DUNCAN SHANKS WINTER JOURNEY
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THE SCOTTISH GALLERY 2017
Duncan Shanks is a committed and self-aware modernist. Nevertheless he chose from the beginning of his career the apparently old-fashioned idiom of landscape. It might seem strange to seek to forge a wholly contemporary art from a form so burdened with history. It was certainly a struggle. By his own account he was thirty before he found his true direction as a painter. That he did do so and has stuck to his chosen course ever since is a measure of his determination to meet the challenge he had set himself. As Joan Eardley did before him, he has since then shown that it is quite wrong to suppose that landscape cannot be contemporary. Properly understood, freed from the burden of imitating the past while nevertheless confidently learning from it, but also resisting the parallel pressure to conform to more transient modes of making art, he has shown that it can be as modern and relevant as any art form.

It is not surprising, given this ambition, that his paintings are complex. They are also very much about surface, an indication of their links to abstract painting. Pollock, de Kooning and Alan Davie are called to mind and indeed the surface of his pictures is as immediate and as energetically worked as any of the work of such heroes of his early years. Nevertheless his pictures reach beyond abstraction to achieve, in his own words, ‘a fusion of the actual and the abstract.’ The image that results from this fusion, however, is not imitative, but associative. It works to record feelings and ideas conjured by place, by light and by the forces of nature. The struggle to find coherence, not in a borrowed idiom, but in a way that reflects this immediate experience is written in every brushstroke.

A key picture here, though it is apparently not a landscape at all, is *Fragments of Memory 11* [cat.1, details overleaf]. The picture has been worked over a period of years, developing, like memory itself, a layered complexity. At first sight it seems to be a table top still life, a format favoured by many Scottish painters including Shanks’s teacher at Glasgow School of Art, David Donaldson. However, it may actually have begun as a landscape. At the top, the sun peeps through trees and a hawk flies across the canvas. The dark area surrounding the composition could almost be water, too, as though the whole thing was floating, and the Clyde does flow past his studio. Certainly the objects don’t seem fixed, but drift at will across the space. They include still-life props like jugs, plates and fruit, but there are also things brought in from his walks, twigs, flowers, birds, a bird’s nest and such like. There is a book on Van Gogh with his Sower against the setting sun on its cover, a picture recalled in many of the paintings here. J.D.Fergusson’s *Les Eus*, a portrait by Jawlensky and other more fragmentary images might be postcards on a studio pinboard. Eve by Gislbertus from the romanesque Cathedral
of Autun [see detail on back cover] is bigger and seems more solid however. She adds an evocative human presence as she slips surreptitiously into the picture, picking a real apple as she does. Photographs of the painter’s studio show how personal all this is. Nevertheless, there do not seem to be any paints, brushes or other studio paraphernalia here. The picture represents what his paintings are composed from, not how they are made.

This picture is not a simple still-life, however, nor indeed a landscape, but as its title suggests, it is a mindscape; and like memory itself, all of this seems to be in flux, only provisionally held in place by the surface of the picture and the web of brushstrokes. Throughout the show this remains true. These pictures don’t reflect a subject-object relationship to the world. As painters realised long ago – but scientists still have to pretend it is otherwise – there is no such thing as true objectivity. Our awareness is irretrievably subjective and so what we see around us can never be fixed ‘out there’ like a butterfly pinned to a board.

In the two versions of the Wanderer [cats.3 & 4], in Heading Home [cat.8], Snowfall [cat.12], December Moon [cat.9] and several other pictures, the painter walks through his painting, or appears in it and in The Wanderer [cat.10], several times. This latter picture is composed on the same fluid principles as Fragments of Memory 11 and so it suggests, not a single external location, but the associations of place and the states of mind they conjure in the artist himself. In Winter Journey [cat.7], too, he appears as a sequence of heads, perhaps seen at different ages or at different times, but always making the point that he is the witness recording the inextricable tangle of what is there, what he is experiencing now and what he is remembering. Indeed titles like Enmeshed [cat.24] or Tangled Web [cat.30] evoke that tangle explicitly. It becomes both real and metaphorical as the setting sun is caught in the tangled branches of the trees. Shanks writes of his search ‘to find a paint language to describe, not substance but energy’ and how in that search the ‘suns have spread across my studio walls’. It is indeed as though what we are seeing is the sun’s energy caught in and driving the web of life itself.

