



# ALASDAIR GRAY

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**June 2018 - Jan 2019**



1. Winnie Wilson, framed ballpoint pen on paper and mounted card, 54 x 54 cm, 1984



2. People in Love, ink on brown paper, framed unframed size 36 x 46 cm, 2009

# ALASDAIR GRAY

## An Introduction

### - Rodge Glass

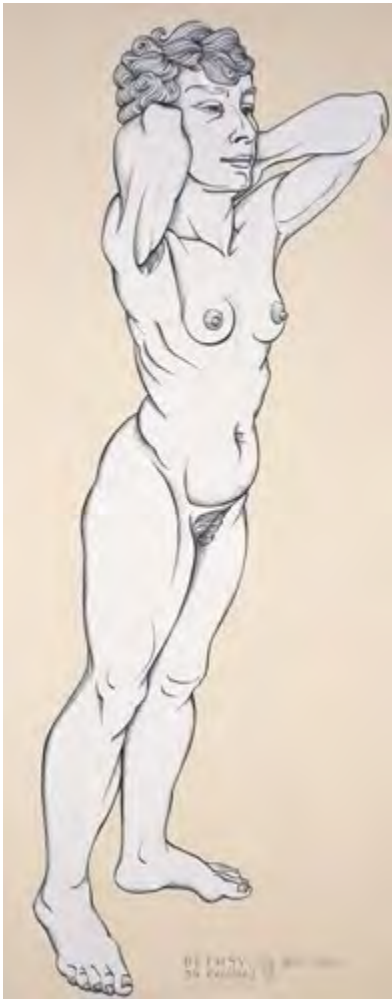
When I heard that a selection of Alasdair Gray's art was going to be exhibited in the Viktor Wynd Museum of Curiosities, I remember thinking, Ah yes, that makes sense. As regular visitors may know, this started out as a basement curiosity shop, expanding into an attempt to fill that vast space between 'what the establishment elite believes is worth of worship and what exists in the world.' In my opinion, that makes Gray a perfect fit. Unnoticed by that elite for decades, Gray has always been rooted firmly in his world, primarily being concerned with recording people and physical spaces who would otherwise disappear if he didn't render them. For decades, he himself was considered to be a curiosity by the few who were aware of his practice. Even within the Scottish art world, he was a footnote. That has since changed, and radically. But before stepping into this space, it's worth knowing about where he started out. With Gray, the past is often the present, the present very much in the past.

Alasdair Gray is, was, has always been both visual artist and writer. From his earliest childhood sketches, which blended picture into word into picture, he has spent a lifetime resisting expectation that the two should remain separate. As an ambitious teenager writing in notebooks now housed in the National Library of Scotland, he imagined a future shelf of books he would write, all of which he would illustrate himself: a novel, a book of collected short stories, a book of collected non-fiction, a book of collected plays, a book of collected

poems. Each of those, he expected, would include portraits of people and places in his home city of Glasgow, some dense and intricate, some spare line drawings. Astonishingly, he did eventually publish all the books on that imagined shelf, though it took him until his seventies to realize the ambition, and there were many digressions along the way.

With Gray, you have to be patient with digressions. Long gestation periods are usual for an artist who took thirty years to write his first novel, *Lanark* (1981), a book that transformed the Scottish literary landscape and made the artist an overnight success at fifty-one. A success, that is, as a writer. *Lanark* is every bit as much a work of visual art as it is a novel, and is now widely regarded as a classic of the form. But somewhere in the ensuing noise around publication, the fact that Gray had always considered his visual practice of equal value to his literary art seemed to be lost. Over the following decades, he complained that one form had overtaken the other. Writing, he described as draining. Painting, an invigorating physical activity that gave him energy.

All Gray's literary output contained examples of his distinctive visual practice intruding on the text – those clean, sensitive pen drawings among them – as well as featuring book covers which were birthed as paintings. Despite producing over twenty books in this manner across the literary spectrum – from the fantastical collection *Unlikely Stories, Mostly* (1983) to the playful, prize-winning novel *Poor Things* (1992) to his vast non-fiction work *The Book of Prefaces* (2000) – this visual element was often dismissed by critics as somehow a minor adornment to the main work, the words. Gray disagreed, and continued working. Sometimes on his biblical-themed murals, some of which have since been destroyed, or painted over, or dismantled since. Also, on his growing archive of portraits and landscapes which built up an evolving



3. Betsy Nude, framed ink and emulsion on paper, 79 x 33 cm, 1986

4. Alasdair and Ann Hopkins, framed ink, acrylic and oil on paper, 67.5 x 88 cm

picture of his disappearing city, his Glasgow. Elements of each of these were sometimes co-opted for other works; Gray is nothing if not a serial recycler, often re-using lost images, or trying to improve on past works with new versions. All this time Gray painted for pleasure, considering himself 'deeply unfashionable'. Having never left his home city, and been neither organized nor well connected, he never expected to be.

