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Margaret Hunter

A new exhibition of paintings and sculptures by Margaret Hunter was opened at the Maclaurin Galleries in Alloway, Ayrshire, on Saturday August 19 and will run there until Sunday October 8. Instead of flocking to Edinburgh for Festival shenanigans, why not make the pilgrimage to Burns Country and the Maclaurin, in Rozelle Park? Alan Riach and Sandy Moffat introduce the artist and her work.

Alan Riach: Start with the biography, Sandy. Who is Margaret Hunter?

Sandy Moffat: Margaret Hunter was born in the small village of Fairlie on the Ayrshire coast and after completing her studies in the Painting Department at the Glasgow School of Art, went to Berlin and developed a central theme as a result of her early experiences there. “Duality” is this central theme. The city Margaret Hunter went to was literally divided by the imposing wall but the theme goes further than the physical or geographic border, becoming a symbol for Hunter’s own position as an artist moving between Scotland and Germany. There are lines of demarcation that take shape in conceptual ways, lines separating people in the social and political and cultural spheres. In Hunter’s work these lines come through in the form of double heads and figures back-to-back, or in the appearance of a mask indicating the interface between what lies inside and what imposes itself from the outside. There is archetypal imagery and symbols such as the spiral, sphere or cone, carrying meaning in her paintings and sculptures. Many of these were influenced by her early life in Africa where her father worked as an Educational Officer in Northern Nigeria setting up a Government Craft School for young boys during last years of colonial rule in the late 1950s. The scarification marks on the faces of the Nigerians she encountered left a lasting impression on the 12-year old Hunter.

Alan: What sort of artist is she? How would you describe the work itself?

Sandy: Throughout the past couple of decades of claim and counter-claim for the latest, most sensational types of art, Margaret Hunter has remained where she always was, painting and making sculptures about the human condition. As John Berger observed in his essay “The Look of Things”: “when one studies an artist’s work as a whole, one usually finds that he/she has an underlying, constant theme, a kind of hidden but continuous subject. The continuous subject reflects the bias of the artist’s imagination: it reveals that area of experience to which his/her temperament forces him/her to return again and again, from which he/she creates certain standards of interest with which to judge ordinary disparate subjects as they present themselves to him/her”. Margaret Hunter’s continuous subject resides in the connection between the internal world of her own experience of living across geographical and cultural boundaries and the external conditions presented by the historical and political realities of contemporary Europe.

Alan: It strikes me that this is an active art, taking place in movement, in dialogue, rather than an art which you might describe as scenic or more literally representational. There are symbols and suggestions, curiosities, unresolved ambiguities and unanswered questions. But there’s a literal sense of history as well, a specific relation to the Europe that emerged from the Second World War and the legacy of that experience.

Sandy: In 1985, when Margaret Hunter first arrived in Berlin, the city was divided, the Wall nearly a quarter of a century old. As the historian Barbara Sichtermann explained, “when the crises and convulsions of an entire age come together in one place, then that city becomes the meeting-point of the many layered realities of an epoch. Berlin is that city... anyone who spends some time there would realise, however, that this beaten, divided, rebuilt and reunited city has an extraordinary story to tell precisely because of the torment it has suffered.” Hunter’s initial experiences of the city vividly reveal what it was like: “There was a great feeling of personal liberty in West Berlin at that time: politics and the social issues of the day would be discussed in the pubs until the early hours. There was an edgy creative atmosphere in the city, decadence and subculture in the clubs, alongside exhibitions, theatre, music and intellectual life. However, the sense of freedom belied the concrete reality; no matter in which direction you travelled you always came up against the Wall.”

Alan: And then that situation changed very quickly in the late 1980s. In the essay that accompanies the exhibition printed as an artist’s card with illustrations, Hunter says this: “On 09 November 1989 totally unexpectedly, overnight, the Berlin Wall fell and with it the Iron Curtain, causing radical political reverberations in surrounding Eastern Bloc countries that eventually changed world politics.” And she describes how she then made her painting on the previously forbidden East Side of the Wall. “Entitled *Joint Venture* it illustrates the reunification in a symbolic format. It depicts two mask-like heads representing the two Germanys lying side by side, seemingly strange bedfellows, with lines crisscrossing from one head to the other to suggest communication, exchange and partnership.”

Sandy: The collapse of Soviet communism in Eastern Europe was something Margaret Hunter witnessed at first hand. As a woman and an artist whose creative self-definition took place in circumstances unique to the city of Berlin, she by necessity contributed to this process of binding, of healing – not by naively celebrating the end of totalitarianism, but by investigating individual emotional experiences (including her own) exposed to the drama and insecurity of social and political upheaval.

Alan: What was her experience in Berlin? She was studying there, wasn’t she?