Music is never far away in Shanks’s painting and the title of this exhibition Winter Journey is a homage to Schubert’s Winterreise, his wonderful setting of poems by Wilhelm Müller. (The Wanderer, also set by Schubert and whose title Shanks also borrows for a picture here was written by Schmidt von Lübeck.) In the painting Winter Journey, as well as the multiple self-portraits, an ominous bird hovers above four dark figures. These four figures also appear separately in the painting Menace [cat.47] where they themselves seem to be menaced in turn by a flock of crows. There is also a
sinister flock of birds in *Solitude* [cat.2] and a sinister crow is perched above the figure of the artist holding a gentler, tame bird in *Bird in the Hand* [cat.34]. There are birds elsewhere too and the hawk features in several pictures including the eponymous *Hawk* [cat.36]. They seem to be birds of omen and so weave a thread of darkness through these pictures.

The hawk also sits atop the *Windwarped Upland Thorn* [cat.35], its title taken from the poem, ‘Afterwards’, by Thomas Hardy that the painter quotes in his text. In keeping with the ominous birds, Hardy’s poem is a strange, melancholy elegy in anticipation of his own death. It begins ‘When the Present has latched its postern behind my tremulous stay’. Lines from another Hardy poem, ‘The Darkling Thrush’, could also describe, not just the mood, but also the actual image of Shanks’s winter scenes:

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And Winter’s dregs made desolate
The weakening eye of day.
The tangled bine-stems scored the sky
Like strings of broken lyres
And all mankind that haunted nigh
Had sought their household fires.
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The mood of desolate solitude in this poetry and in Shanks’s winter scenes matches Schubert’s song cycle with its themes of disappointed love, yearning, loneliness, winter and death and in Müller’s poems birds of menace also appear. The artist himself makes that link to Schubert and Müller, but also to the rooks above the Clyde and they in turn recall Van Gogh’s last painting, *Crows over a Cornfield*. Perhaps here Schubert and Van Gogh meet, for Van Gogh’s inspiration is a constant in Shanks’s blazing images of the setting sun, of himself as traveller, in the blossom trees and even in the starry sky in *Towards Tinto* [cat.23]. If the brilliance of these paintings dispels the melancholy echoes of Schubert and Hardy, Van Gogh is nevertheless a difficult hero for a painter. Very few painters could meet the challenge. Most would end up looking derivative, but Shanks has succeeded where others would have failed. Van Gogh has frequently been an echo in his previous work, but now, with more than fifty years experience behind him, he is strong enough to absorb with confidence the Dutchman’s mighty example to emerge triumphantly as his own painter, master of his own poetic ‘fusion of the actual and the abstract’ in paintings of unparalleled intensity.

**Professor Duncan MacMillan**
[1] Fragments of Memory II

oil on canvas · 178 × 188 cm
And then there were the crows.

The valley sky is often disturbed by a scatter of crows before they go to roost on a winter’s evening and they brought to mind the crow that followed Schubert’s rejected lover in his dark song-cycle ‘Winterreise’. It shadowed the solitary wanderer and its introduction brought a different emotional colour to my paintings. I tried to see the landscape through the eyes of the wanderer, recalling springtime with the blossoms of frost on my window and merging figure, landscape and object in a confusion of past and present, as an unrestrained drift into dream and delirium.

Eventually, I imagined myself as that tramp, not with a crow, but with my dog as companion, but unlike Schubert’s solitary who staggers towards nothingness, I returned to the reality of drawing on the hill and though between sunset and moonrise, my track too fades into obscurity, my journey in paint, goes on.
[2] Solitude
acrylic on paper · 95 × 150 cm
detail opposite
acrylic on paper · 37 × 36.5 cm
acrylic on paper · 35 × 38 cm
[5] Darkness Falls
acrylic on paper · 56 × 53 cm

[6] Through Wind and Snow
illustrated opposite · acrylic on paper · 81 × 112 cm
acrylic on paper · 70.5 x 100 cm
[8] Heading Home
acrylic on paper · 31 × 33 cm
[9] December Moon
acrylic on paper · 57.5 × 76 cm
[10] The Wanderer
acrylic on paper · 70.5 x 100 cm
acrylic on paper · 65 × 100 cm
[12] Snowfall
acrylic on paper · 44.5 × 44 cm · detail opposite
THE SUN, THE MOON 
& THE HEDGES

Drawing on the hill track in winter, the sun inevitably appears on my paper. Low in the sky it dominates my landscape.

