, a Professor in 'word/image studies'. Also notable was a chapter written by Sorcha Dallas. Now Gray's art agent, Dallas's chapter documented ambitious attempts to foreground Gray's visual practice and order his extensive archive during their first five years working together.

The Arts of Alasdair Gray, *Critical Appreciations* and *Ink for Worlds* all contain valuable insights into Gray's oeuvre. There are also several other single-author, book-length studies that have made contributions to critical understanding, including Stephen Bernstein's *Alasdair Gray* (Bernstein 1999) and Gavin Miller's *Alasdair Gray: The Fiction*

of Communion (Miller 2005). But most of these have three crucial things in common. First, they all trained much more heavily on literature than art in terms of their focus, some exclusively. Second, they were all written or edited by literature specialists. And third, with the exception of *Ink for Worlds*, they were written in a time when the reputation of one dwarfed the other. Even when Gray appeared in books expressly designed to explore ‘the phenomenon of the multiply gifted’ (Friedman & Wronowsky 2014, pii) Gray’s art has been presented in the context of his writing.

The Writer’s Brush (Friedman & Wronowsky 2014) marked exhibitions of writer-artists in New York and Massachusetts in 2007. Amongst a glittering cast, this publication features paintings by Aldous Huxley, Mina Loy, Louise Glück and Derek Walcott. Gray’s inclusion in itself is notable, given the focus on writers well-regarded in the US. However, even in this niche context, Gray does not fit. In his introduction, Joseph McElroy discussed the approaches of those featured, distinguishing those writer-artists keen on ‘coupling across arts’ (the few) from those seeking a ‘departure from one for the other’ (the many). (Friedman & Wronowsky 2014: pvii) As presented here, Gray is, appropriately, in the former camp. But it is curious that both examples of Gray’s visual practice in *The Writer’s Brush* are notable for being extracted from his own books. Not only that, but both examples contain text intended to be read in a narrative context.

The first of these, here called ‘Domestic Conversation’, shows the same two figures twice, with differing text below. It is presented as a single silkscreen print dated 2006, though readers of Gray’s *Unlikely Stories, Mostly* (Gray 1983) will recognise it as two connected short stories.⁶ In Gray’s collection, the first picture is called ‘A Likely Story in a Nonmarital Setting’. A brief exchange of dialogue shown below constitutes the entire tale. The second story, figures reversed, expressions identical, is called ‘A Likely Story in a Domestic Setting’. In this, the same trick is applied, with different dialogue below.

The other example in *The Writer’s Brush* is Gray’s ‘Leviathan’, closely based on the frontispiece to Hobbes’ 17th Century non-fiction work of the same name. This will also be familiar to Gray’s readers, being the single-page illustration starting Book Four of *Lanark*

⁶ These images originated in a 1970s unfinished film sequence collaboration between Gray and Liz Lochhead in the titled ‘Now and Then’, intended for BBC producer Malcolm Hossick. The series includes a picture titled ‘But I Dare You’, later used for stories discussed here. Models were Doreen Tavendale and Russell Logan, later married.

(Gray 1981), central inscription modified. In later editions, 'Leviathan' was used as the book jacket, so associations with *Lanark* are strong. These details do not negate the value of the works as stand-alone pieces, but it is relevant that, rather than present a Gray oil paintings or detail from a mural, the editors chose art housed in his literature to present Gray to American readers. Wronowsky did not intend to be insulting – but his Afterword was also telling, in that it contextualized *The Writer's Brush* as:

...an exhibition of visual works by intelligent, thoughtful, sometimes even brilliant artists who, for the most part, don't have the technical wherewithal, or perhaps more importantly, the habit of or ready facility for visual thinking, to bring their ideas to fruition in a work of art. (Friedman & Wronowsky 2014)

Or in other words, it is made up of interesting second-raters. Even the book's title prioritizes the literary, the visual portrayed primarily as an extension of the textual. Nothing in the short paragraph summarizing Gray alphabetically in *The Writer's Brush* between the etchings of Günter Grass and the pen drawings of Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén, suggests readers should consider him otherwise.

