

**Joan Eardley**  
**National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh**  
**6th November 2007 to 13th January 2008**

It has been over forty years since the premature death of British artist Joan Eardley (1921-1963). From the post-war era and a time of great artistic development into abstraction in America and Europe, her contemporaries included Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning of America and the extreme reality of the Kitchen Sink Group of London with their unflattering encrusted paintings.<sup>1</sup> Eardley was, however, not identifiable by any style in particular but assimilated and contained aspects of many, both expressing and documenting itself and its surroundings. Much of her work is defined into two obvious themes: urban Glasgow and Catterline landscapes (a small fishing village on the north east coast of Scotland). It is rare to see such seemingly contrasting works exhibited along side each other, painted also at the same time albeit at different locations. One thing is clear; Eardley was greatly influenced and inspired by her surroundings. Grasping every visual stimulus available, soaking it in and applying it to the surface of her work. As there is so much knowledge of the artist and her intentions from letters written whilst she painted, and insight given from close friends, family, fellow students and tutors, there has been little doubt of her intentions and desires for her work.

Although born in Sussex, England, Eardley is primarily seen as a Scottish artist; her final (living) show was held in London during 1963 and received spectacular reviews comparing her to Goya and Renoir - pin pointing it to her use of paint to convey the inner life of the child. The review by Eric Newton (The Guardian, June 1963) extends the praise to her landscapes and their comparability with the passionate landscapes of Turner.<sup>2</sup> This also coincided with the recognition of the RSA and the membership they bestowed onto her before her death. This thus removed any strong provincial barriers that had been in her way<sup>3</sup>. It was also during this year that the pain of breast cancer was becoming more difficult to combat and paintings were becoming less frequent. This perhaps may be due to the medication taken causing her to be less aware of her work<sup>4</sup>. Her untimely death from breast cancer meant that the subsequent exhibition (the following year in 1964) was organised by her friends and family as a memorial retrospective of her work at the Art Gallery and Museum, Kelvingrove, Glasgow.

This layout of her work at the Memorial exhibition with Glasgow tenements and the landscapes of Catterline being sandwiched between her early and last works appear to be the basis for subsequent shows and evaluations of her work in catalogues. There have only been three public exhibitions of her work since her death and this is the latest re-evaluation of her work in over twenty years offering a fresh view and taking the photographic process of her work into consideration<sup>5</sup>.

Most famous for her depictions of the now extinct tenement blocks in Glasgow centre and the vibrancy of life that inhabited them. It would appear fitting that such a comprehensive collection of Eardley's work be displayed in Scotland, as it was in Scotland that she made her home and gained much of her inspiration and subject matter.

This is one of the most extensive Joan Eardley exhibitions ever held with works from her early years as a student (donated by her younger sister Mrs Pat Black), through to

her more renowned works and with selected works painted from her hospital bed before she died. The Scottish National Gallery provides a ready made grouping system in its matrix of rooms of varying sizes which intertwine to allow a systematic and natural flow from one section to another. In this exhibition's case it allowed for a mixture of chronological and stylistic themes of Eardley's work to be displayed together.



[3] Self-portrait, 1943  
Oil on Canvas 53.3 x 45.7cm  
Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh

For those familiar with the gallery's horse shoe layout the show opens up with a small room entitled 'Glasgow School of Art' full of sketch books crammed with drawings, ideas and general inspirations of a Fine Art student. These pieces plunge the viewers into the world of someone who battled with depression and a desire to learn everything about her practice. Her early talent was noticed by her tutor Hugh Crawford, head of the painting school at Glasgow school of art, and she later won the Guthrie prize for her self portrait in 1943. He paid her the ultimate complement by buying the portrait and later displayed it as part of the background of his own portrait completed years later.<sup>6</sup> It is this self- portrait that set the tone although there is no mention of how the young artist viewed the work itself as it was a 'last ditch success after the first attempt had "gone dead" through over painting.'<sup>7</sup>

There is a sense of mix match approach to this part of the exhibition as the organisers display all the pivotal training aspects (drawings, photographs and small oil sketches) of Eardley's work to give greater depth of understanding of her progression. The title of 'Hospitalfield, Post Graduate travel and Shows' lumps together all of her later education including sketches, woodcuts and paintings. These were done during her time out of art school and including her diploma, when she decided not to pursue the typical teaching career of a female graduate during the war. Eardley chose to help the war effort by way of becoming a Joiners apprentice; painting the camouflage onto the

hull of boats. Once over Joan spent various terms at different art schools including the School of art at Hospitalfield near Arbroath perfecting her talents and won two travelling scholarships which she took together to Italy and France in 1948-1949.

There is a definite presence of Vincent Van Gogh and Picasso within her early work, most likely inspiration from her trips abroad and the rich art works she would have been exposed to. The strong, scratchy drawings mixed with the aspects of the working class life that she constantly captured are indicated by the photographs collected within her sketch books and displayed on the walls of the exhibition with the drawings.

