

The Arts



Don't Miss

JOHN WILLIAMS, Old Fruitmarket, Glasgow, tonight. 8pm
The Big Guitar Weekend in Glasgow's concert halls gets under way with an appearance by one of the best-known British names on the instrument. Go early (7pm) and he is, in fact, preceded in the recital room by Aberdeen's Ian Watt (of BBC TV's Classical Star) with his RSAMD colleague, tenor Stephen Chambers.

Ready for a rural revolution

Kirsty Wither tells Cate Devine how landscapes are slowly supplanting the flowers for which she is famed

On a bright autumn day, Kirsty Wither is in her Brighton studio playing Nick Cave and putting the finishing touches to her newest paintings. The Scottish painter, who graduated from Gray's School of Art 20 years ago this year, is feeling optimistic.

"I do feel I've developed over that time, and I'm enjoying the fact that I'm putting more paint on my canvases, using fresher and more subtle colours, and have a wider range of looser and tighter handling," says the 42-year-old, whose breathtaking work with flowers has found considerable commercial success. "It feels good to evolve. But the thing I'm noticing most is that I'm reacting more positively to landscape painting than ever before. At the moment they seem to have more potential."

While this statement doesn't exactly herald a change of direction – Wither has always juggled landscapes and figurative work with flowers – rural vistas do take up more space in her upcoming 80-piece London exhibition than she had anticipated. Most of them are scenes from her native country, with additional Scottish content from Jura already underway for her next exhibition in Glasgow's Mansfield Park Gallery next May. Like her deceptively simple filled vases, these sweeping unglazed vistas are full of complex colour, texture and movement, yet curiously they are never site-specific. Wither has made it her mission never to identify the actual locations of her rolling rural "big sky" scenes – she prefers to give an impression of her emotional response to a view – but lately she has found that they are resembling the places she's visited much more precisely.

"I've been spending a lot of time in Scotland, at my parents' house in Innellan near Dunoon, up there on a hill with incredible view of the Firth of Clyde and Largs. Blustery Country reminds me of their house. There's another with a big sky, with that blue-blue you sometimes get on the West Coast. That is the only one I've actually located by calling it Storm on the Clyde. And Late In The Year reminds me of my brother's Perthshire home."

Much of her new work, in greens and browns, reds and oranges, tones and whites, are the result of "short, extremely intense" walking holidays in her beloved West Coast with her husband, the actor Robin Cameron, whom she met 15 years ago when exhibiting her first commercial show



CANVASSING OPINION: Kirsty Wither with one of her emblematic flower paintings. But she is increasingly switching to landscapes, such as *A Sense Of Place*, below.

at Anne Mendelow's Gatehouse Gallery on Glasgow's south side. Mendelow, now retired, lives close to the couple in Hove and they remain great friends.

"These paintings remind me of specific places more than before," she says. "I don't name the places I paint. But now it's like, 'My God, that's Islay!' It's very unusual for me, but it's quite nice."

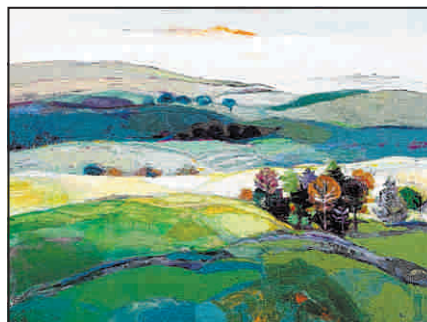
"I think they're more atmospheric, very obviously certain places. In Freedom to Roam, for example, there's a combination of agricultural flat land then a wee bit up the hill it's very ragged. It captures both the wilderness and the soft gentleness of the West Coast."

Her Glasgow exhibition will contain landscapes inspired by her recent trip to George Orwell's

cottage on Jura. The candlelit gloom, the spectacular views and the sheer silence are currently "soaking into my brain at the moment".

But she doesn't intend to start giving her creations fixed identities. "If I tie it down to a certain place it can put people off who don't know that place," she says. "I like titles to be an invite in to the piece."

Neither are they intended to be melancholic. "I want my work to be



uplifting. It's important for me that when someone is looking at a painting of mine on their wall all day it doesn't bring them down but makes them happy. I don't dwell on

depressive subjects, but I don't think that means the paintings are easy or facile.