Sorcha Dallas, Partly

Recently, things have changed. But how? It is wise to be suspicious of neat narratives. I am not about to suggest the change in reception to Gray's art has been down to one person, though I will to the contribution of that person shortly.

By the start of the 21st Century, anything produced by the 'small, bespectacled, grey-bearded deity' (Self in Moores 2002: 2) was considered valuable by his growing, devoted following, as well as being noted by the Scottish press. By the turn of the century, generations of Scottish Literature and Glasgow School of Art students had grown up with Gray as part of the cultural landscape. Also, since the 1990s the sheer numbers of readers who had grown to value Gray's visual practice after first encountering it in his books had grown exponentially. One example of that development in action was the international success of award-winning novel *Poor Things* (Gray: 1992), a playful, illustrated satire of Victorian literature which featured multiple portraits, not least one of heroine Bella Baxter. As suggested by her elevated presence in *Oran Mor*, this figure has since been widely used as a symbol of the pro-Independence movement. Then there was *The Book*

of Prefaces (Gray 2000), vast, colourful and ornate. Both were works of integrated word and picture. Each featured multiple illustrations, designed exquisitely in Gray's distinct, clean lines. As Elspeth King put, 'Each publication by Gray is as much a work of art as it is a work of literature' (King in Moores: 2002). The more impactful those publications were, the more his reputation as visual artist crept forward.

Either side of the millennium several more books, theses and critical works were published, the *Edinburgh Companion to 20th Century Scottish Literature* (Brown & Riach 2009) just one of several recognizing Gray as a true renaissance man. Then there was the flourishing of Oran Mor, offering focus, coherence and scale that had been lacking previously, followed by the Hillhead Subway commission. By the time of Kevin Cameron's BBC documentary, *A Life in Progress* in 2014 the disparity between the two forms, literature and art, was less noticeable. Gray was filmed up the scaffolding in Oran Mor. Finishing the Hillhead Subway mural. Discussing his process from his studio. Things were changing. That same year, already a figurehead due to his political books *Why Scots Should Rule Scotland* (Gray 1992 & 1997) published a couple of decades ahead of their time, Gray prominently and controversially featured in the Scottish Independence Referendum campaign, advocating once more for completing that unfinished business of self-determination. Each of these things alone means little, but when put together they constitute a cultural, generational and political shift that I believe has contributed to a change in perception of the visual practice.

Among these many contributing elements, I believe the greatest catalyst since the turn of the century has been Sorcha Dallas approaching Gray in 2007, the artist finally acquiring his first art agent at a youthful 74. Herself a graduate of Glasgow School of Art, Dallas was intimately acquainted with both the visual practice and Gray's influence on younger artists, many of whom had been inspired by his use of Glasgow as his subject. Dallas believed here was an artist too long neglected, that the public would respond to if only they could see his work. It is no coincidence that in the twelve years since she began to represent Gray, his artistic reputation has been transformed. Major exhibitions. Retrospectives. Sales. International recognition. The artist in the landscape of his city as never before.

Sorcha Dallas had others on her books in 2007, but soon made Gray her only artist. Since then she has dedicated years of time and energy to finding and cataloguing Gray's

huge, disparate output, then presenting it in innovative ways in places previously shut to him. One of those ways was putting Gray under new light. Another was allowing the work to be seen in its own right, rather than simply as an addendum or footnote to books the artist has also produced. As she put it in *Ink for Worlds*:

My main aim was to recontextualize Gray's visual work, to show it is as unique and autonomous as his literary works and to make a wider public aware of the incredible body of work spanning over 65 years. The key to this would be promoting it through exhibitions and events as well as ordering his visual material and creating an online resource through which to experience it.

(Dallas in Manfredi: 172)

This was what Elspeth King had been calling for.

Initially, Dallas prioritized cataloguing the archive. This meant searching out lost works, photographing everything, and dealing with previous attempts at archiving, as she explained: 'Many of the works he had made had been photographed, but they were of varying quality, some on slides, some poor-quality photos and a few high res jpegs' (Dallas in Manfredi 2014, 173). Gray's famously chaotic working practice made this undertaking a huge challenge, as did the sheer size and diversity of the work. (By 2014, Dallas stated 1,000 works had already been logged.) This attempt to contextualize the work developed further in the next few years, resulting in major retrospective exhibitions of the artist's visual practice in Glasgow and beyond, seeing him featured in galleries where previously he had been unwelcome.