And so it proved for many more years, something perhaps accentuated by the fact that Gray was disorganised, often living in penury, painting in pubs for the price of his meals and sketching portraits for fans of his literary work in the title pages of his books. But there's no doubt, fast-forwarding to the present day, that the value of this work is being reappraised now. That's not just about younger artists namechecking an elder, though that's part of the picture, and the two-part 'Spheres of Influence' exhibition at GoMa and Glasgow School of Art to celebrate Gray's 80th birthday was revealing in terms of understanding both where his work came from and how it has been passed on to others. But the most notable change in Gray's artistic fortune is one that is hidden from visitors.

Sorcha Dallas became Gray's art agent a decade ago. Since then she has dedicated a huge amount of time and energy to finding and cataloguing Gray's huge disparate output stretching back over six decades and more, then presenting it in new and innovative ways. One of those ways is, as described above, putting Gray under new light. Another is allowing the work to be seen in its own right, rather than simply as an addendum or footnote to the books the artist has also produced.

The exhibition at the Kelvingrove Art Gallery in 2014/15, 'From the Personal to the Universal', was an example of how

this could work. It took place in the temporary basement gallery space, but saw more visitors witnessing Gray's art in the few months it was on display than had done so for most of his life up to that point. It wasn't until I visited this exhibition myself – moving through Gray's Glasgow Art School work from the 1950s, on to reproductions of his ambitious, lost murals, on to the portraits created as part of his work as Artist Recorder at the People's Palace Museum in Glasgow in the 1970s – that I felt I could appreciate Gray's visual output without feeling the unspoken pressure of literary context. The only words here were arced around the figures being portrayed.

Even these helped me see Gray in new ways. One of his pieces, of his son Andrew aged 7 in his then-home in Kersland Street, seemed familiar and unfamiliar all at once. Hadn't I come across it before? Then I noticed the words, 'Drawn 1972. Painted 2009.' For Gray, nothing is ever finished. Every rendered image is always in a state of flux, of incompleteness, waiting to be altered to take in new perspectives or lifted and placed in another context. This can be seen writ large in his 'Cowcaddens Streetscape in the Fifties' (1964), also the much more recent Glasgow Hillhead Underground mural, which is a kind of who's who of Gray vignettes and emblems recognisable to fans. It also exists in Gray's largest and most-viewed mural at the Oran Mor Arts Centre in Glasgow, which features his glorious night sky which blends Adam and Eve, entwined below the stars, with contemporary real-life figures from the city's West End. As ever, recording the disappearing. Juxtaposing the real and the unreal. And open to new, complementing perspectives.

All of which brings me to the selection featured here in Viktor Wynd's Museum, featuring a series of Gray portraits, some of which are new to me – those of Tony Bliss (husband of Mary,

who Gray once proposed to, way back in 1959), also Helen Mitchel, Alan Singleton. I'm pleased to see, in particular, that several of Gray's portraits of May Hooper are featured, being an example of just the sort of multiple-view approach discussed above. May, distractedly looking away from the artist, chair barely visible. May in white bodice, framed by a much larger chair, which dominates the frame. May, naked, the chair she's sitting on now invisible, looking directly at the artist. Each of these are valuable pieces from the Gray visual archive, some of which lay partly finished in the artist's studio room in his home for many years before being completed. (Not that they ever are.)

It's interesting, I think, both before and after Gray's literary breakthroughs, that he was producing visual art which few noticed at the time, but which is now coming to prominence, and being re-examined in a new context. The longer that passes, the less marginal these appear. Indeed, old Gray murals are still literally being uncovered, with one from 1965 just going on display for the first time in 2018 in Glasgow. (Of course, he's added a poem to the new version, fifty years on.) Considering the prominence of the Oran Mor mural, plus the Hillhead Underground mural, and the growing interest in Gray's art internationally, it seems the visual practice is finally getting a bit of the attention it deserves. But in my opinion, that only makes it more special to be able to witness Gray's work in its natural home – a Museum of Curiosities.

Rodge Glass







5. May on Nursing Chair, framed ink on brown paper, acrylic background unframed size 81 x 45.7 cm, 2010

6. Preliminary Sketch of Horrors of War (for Scotland USSR Friendship Society), framed gouache and pen on board, unframed size 39.5 x 48 cm, 1954

7. Young Boy and Paint Box, framed ink on paper, unframed size 33.5 x 25.7 cm, 1951







8. Andrew Sleeping 21 December 1965, framed ballpoint pen on paper, 20.5 x 19 cm

# THE ARTS OF ALASDAIR GRAY

## **Poema pictura loquens, pictura poema silens**

### **Stuart Kelly**

A few years ago, I was asked to interview Alasdair Gray at the Wigtown Book Festival. After the event, my friend Shaun Bythell, the owner of the largest second-hand bookstore in Wigtown (and indeed the country) asked Alasdair to sign his copy of *Lanark*. It was an enlightening experience to watch, as Alasdair decided he would also draw a portrait of Shaun as well as merely sign it. What struck me – there's a chiel among ye, takin notes – was the fluency of Gray's line. There was no hesitation but there was a quality of patience; certainly there was no sketch in advance that was then inked over. There was a strange precision, and he wielded the sharpie pen as if tracing something beneath the paper itself.