Defying the transience of things and pinning down this primal image was a daunting challenge. Its laser beam of light cut across my vision, forcing me to find a paint language to describe, not substance but energy.

In a period of analysis, dissection and fragmentation, I destroyed hedges and track in an explosion of colour and frenetic paint marks, searching for an abstract expression of the phenomenon, but continually and often inadvertently, the recognisable would reappear on my paper. A need for a personal identity and humanity, eventually led to a fusion of the actual and the abstract.

A single picture was hopelessly inadequate to convey the power of this life force and my search resulted in a set of variations on a theme. Scherzos in which the sun disc is a constant motif in the chaos of storm and tangled branches and over the months, suns have spread across my studio walls, their repeated image an inventory of my obsession.
[13] River Moon
acrylic on paper · 89 x 71 cm
detail opposite
[14] Glare
acrylic on paper · 33.5 × 33.5 cm

[15] Razzle Dazzle
acrylic on paper · 28 × 27 cm
[16] Sunset I
acrylic on paper · 43 × 42 cm

[17] Sunset II
acrylic on paper · 44 × 41 cm
[18] Morning Mist
acrylic on paper · 40 × 44 cm

[19] Storm Clouds
acrylic on paper · 29.5 × 33.5 cm
[20] The Bright Moon Lights my Path
acrylic on paper · 71 × 121 cm
[21] Winter Wild

acrylic on paper · 122 × 141 cm
[22] Sun Trap
acrylic on paper \( \times 70.5 \times 85 \text{ cm} \)
[23] Towards Tinto
acrylic on paper · 57 × 73 cm
[24] Emeshed
acrylic on paper · 56 × 55 cm

acrylic on paper · 70 × 100 cm
[26] The Dying Sun
acrylic on paper · 62.5 × 121 cm
[27] Sun Burst
acrylic on paper · 53 × 57 cm

[28] Dazzle
acrylic on paper · 55 × 67 cm
[29] Winter Hedge
oil on canvas · 122 × 102 cm
[30] Tangled Web
acrylic on paper · 80 × 100 cm

[31] Eventide
acrylic on paper · 70.5 × 90.5 cm
[32] Shimmer
acrylic on paper · 70 × 76 cm

[33] Through the Gap
acrylic on paper · 70 × 88.5 cm
BIRDS, TREES
& THE ARRIVAL OF SPRING

‘If it be in the dusk, when like on eyelids soundless blink,
The dewfall hawk comes across the shades to alight,
Upon the windwarped upland thorn, a gazer may think.
To him this must have been a familiar sight.’

These lines are from Thomas Hardy’s modest self-elegy ‘Afterwards’ and drawing by the hawthorn as the light faded, I too was often joined by blackbird and finch and on occasion by a hawk on a fence post quite close. Though Hardy’s hawk was probably a nightjar and not my sparrow hawk his words reflected my own experience and soon birds flew into my hedges and across my paper skies as yet another symbol of transience.
[34] Bird in the Hand
acrylic and collage on paper - 22 × 22.5 cm
detail opposite
[35] Windwarped Upland Thorn
acrylic on paper · 57 × 66 cm
[36] Hawk
acrylic on paper · 70.5 x 70.5 cm
[37] The Clouds Fly Apart
acrylic on paper · 51 × 80.5 cm
[38] Night
acrylic on paper, 33.5 × 33.5 cm
[39] Night Hawk
acrylic and collage on paper · 29 × 34.5 cm

[40] Night Bird
oil on canvas · 116 × 121 cm
[41] Sun in the Pines
acrylic on paper · 71 × 100 cm
[42] Petal Fall
pastel on paper · 56 × 76 cm

[43] Last Leaves
acrylic on paper · 70 × 99 cm
Cherry Blossom
acrylic on paper · 70 × 91.5 cm
[45] Dream of Spring II
acrylic on paper · 56 × 76.5 cm

[46] Dream of Spring I
acrylic on paper · 70.5 × 93 cm
Menace
acrylic on paper - 22 × 22.5 cm
Born Airdrie, 1937
Studied Glasgow School of Art, 1955–1960
Post Diploma and Travelling Scholarship to Italy, 1960
Part-time lecturer at Glasgow School of Art until 1979
Lives in the Clyde Valley
Member of:
Royal Scottish Academy
Royal Scottish Society of Painters in Watercolour
Royal Glasgow Institute of the Fine Arts