During the early years of Dallas and Gray's working relationship, there were several key breakthroughs. Much to the amusement of some who had followed Gray for decades, the septuagenarian was featured in the 2008 Frieze Art Fair in London, which arts journalist Tim Cornwell, writing in *The Scotsman* at the time, referred to as 'Britain's youngest, hippest and wealthiest celebration of contemporary art'.⁷ Two pieces, 'Inge in Bed' (1961) and 'Two Views of Katy Mitchell' (1980) were featured. In the same *Scotsman*

⁷ Tim Cornwell, 'Our Alasdair's HOT at FRIEZE' (*The Scotsman*, 06/10/2008)

article, Gray's influence on Lucy McKenzie was mentioned by his new art agent. Soon after, supporters began to pop up in UK galleries, which then bought Gray into their collections, Arts Council England and the Scottish Portrait Gallery among them. Sarah McCrory, now a curator at Goldsmith's, University of London, included him in her top picks in *Art Forum*. *Frieze* Co-Editor Jennifer Higgie was now a prominent supporter of Gray's work too. For years, he could not buy a review. After decades of total absence from art magazines, suddenly he could not keep up with the notices. In 2012, the 'City Recorder' exhibition at the Gallery of Modern Art in Glasgow raised Gray's profile further in his own city, focusing on his People's Palace period. By training attention on a brief, critical two years and excluding literary work, a much more coherent picture of the artist emerged. Thirty-five years after their creation, Gray's representations of Glasgow's disappearing past were finding an appreciative audience.

In 2014/15, to coincide with Gray's 80th birthday, Dallas's plans were ambitious. Working with major galleries across the artist's city, she devised The Alasdair Gray Season, a series of exhibitions with differing foci. As well as a Kelvingrove Art Museum exhibition 'From the Personal to the Universal', which was particularly well received (not least by the *Frieze* Deputy Editor, Amy Sherlock), Glasgow School of Art, Glasgow Print Studio and Glasgow's Museum of Modern Art also held Gray exhibitions, meaning the artist dominated his city like no other. The 'Spheres of Influence' shows were particularly interesting, being rooted in those that had influenced Gray (Beardsley, Blake, Gauguin) but also in the work of a younger generation he had influenced, such as Stuart Murray and Hanna Tuulikki.

The Kelvingrove exhibition showed perceptions were changing. It took place in the temporary basement gallery space but saw an explosion of interest that makes a mockery of the fact that Gray was ignored by places such as this for decades. It wasn't until I visited this exhibition myself – moving through Gray's Glasgow Art School work from the 1950s, onto his Artist Recorder portraits of politicians, friends, the media, the unemployed – that I felt I could appreciate Gray's visual output without feeling the unspoken pressure of literary context. The only words here were arced around the figures being portrayed. Even these helped me see Gray in new ways. One of his pieces, of his son Andrew aged 7 in his then-home in Kersland Street, seemed familiar and

unfamiliar all at once. Then I noticed the words, 'Drawn 1972. Painted 2009.' Which made me think of the Ubiquitous Chip, and 'Arcadia', and Tom Leonard, and unfinished business. Every rendered image is waiting for fresh contexts. As ever, Gray recording the disappearing. Juxtaposing the real and the unreal, the known and the unknown. And always open to new, complementing perspectives.

Since the 80th birthday celebrations, Alasdair has survived a lengthy period of ill health, but nonetheless has seen more of Dallas's plans put into action. He recently had two exhibitions in London. At the time of writing, work is about to be purchased by the Tate. This is symbolic of the progress that has been made. And it means that many more people will be able to witness Gray's visual practice, far from Glasgow, than ever before.

A Pattern of Reinstatement

Let us finish by returning to the murals. Here, too, there is a pattern.

In the 21st Century, works began to be discovered and restored. This has happened in two distinct ways. Firstly, in new murals, such as Oran Mor, where Gray chose to reproduce images, or versions of images that first appeared in murals since lost or destroyed. Secondly, this has been seen in old works that have been restored by the artist himself, literally putting his images back into the space they had been erased from. Or in a new place entirely.