This re-evaluation of Eardley's collective works aims to highlight social realism within her art, mainly concerning her use of photography<sup>8</sup>. Curator Fiona Pearson certainly utilises previous Eardley retrospective show's groupings and themes to show case this.

The natural flow of visitors led into a bottleneck room with seating and a television screen showing a slideshow of photographic images of Eardley's life and works. Edited over were sound clips from a BBC documentary of Eardley discussing her work, her aims and interests.<sup>9</sup> This highly insightful video reinforced the earlier work shown and this reviewer found it an excellent stepping stone for the work to follow. Most memorable was the discussion of her time in Glasgow with the people there. Living among them, getting to know them meant that her work was simpler to execute. They were real and earthy which is evident within her work and the gritty style she adopted to capture them.

The Samson family was seen as a favourite as they had children of many different ages and she painted them for over seven years at one time or another. It could be said that it is this family aspect and the characters of her subjects that have given her work an edge of vibrancy about them. Some of the children interested her more than others<sup>10</sup> in particular Andrew Samson, who is painted several times.

The following collection was displayed in a far more spacious area where each individual piece was given the space required to view it properly. Although the works were then ordered more thematically (Catterline and Glasgow) there also remained a chronological organisation of the show clearly demonstrating an idea of the development of her work. Most impressive from this collection of early Glasgow (Glasgow and Childhood) painted in her studio at St. James Road is that of Port Glasgow, 1955. This piece encompasses the bomb scared, boarded up urban environment that was so often seen in post war Glasgow. Eardley however managed to portray the richness of life, although they were impoverished people, as she was able to engage with the life forces around her.<sup>11</sup> The children are mainly concerned with their own goings on; however, amongst the gender oriented roles of the young girls left 'holding the baby' the viewer is aware they too are being watched. Eardley wanted the children to act as normal, when she observed they generally did not pay much attention allowing her to freely depict them as they are<sup>12</sup>, her engagement and inclusion within the painting is interesting and allows the viewer a similar insight into the lives of the youngsters with penetrating force.

There are several images of the urban landscapes which have similar impact behind them, displayed further down the time line. In a recording made by the BBC and partly used as an audio aid alongside the exhibition, Eardley describes her integration

with the subjects of her work and how they engage with her. As quoted within the video 'they [the children] are full of what's gone on today...they just let out all their life and energy... they are Glasgow- this richness that Glasgow has... a living thing.'<sup>13</sup>

Accompanying her tenement children and her street scenes of the resilience of the human spirit<sup>14</sup> are the paintings of her other obsession Catterline; a small fishing village. During any season and weather condition, she would paint from the same spot rigorously until the moment was captured. Paintings were even left out overnight<sup>15</sup>, exposed to the elements which most likely stemmed from a passionate engagement with her work.



[62] Seeded Grasses and Daises, September, 1960

Oil, grasses and seedheads on board

121.9 x 133.3cm

Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh

Eardley was known to rush up to Catterline as soon as she was informed there would be a storm.<sup>16</sup> Here we can truly understand Newton's remark that Eardley's work echoes aspects of Turner with the fundamental understanding of the language of paint and the consistency, texture and resilience of it. Structurally Eardley uses a low vantage point, so as to add herself to the landscape without physically being in picture; similarly to the eye contact with the Glasgow children it allows the viewer a special engagement with the subject.

During such a retrospective of her work it is possible to compare her two major themes and see the comparisons. Within both it is evident that she allowed the natural surroundings to influence her marks, incorporating natural and found materials such as newspaper and sweet wrappers for her urban scenes and grit, earth and grass in her landscapes to heighten their immediacy<sup>17</sup>. With regards to the land and seascapes the aggressive moods of the sea lent itself well to her style, speckled paint and a lively use of brushes and pallet knives to create texture much like her American contemporary Jackson Pollock who splashed and dribbled to create specific effects.<sup>18</sup>

Slotted in between her Glasgow children and Catterline are her almost genre styled paintings of daily life. Paintings, such as 'A Glasgow Lodging' (1953) in which there reminisces a portrait of a gentleman by his fireplace. Instead Eardley portrays what appears to be a war veteran in his trench coat, there is a gritty reality of life present

within the works. The model for this painting as in many of her male roles was close friend Angus Neil also modelled for her most sensational and controversial works 'male nude.' For a woman it was rare to display a life drawing style image of a male nude. Eardley received a great deal of unwanted attention due to the exhibition review releasing her address.<sup>19</sup>



[76] Two Children, 1963  
Oil and collage on canvas (unfinished)  
134.7 x 134.7cm  
Glasgow City Council (Museums)