SOLO EXHIBITIONS
1981 The Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh
1984 The Fine Art Society, Glasgow and Edinburgh
1988 Falling Water, Talbot Rice Art Centre, University of Edinburgh;
Crawford Centre, University of St. Andrews; MacLaurin Art
Gallery, Ayr; catalogue introduction by Duncan Macmillan
1990 Contemporary Art Season, Glasgow Art Gallery
1991 The Fine Art Society, Glasgow and Edinburgh
1991–2 Patterns of Flight, Wrexham Arts Centre Touring Exhibition;
catalogue introduction by Roger Billcliffe
1992 Roger Billcliffe Fine Art, Glasgow
1994 The Creative Process, Hunterian Art Gallery, University of Glasgow;
catalogue introduction by Chris Allan
1994 Hill of Fire, Roger Billcliffe Fine Art, Glasgow
1997 Of Wet and of Wildness, The Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh
2000 New Paintings, The Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh
2002 Beyond the Valley, artLondon, with The Scottish Gallery
2004 Along an Overgrown Path, The Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh
2006 Air, Fire and Rain, Roger Billcliffe Gallery, Glasgow
2007 In a Summer Garden, The Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh
2009 In Search of Time Past, The Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh
2012 Across a Painted Sky, The Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh
2013 Drawing the Year, The Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh
2015 The Poetry of Place, Hunterian Art Gallery, University
of Glasgow
Seasons and Storms, Roger Billcliffe Gallery, Glasgow
2017 Winter Journey, The Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS
1975 Five Glasgow Painters, Edinburgh Arts Centre
1981–2 Contemporary Art from Scotland, Touring Exhibition
arranged by The Scottish Gallery
Scottish Painting, Toulouse
1984 Weather, Scottish Arts Council Travelling Gallery
1985 About Landscape, Edinburgh Festival Show, Talbot Rice
Art Centre
Western Approaches, Touring Exhibition of Contemporary
Scottish Art, Rio de Janeiro
1986 Ten Scottish Painters, London
1988 The Scottish Show, Oriel 31 Touring Exhibition, Wales
1991 Landscape to Art, Four Scottish Artists, Dundee Art
Gallery
2000 Scottish Landscape, The Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh
2003 Six RSA Artists, University of Central Florida
2015 Modern Masters IV, The Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh
AWARDS
Scottish Arts Council Award
Latimer Award and Macaulay Prize, Royal Scottish Academy
Torrance Award, Cargill Award and Macfarlane Charitable Trust Award, Royal Glasgow Institute of the Fine Arts
May Marshall Brown Award, Royal Scottish Society of Painters in Watercolour
Provost’s Prize for Contemporary Art, goma, 1996,
Royal Bank of Scotland Award, RGI, 2001

SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS
Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre
Dundee Art Gallery and Museum
City of Edinburgh Council
Fleming-Wyfold Art Foundation
Glasgow Museums Resource Centre
Glynn Vivian Art Gallery, Swansea
Government Art Collection
High Life Highland Exhibitions Unit, Inverness
Lillie Art Gallery, Milngavie
Low Parks Museum, Hamilton
Pitlochry Festival Theatre
Royal Scottish Academy of Art and Architecture, Edinburgh
The Stewarty Museum, Kirkcudbright
University of Edinburgh
Hunterian Art Gallery, University of Glasgow
University of Stirling
University of St Andrews

SELECTED PRIVATE COLLECTIONS
Works in many private and corporate collections in Britain, Germany and North America including:
Arthur Andersen & Co, Glasgow
Bank of Japan
Clydesdale Bank plc
Diageo Scotland
Halifax Bank
Prudential
Reader’s Digest, New York
Rowntree’s
Royal Bank of Scotland
William Teacher and Sons Ltd

LITERATURE
Duncan Macmillan, Scottish Art: 1460–1990, Edinburgh
1993 William Hare, Contemporary Painting in Scotland, Edinburgh
1996 Duncan Macmillan, Scottish Art in the 20th Century, Edinburgh
2015 Anne Dulau Beveridge, The Poetry of Place, Duncan Shanks’s sketchbooks and the Upper Clyde, Glasgow
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Back cover: detail from Fragments of Memory II [cat.1]