

VISUAL ART



Skies of Strathmore

James Morrison's captivating landscapes are a powerful reminder of his enduring talent, while David Austen's installation intrigues

Duncan Macmillan



January is always a bit difficult for your reviewer as such shows as there are don't usually open till well after the New Year and for some reason too, as the year gathers pace, they seem hardly to be open before they have closed again. So with an apology for doing something I've rarely done, I will write about James Morrison's show at the Scottish Gallery that has already closed, but was on for barely two weeks. I write about it because I think it was important and because, though he shows regularly, it is a very long time since I wrote about James Morrison. Although not

the dozen of Scottish painting, that honour should perhaps go to Frances Walker, he is also one of our most senior painters, born 1932 and, like Johnnie Walker, still going strong for there were works in his show from late last year. Morrison is a dedicated painter of landscape. If that sounds an old-fashioned thing to be and indeed it often is, on the other hand is not the least old-fashioned, but very much a man of his time. Trained in Glasgow in the early 1950s, he first painted the streets and houses of the city, finding a kind of picturesqueness in their dilapidation. It was all a

bit like Joan Eardley, but without the children or indeed generally without any people at all. The link with Eardley became even closer however when, tired of painting Glasgow and perhaps depressed by recording the city's dereliction, he moved to Caterline and so into the quite different world of the north east coast with its stormy shores and wide inland landscapes. Eardley made the same move, but that was really a coincidence. Soon after that, now teaching at Dundee and Jordanstone College of Art in Dundee, Morrison settled in Montrose, where he has lived ever since. You might say he fell in love with the wide skies of Strathmore. This great landscape, the Big Strath, has been the constant feature in his art and though he has worked further afield, notably also in the west of Scotland, you feel that he has taken with him the sense of space learned in this special Angus landscape. The heart of southern Pictland and one of the widest and most fertile landscapes in Scotland, Strathmore is bounded by the Cairngorms to the north west and

James Morrison
Scottish Gallery,
Edinburgh
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David Austen
Ingleby Gallery,
Edinburgh
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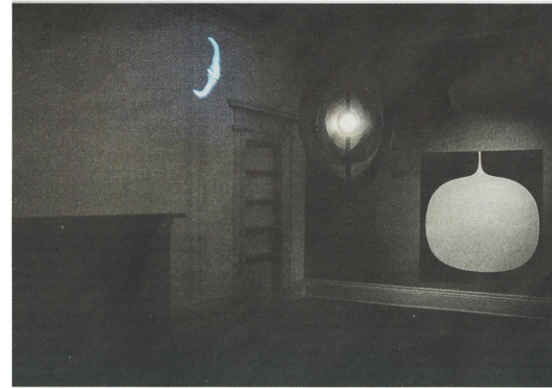
the Sidlaws to the south east. To the north, too, still sheltered by the hills and so part of the same expanse, lies the Meams, Grassic Gibbon country. It was above all the sense of space in this wide landscape that shaped Morrison's art, but he got there by a dialogue with modern painting, a little like that which Eardley also pursued. Like her, too, even as he learnt from the radical abstract painting that seemed so new in the 50s and 60s and that proved so seductive for many of his contemporaries, he kept his own sense of direction. The work in his show that has just closed at the Scottish Gallery included one or two much earlier things. *Denhead Farm*, for instance, dates from 1963 and is a scene near Caterline. It is freely painted with a nice contrast

With wide skies above low horizons Morrison puts in the picture, much as the Dutch painters did at the beginning of modern landscape painting



between tightly worked detail and the broad open handling of the wider context whether it be land or sky. This has been a feature of his painting ever since. But the picture is also partly abstract and shows how interested he was in the freedoms offered by contemporary abstraction, particularly in French painting, but later also in American. When you turn to look closely at paintings like *Blue Hills* from 1958, for instance, or *Northwards* from 2010, both paintings of his favourite north-eastern landscape looking across towards the Cairngorms in the distance, you see that in fact they are very freely painted. He uses veils of thin paint allowing it to run across his chosen support, a smooth surfaced board, so that what seem to be lines of drawing are in fact where liquid paint has dried to create a fluid line. This is a technique which though it is used here for landscape is clearly analogous to the work of several abstract painters, both French and American. This freedom and the transparency of the paint he uses certainly give his painting the luminous spaciousness that is its hallmark, with wide skies above low horizons literally putting us in the picture, much as the Dutch painters did at the very beginning of modern landscape painting.

David Austen's small show at the Ingleby Gallery is actually rather a sideshow – the main event for him at the moment is a major exhibition currently with the Ingleby Gallery at Miami Beach. Austen is a multimedia artist. He has made films and installations, but he also makes prints and paintings and from the small selection on view they are often very beautiful. Though it doesn't have a single theme, his show is an installation. The room is dominated



by an untitled hanging construction made from three interlocking circles of steel with a light at their centre. It suggests an orrery or some schematic representation of the solar system. This astronomical impression is endorsed by a projection of the new moon, or at least it would be if the moon did not have a face like the moon in a nursery rhyme and was not also smoking a cigarette. The same image appears as an etching with a black moon against a white ground. *Bomb* is a large abstract painting. A large white blob a bit like a speech balloon, but with no speech, sits in a field of black. The image is not quite so simple as it seems, however. In this

and also in his other paintings, *Black Stars* (black stars on a white ground) and *The Moon and Stars* (those words, also in black on a white ground) it is the subtle and understated but really tangible texture which gives them their presence. They are austere images, but real paintings never theless. Most of his prints are words used as images. *The Naked, Love Calling or Men and Women*, but he strikes a different, more surreal note in a print that is an image of an eye, but apparently suspended on the wire of a garden fence. ■

James Morrison, run ended; David Austen until today

Works by James Morrison, opposite page, clockwise from main: *Denhead Farm*, 1963; *Finally Summer, Mull*, 2011; *Strathella*, 2013. This page, from top: two installation views of David Austen's show at Ingleby Gallery; *Black Stars*, 2007