The final major works to be shown were those grouped 'Last Works' which were exactly what the title suggested: the final pieces including her last painting before her death in 1963. A truly touching piece is that of *Two Children*, a vibrantly colourful painting of two girls in the usual mix match style. This piece, however is unfinished and also proves to be her most abstract, perhaps it was due to the medication or perhaps it was the direction she was taking her work. There remains the community aspect and documentation of a world no longer visible as it was. This loose, but forceful style with which there is much gestural vigour<sup>20</sup> was well described by her friend and biographer Cordelia Oliver in the book *Joan Eardley RSA 1988*. Perhaps overlooked, a poignant piece is the vase of flowers (still life) that Eardley painted in the hospital soon before she died, even then she had the need to create and record her surroundings and here ended her life long struggle to make her art live.<sup>21</sup>

The exhibition closes with a vast collection of photographs by and for Eardley to complete her works. The exhibition's primary re-evaluation is in the examination of these photographs and the use they had to Eardley and there is an accompanying essay by Sara Stevenson at the back of the catalogue. Although photography was progressively becoming an artist's tool it is also likely that one reason behind the use of the camera was due to ill health and the pain that standing and sketching caused.

Many of her sketches are also displayed alongside these photographs which mirrors the start of the show in the first room.

Her work shows the life forces of children and her tenement neighbours. There is an overwhelming sincerity within the work and a strong sense that her paintings are living things, with a robust confident quality. Like the photographs displayed of the Glasgow back streets, her work documents an aspect of social history which the composition of the show executes well throughout with informative wall panels. Her scratchy landscapes layered with paint and natural findings add to the history of the landscape the same way that the rustic, peeling lettering which is layered and collaged onto the backgrounds of her urban scenes. It is quite evident that her style was beginning to loosen up the children and to perhaps remove them completely, although this was never achieved, probably due to her ill health and death. The exhibition catalogue written by Fiona Pearson and Sara Stevenson, gives a refreshing array of colour photographs of Eardley's work formally limited to black and white within the previous texts on the artist. Considering the large size of the exhibition it is merely a basic instalment with useful insights to certain works and themes of the artist. It glosses over much of her life and summarises the rest, accomplishing a more digestible palate of information for visitors using much from earlier guides and reviews to summarise ideas. In comparison the wall panels and audio input from the collage of sound clips gives a uniqueness that previous retrospectives have been lacking. Their locations, spread amongst the works, eliminate the possible slowness of such a full show. However, the luxury of such a bright and spacious location as the National Gallery of Scotland holds the exhibition together and allowed the curatorial staff to be less creative with regards to layout. No doubt that they have succeeded in producing a show that provoked and stimulated the audience; that echoes the opinion that this was a woman who seemed to combine the best in both sexes and who, among the dedicated artists has not been surpassed by any.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2003/03/24/bacg24.xml> (11/04/2008)

<sup>2</sup> Newton, E. (1963), *The Guardian*, 29 June 1963 (Exhibition Review)

<sup>3</sup> Pearson, F. (2007), *Joan Eardley*, Exhib cat. p.73

<sup>4</sup> Oliver, C. (1988), *Joan Eardley RSA*, p.93

<sup>5</sup> Pearson, F. (2007), *Joan Eardley*, Exhib cat. p.8

<sup>6</sup> Pearson, F. (2007), *Joan Eardley*, Exhib cat. p.12

<sup>7</sup> Oliver, C. (1988), *Joan Eardley RSA*, p.13

<sup>8</sup> Pearson, F. (2007), *Joan Eardley*, Exhib cat. p.8

<sup>9</sup> BBC [taped interview with Joan Eardley](#), recorded 14 January 1963, Scottish national gallery of modern art archive

<sup>10</sup> BBC [taped interview with Joan Eardley](#), recorded 14 January 1963, Scottish national gallery of modern art archive

<sup>11</sup> Pearson, F. (2007), *Joan Eardley*, Exhib cat. p.8

<sup>12</sup> Pearson, F. (2007), *Joan Eardley*, Exhib cat. p.31

<sup>13</sup> BBC [taped interview with Joan Eardley](#), recorded 14 January 1963, Scottish national gallery of modern art archive

<sup>14</sup> Pearson, F. (2007) *Joan Eardley*, Exhib cat. p.8

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.nationalgalleries.org/index.php/collection/online\\_az/4:322/results/0/489/](http://www.nationalgalleries.org/index.php/collection/online_az/4:322/results/0/489/) (01/04/2008)

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.nationalgalleries.org/whatson/exhibition/5:368/4467/4540> (01/04/2008)

<sup>17</sup> [http://www.nationalgalleries.org/index.php/collection/online\\_az/4:322/results/0/489/](http://www.nationalgalleries.org/index.php/collection/online_az/4:322/results/0/489/) (01/04/2008)

<sup>18</sup> Fineberg, J. (2000) *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), p.86-98

<sup>19</sup> Pearson, F. (2007), *Joan Eardley*, Exhib cat. p.34

<sup>20</sup> Oliver, C. (1988), Joan Eardley RSA p.13

<sup>21</sup> Oliver, C. (1988) Joan Eardley RSA p.8

<sup>22</sup> Pearson, F. (2007) Joan Eardley, Exhib cat. 2007 p.73 Lillian Browse (2000), The Duchess of Cork Street