'Horrors of War' no longer exists, but fifty-seven years after that original launch, a detail from this was reproduced and included in the exhibition at Kelvingrove Art Museum along with critical context. Also, the garden of earthly delights Gray first conceived of in this piece was re-attempted in 'Arcadia' at the Ubiquitous Chip.

'The Firmament' in Belleisle Street Synagogue was never put back together – fragments of the ceiling were returned to the artist's door after the building was knocked down, in case he wanted them. (He did not.) But the cloudscapes evident here have reappeared in various forms across Gray murals and paintings since. You can see them on the ceiling of 'Arcadia'. They crash across the Oran Mor night sky. In Gray's 2003 portrait of Edwin Morgan.

The Greenhead Church murals are long gone too, as we have seen. However, parts have been reinserted into the landscape. Adam and Eve share the same embrace in Oran Mor as they did in Greenhead Church. Again, Adam is depicted black, Eve white. Forty years later, no one complained.

In the case of 'Jonah and the Whale', this was discovered by new owner Sian Holding in the early 2000s. Gray restored this himself, offering to do so after Holding phoned him to explain she had found his creation under wallpaper. This restoration was documented in Kevin Cameron's earlier Gray film *Unlikely Murals, Mostly* (2006).

'The Falls of Clyde' was also discovered forty years after Gray first painted it, by the new owner of what had become The Riverside Bar and Restaurant. Andy Boyle found it 'after stripping off layers of paper put over it by several owners'⁸, then invited the artist back to restore the work. The original was greatly damaged due to water penetration, especially on the left of the landscape. Throughout, its colours were faded and its surface full of holes. Also, there were no complete photographs of the original. Few sketches survived. So the restoration was also making the mural anew, Gray and Richard Todd painting the 2009 version based on memory and recent photographs of the landscape.

'Arcadia' in the Ubiquitous Chip was restored and updated repeatedly, most recently in 2006. Visitors may notice that several portraits remain unfinished.

Gray and his assistants worked on the Oran Mor Auditorium from 2004 for many years afterwards. He can no longer climb the scaffolding and recent work has been very occasional. But as of 2019, Gray is working on new portrait mirrors from home.

The untitled black and white phantasmagoria mural painted in 1965 for the Singletons was also recently rediscovered. Adapting it into a new piece in 2018, a reworked inkjet print was developed with fine artist and Gray assistant Lin Chau, then exhibited in The Lighthouse, Scotland's Centre for Design and Architecture, in Glasgow's city centre. The piece, previously unseen by the public, is now titled 'Facsimilization', given a name over half a century after it was first created.

In Cameron's *Unlikely Murals, Mostly*, Gray stated, 'I like the idea of spending my old age restoring murals I began when I was young.' These murals have been my primary

⁸ The Riverside Restaurant History, available at: <http://www.spanglefish.com/theriverside/index.asp?pageid=169814> [accessed 10/3/19]

focus in this chapter and are of critical importance in terms of Gray's visual practice. But as we have seen, the murals have only ever been part of the picture.

Alasdair Gray is now 84, confined to a wheelchair since recovering from a life-threatening fall in 2015. He works more slowly, but continues to produce from home. In 2018, Canongate published *Hell* (Gray 2018), a poetic translation of the first part of Dante's *Inferno*. The first of a trilogy, *Purgatory* is due to be published next. Meanwhile, Canongate have recently published *Of Me & Others*, his life's collected non-fiction, in paperback for the first time (Gray 2019). There is always a painting on the easel, incomplete. This thought returns me to Riach's unfinished business, both personal but and national. Gray is always engaged in both. Documenting the past, altering the present, looking to the future. In a sense, Gray is doing what he has always done. But now he is finally being seen as both artist and writer, as Elspeth King claimed he deserved, and as Sorcha Dallas has worked for, with his visual practice finally appearing widely in galleries while also being an integral part of Glasgow's landscape. It is a long way from Belmont Street, Glasgow to the Tate. After all these years – could it be? – that something like equilibrium is breaking out?

(RG2019)

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