"Even if they are in really dark colours I'd like them to reflect strength and oomph. People have a simple response to them, especially the flowers. Landscapes take a longer time to respond to, and I've found that those who have bought a flower painting then move on to the landscapes."

"Landscape can be a nightmare to do, though. They can be really challenging. Sometimes they don't want to work. They take a lot longer to do, but that's not a bad thing."

If she speaks as though the paintings have a mind of their own, that's exactly how she feels. "I think of a painting in terms of colour first. Then it evolves all on its own. Being

in the studio is a mysterious place where the paint takes over from any set ideas I start with and often unexpectedly leads me to a finished work."

Oil has been her preferred medium since the very beginning. "When I first discovered oil paint at Art School that was me hooked," she says. "The smell, the texture, the handling and the mess was to me just wonderful. I love oil's malleability before it dries and its permanence afterwards."

Wither's father was an Army officer and her mother is a potter. While he moved from posting to posting, Wither was a boarder at Lomond private school in Helensburgh before moving to Aberdeen to study. She pays tribute to the "very strict training" she received at Gray's under her favourite tutors Sandy Fraser and Jackie Nixon.

In the traditional method, she first learned life drawing and – perhaps surprisingly, given her subsequent success in the field – did not actually paint flowers until after she left art school. "It was nudes first, then landscapes, then flowers," she recalls. "Sandy Fraser was a real stickler about learning to draw properly and how to really see things. We learned about lines, spaces between things, perspective, and basic things like structure."

Her advice to young artists is to be tenacious. "Stick with it, and keep showing your work. Do your growing up in public," she says.

"I started by putting on wee exhibitions in the foyers of local hotels, selling framed paintings for £45. I worked up to hiring a conference room at Turnberry Hotel for one evening and exhibited 90 pieces of work. Luckily Anne Mendelow came to that show and offered me an exhibition."

"Artists always want their last painting to be The One – but you have to get them seen. They take on a whole life of their own once you get them out there."

"I'm still looking to paint THE picture. But then again, if I did that, maybe I'd stop."

Kirsty Wither's 5th solo exhibition at the Portland Gallery, Mayfair, London, runs from November 11-26. She will also have an exhibition at the Mansfield Park Gallery, Glasgow, in May 2011. www.mansfieldpark-gallery.com www.portlandgallery.com www.kirstywither.com

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Performance review

ALMA MATER, SCOTLAND STREET SCHOOL, GLASGOW
MARY BRENNAN
★★★★

YOU could, of course, just wander into Scotland Street School – gaze at the architectural grace notes in Charles Rennie Mackintosh's design, browse the museum of education that now occupies the classrooms, buy some cinnamon balls in the wee shop and head home, thankful that times have changed and notions of what adds up to appropriate and effective schooling have changed with them.

But – and only until tomorrow – this site-specific IETM commission adds another dimension to the building and its history. Fish and Game – the company name that harbours the talents of Eilidh Macaskill and Robert Walton – has created a kind of portable time-warp that has you seeing the past even as the present, in my case a troop of happily noisy small boys, crowds the corridors. The

device in hand is an iPad. Don headphones, switch on and a video guides you on a journey filled with haunting details of a strictly regimented attitude to schooling. It extended beyond the three Rs into aspects of play, "acceptable" behaviour and the process of becoming a worthwhile adult.

Uniform-clad figures come and go on-screen, boys and girls at different ages – but rigorously segregated, so that any shy encounter becomes illicit. Smiley times, the hapless girl in the dunce's hat, sombre-faced adolescents, authoritarian teachers: all forever being summoned by echoing bells. It's so vividly produced, you constantly expect to see these persuasive ghosts appear beside you as you walk. The intricacies of the camerawork, the nuances of behaviour, all connect superbly to the building and its previous life – would that Alma Mater could be a more permanent part of what the museum offers.

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WITH YOUR HERALD TOMORROW



In tomorrow's Herald Magazine Douglas Gordon (left) reviews his life and art in an in-depth interview from his home in Berlin. Plus Colin Prior's favourite photographs.

In the Arts we meet Emeli Sande (right), the Glasgow University medical student with a sideline in hit-making, as she suspends her studies to take to the road. Plus Paul Auster on his new novel.



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