Sandy: Hunter had originally gone to Berlin to study with Georg Baselitz, one of Germany’s major post war painter/sculptors, who himself had moved from East to West Berlin while a student in the 1950s. The city’s cultural institutions and contemporary art scene not only informed and shaped her painting but also expanded her horizons. Apart from Baselitz, Berlin had long nurtured a figurative tradition in painting from the 19th century onwards, often of a critical and political nature. In East Berlin the dogma of Socialist Realism had given way to a dialogue with the heritage of Expressionism. So there was a line of development from the eras of Expressionism and *Neue Sachlichkeit* to the present day. That was very clear. And it proved a liberating experience for Hunter as she set out to build upon the expressive method of painting that came naturally to her (deriving from her early admiration for the work of Joan Eardley and John Bellany). She was undaunted by the uncompromising challenge that painting in Berlin presented. However, Berlin and Baselitz demanded that she define a new content and framework for her painting. The archetypal imagery, the vehement treatment of the painted surface, the “aggressive disharmony” of her colour and the incisive edge of her drawing all bear witness to her response to German art. With her discovery of “Primitive Art” she established a link to those artists of *Die Brücke* who, at the beginning of the 20th century, explored the ethnographic museums of Berlin and Dresden. Her childhood encounters with African art in Nigeria now became a new source of ideas and likewise the depictions of

female figures found in Celtic art provided a further stimuli for an affinity with archaic art. Hunter's quest for an authentic visual language took her beyond the normal conventions of Western Art.

Alan: That's a wonderfully rich series of cultural identities: Celtic Scotland, Berlin and Europe, and the African, specifically Nigerian, sources. They seem so disparate and different from each other but you can see in the work how they connect and nourish each other vitally, expressively. There's another John Berger quotation that comes to mind, when he imagines his mother speaking to him in a dream, in the book *Here is Where We Meet* (2005): "Everything in life, John, is a question of drawing a line, and you have to decide for yourself where to draw it. You can't draw it for others. You can try, of course, but it doesn't work. People obeying rules laid down by somebody else is not the same thing as respecting life. And if you want to respect life, you have to draw a line."

Sandy: Margaret Hunter's journey from Scotland to Berlin marks out the boundaries of her art, where the symbolic bonds of home and society, the individual and nature, have remained the heart of the matter. This journey has seen Hunter develop, in her painting and sculpture, an unforced unity of form and content, where abstraction and figuration sit side by side. Her work over the past quarter century or so can now be viewed as a coherent statement where the problems of expression and expressiveness, image and idea, have been solved by painterly means and not by recourse to theoretical posturing.

Alan: It's also humanly palpable. People – particularly women – inhabit the paintings and take shape in the sculptures in affecting ways. Again, they're not represented as passive creatures to be viewed or looked at from a distance. They're not made "scenic" in that sense. But they're not looking back at you aggressively either. They aren't like Picasso's "Demoiselles D'Avignon" for example. They're in dialogue with each other and with the viewer, imaginatively prompting reflection, consideration, asking questions rather than making demands.

Sandy: Hunter's great subject is the female human figure which she presents as a combination of parts, signs, and fragments, and which in turn emerge fully conceived and realised as either paintings or sculptures. Her sculptures, carved from wood but often incorporating metal parts, resemble her paintings through the use of heavily textured surfaces and incised lines. The "surface" of her work is crucial, built up layer upon layer. Many years ago a student at Glasgow School of Art told Hunter she had visited an exhibition of African sculptures which gleamed with "human grease" – the sweat from the hands laid on the sculptures over years and years for religious and related purposes. This description of sculptures invested with human histories and magical properties stuck in Hunter's mind and this was what she sought and desired for in her own work.

Alan: So the female human figure is central, but invested with meaning and not to be taken for granted in any sense. If you keep in mind the centrality of that subject, you can see other themes coming through the work in all its varieties, paintings, drawings, sculptures, and on canvases of different size, some on an epic scale, some more intimate and literally smaller in scale. No matter how epic the scale of the work becomes, though, it never loses qualities of nuance, subtlety, gentleness and sensitivity. They're sensitising works.

Sandy: The central themes of Hunter's work are language and meaning, signs and signals, understanding and misunderstanding. These themes are reflected in all of the works in the

exhibition. By making paintings or sculptures or drawings about the clash of desires and needs that have to be accommodated and negotiated within ourselves, in our bodies and in our minds, Hunter proposes that through conflict and diversity there might also arise the possibility for change and progress, both on a personal level and on the larger and wider levels of the social and political. All of the work in the exhibition deals with the relationship between the individual human psyche and external reality and is imbued with the spirit of renewal and transformation and hope for the future.

Alan: And Margaret Hunter herself has said that the exhibition at the Maclaurin Gallery in Alloway is a full retrospective of her work, “bringing my work back home to Ayrshire and to the same gallery which supported and nurtured my art career at the very beginning.” I’m reminded of another thing. At the heart of every one of Margaret Hunter’s works is a sense of lived experience. They confront the dividedness that has characterised our era so bitterly and show clearly, maybe as few other artists have done, how such division can be transformed and produce new worlds of human possibility. They are engaged but also, somehow, respectful. They return a sense of dignity to the viewer and possess that character of authority dignity confers.

Sandy: Once again, Margaret Hunter with her Giacometti-like persistence, has shown us that in her hands, the power and vitality of painting and sculpture remains capable of transforming our lives.