

## **Helen Glassford**

### **Into the Wild**

Exhibition of Paintings

The Meffan, Forfar 19th September-17th October 2009

This is Helen Glassford's third solo exhibition and a major statement from an artist who has distinguished herself from her student days in Dundee in the late 90s to the present day. In 1998 she won the Philipson Medal for Painting at the Royals Scottish Academy, the Highland Spring Purchase Prize, and the Cuthbert New Young Artist award at the Royal Glasgow Institute, where in 1999 she also won the Armour Award. In 2007 she was a runner up in the Jolomo Landscape Painting Awards.

The title of the exhibition, "Into the Wild" is appropriate because we are led to inaccessible places that only the physically fit and adventurous of spirit can reach. In addition, there is also an unusual generosity in Helen Glassford's paintings, because she is happy to share with us her intense sensations and personal observations rather than merely depicting visual detail. This is not ordnance survey topography, or postcard depiction: this is a search for the sublime. She experiences the moors and mountains of northern Scotland not only through walking, but also from rock-climbing in summer and ice-climbing in winter. Her experience of the sublime goes from awe and wonder at the beauty of her surroundings to the fear of the danger that is ever present when one grapples physically with the substance of our wild landscape.

She re-lives and re-creates her experience in her creative process in the studio. These works do not usually depict an actual place or a specific viewpoint, but rather they attempt to create a universal truth, synthesised from the range of sensations that she has experienced. The ever-changing weather patterns and light conditions that the Scottish highlands offer are used to explore a painterly equivalent of the terrain and the sky. The paintings have gestural swirls of paint, from washes to dry scumbles that appear totally abstract when the viewer is very close to the work. Further back, hints of details of mountain, corrie or loch key up the image and provide a resolved totality that we feel that we recognise, and may even claim to know intimately, even though it is an image born in the studio. The titles often give a clue to this poetry of sensation – "Waiting for Clarity," "Luminous to the Last," "Crisp."

Helen Glassford handles the sensation of weather and light that not only inspires vigorous, painterly art-works, but also allows her to celebrate her sensitivity to colour, and her acute observations of it. Her palette does not provide Mediterranean garish heat: here we have a range of greys that move from cool blues to soft pinks and purples. There are slashes and patches of richer blues and russets that convey a hint of water or moorland scrub that smoulder richly, rather than burn brightly. They perfectly measure the richness of visual experience we have in lower light conditions where the chromatic intensity of colour is perceived to be greater than would be the case in bright sunlight. Getting this right gives the paintings tremendous authority.

There are forty paintings in this exhibition. A handful are very big, the majority are about 60x80centimetres, and some, including a block of nine, are quite small. While

each has its place here, and contributes to the overall experience of the ensemble, some of the smallest works carry the greatest power. There is an almost casual directness in these that carries great punch. With amazing economy the artist reveals for us these hidden places, and offers aesthetic joy, as a confident fast brushstroke of rich colour sweeps across a crunchy melody of soft greys.

In this exhibition Helen Glassford has produced a body of work that is observant, creative and mature, and offers discovery and pleasure for those who allow themselves to be taken on her journeys “Into the Wild.”

Ronald Forbes RSA September 2009