The great virtue of Gray's artwork is that it is unmistakably his work. It might be said that its greatest failing is that it is unmistakably his. To look over his artistic career is to see little in the way of an evolution of style, or even the honing of one. Most people will encounter his art in its most hybrid form, either as the accompanying designs of his novels, short stories and poetry, or as the public commissions where it is



9. Poor Things: Morag as Bella Baxter (frontispiece). Framed photocopy and scraperboard, pen, Indian ink and tippex, 23.5 x 20 cm



10. May Hooper on her knees, framed ink on paper, 57 x 35 cm, 1984

in dialogue with architecture, as in the murals in Oran Mor or the Hillhead Metro Station. Even the most compendious collection of his painting and illustrations occurs within his book, *A Life In Pictures*, where it is spliced with autobiography.

Gray's style is distinctive in particular ways. I have always thought of him as an exceptionally accomplished draughtsman who occasionally adds colours to his work – and indeed, many of the works here have a tendency to the monochrome. The insistence on the line, first and foremost, strikes me as similar to another writer-artist, Jean Cocteau, with his looping, reproducible Orpheus. There is also a kind of two-dimensionality to the work – it is rare to see Gray use perspective, and even when he does it is radically “stacked”. These must be considered as aesthetic choices, and they bring to mind the kind of flatness to be found in the work of Henri Rousseau or Diego Riviera.

As such it is interesting to see here two almost Vorticist abstracts, lacking the bounded line and seeming in many ways more “painterly”. Looking at the portraits in particular, they lack the painted quality of, say, Lucien Freud or John Bellany. Subject is all, application is mere technique. The abstracts appear like little frolics of his own, where Gray actually tries not to paint like Gray. Every artist deserves a chance to not be themselves for a while.

I confess a slight queasiness about some of the nudes; especially as even when clothed there is a recumbent slant to the depiction of women (an exception must be made for the formidable images in *Something Leather*). This raises the question of how image and text interact in Gray's work: I would argue that they do so significantly, as the images introduce ideas that the text itself does not make explicit. They are not, in a way, illustrations. The variation on the

frontispiece of Hobbes' *Leviathan* in *Lanark* is both subtly subversive and introduces an angle on the political “future” of the novel. Likewise, the portraits in *Poor Things* often hint at qualities and failings that the book will later expound.

Returning to *Wigtown*, the preponderance of portraiture in Gray's oeuvre is, I think, worthy of note. (Heaven help the curator who ever tries a complete catalogue of his artistic work – where for example, are the originals of all the authors, editors, typesetters, designers and so forth who garlanded the printed edition of his *The Book Of Prefaces*? Or all the cartoons, doodles, pictures and calligraphic flourishes on all those books at book-signings?) A portrait is both a gift and a strange limitation – or delimitation. I say this as someone who has many portraits – photographic, painted and graphic of himself, a vanity I consider excusable. A portrait is always in some ways a way to fix time itself. *Dorian Gray* is the obverse of the reality. Gray's portraits always seem gifted, a moment of time kept away from time. (Hence, perhaps, the strong emphasis on line over shifting colour and smearing paint). It also highlights how, in some ways, Simonides of Keos – whose quote is the title of this contribution – got it wrong. Gray as novelist and artist knows that that the novel is a portrait in motion. A novel can't be a novel if the characters don't change. The portrait is a static novel, an amber-trapped slice of life.

Author & Critic Stuart Kelly regularly writes for *Scotland on Sunday*, *The TLS*, *The Guardian*, *The Spectator* & *The New Statesman*, and is the author of '*The Book of Lost Books*, an *Incomplete History of all the great books you will never read*,' '*Scott-Land - The Author Who Invented a Nation*' & '*The Minister and the Murderer; a Book of Aftermaths*'



11. Gerda Stevenson, framed ink and acrylic on paper, 38 x 24 cm, 1966  
colour added 2017

12. Alan Singleton, framed ink and acrylic on paper, 48 x 49.5 cm, 1966  
colour added 2017

# THE DUAL IDENTITY

## of Alasdair Gray

- Allan Massie

It is quite rare, not perhaps surprisingly, for someone to excel in more than one art-form. Wyndham Lewis is one of the few painter/novelists to come quickly to mind. That fine and versatile artist Michael Ayrton wrote two good novels. Likewise there are professional writers who are occasional painters. Nevertheless Alasdair Gray is unusual in having pursued parallel careers as writer and artist for more than sixty years now. Though it is probable that anyone in his native Glasgow who is interested in the Arts knows of his dual identity and values him in both his roles, there are readers of his novels who are ignorant of his paintings while visitors to Glasgow may have admired his murals without knowing that they were made by the author of "Lanark".

He is unusual too in being able to work on both a grand scale, with a Baroque extravagance of language, line and colour, and in an apparently modest and certainly intimate fashion. Though he likes to describe himself with a degree of mischievous self-deprecation as "an elderly Glasgow pedestrian", there is still in his ninth decade a remarkable freshness to his vision, nothing "elderly" about it, while his soaring imagination takes wing as no pedestrian ever does.

Gray's is a humane art. He celebrates intelligence and the human body. His portraits, especially the drawings with lines as clear and assured as William Blake's contrive to be both strong and tender. They are alive to the moment, yet rooted in the past. A portrait of a woman in knee-length boots and fishnet tights is very much of our time, yet harks back

also to the music-hall, while the cast of her face dreamily recalls a figure in a Gothic stained-glass window. As artist and writer he is always aware of those who have come before him whose works are in museums or libraries, yet still alive. All the best modernist art offers an oblique acknowledgement of tradition. Valuable novelty is possible only for those artists who recognize their debt to the masters on whose shoulders they stand. Gray has always been aware in both his arts of the paradox of influence. Without an awareness of influence a painter and a writer of fiction works in a narrow world, even a solipsistic one. Yet at the same time he has to liberate himself from even the most nutritious of influences if he is to be true to his personal vision, his understanding of immediate reality.

His art is aristocratic in a finest sense of the word, for it celebrates what is best and most beautiful but it is also profoundly democratic in its tender regard for our common humanity. It contrives to be both exuberant and disciplined, joyful and melancholy, for it reminds us of life's pains and sorrows even as it enriches our experience of the world we have found ourselves in. It is, for Gray, a world we never chose to enter but one which we can learn to celebrate. At times his vision is as candid as a child's, but awareness of mortality is there in the shadows.

Gray has said we should work as if we lived in the first days of a better nation. The remark was made in the course of arguments about Scottish independence. So it was understood as a political statement or advice. No doubt it was that, but it was more than that. It was an expression of his artistic creed, and, one may say (though he wouldn't himself) it is how he himself has worked; and we have all been better for it. Moreover, in his mid-eighties he is still working and working well; remarkable.



13. Director of the Scottish Stage Company, framed pencil and acrylic on paper, 22.5 x 18 cm, 1966 colour added 2017



14. Helen Mitchel: actress Scottish Stage Co, framed pencil and acrylic on paper, 23 x 18 cm, 1966 colour added 2017





15. Aongus MacNeacail: Gaelic Poet and Journalist, framed ink and acrylic on paper, 19 x 17 cm, 1966 colour added 2017

16. Tony Bliss, framed ink and acrylic on paper, 27 x 6.25cm, 1966 colour added 2017





# ALASDAIR GRAY

- Viktor Wynd

I first came across Alasdair Gray's novel *Lanark* in the early 1990s and it gripped and astonished me. I remember reading it over the course of a week and then reading it again that weekend before going to the library and ordering the rest of his books and devouring them with enormous pleasure, both literary and aesthetic, returning to them over the years but it wasn't until seeing some of his work at The Hayward Gallery in 2011 that I became obsessed by his work as an artist – I then contacted his dealer to see if I could show his work in my (then commercial) art gallery but was politely told that this would not be possible and being unable to buy any work from his dealer bought a few works at auction that have been my daily companions ever since and fill me with joy and a slightly disturbed sense of wonder.

With Alasdair Gray's work ever present in my life I didn't take no for an answer and invited him to give a lecture for me at the Edinburgh Festival and timidly asked if he might lend some pictures to a show I was curating of work by Mervyn Peake & Gunter Grass and was delighted to learn that he was as keen on their work as I was (in fact had first become interested in Peake's drawings in the 1940s). It was the second exhibition, I think, in my new museum, and I was very excited – not least because Alasdair was coming. I don't think it really worked – the space is too small to be split between artists so I wanted to revisit the artists individually and recently travelled to Glasgow to choose the works in the show from amongst those hanging on the walls in his home.



When Alasdair gave a lecture for me in Glasgow I asked if he'd like to take questions afterwards he replied that he was happy to but didn't expect to hear any new ones, when I reminded him of this in Glasgow he laughed and said that Louis Bunuel once sent his son, Juan Luis, in his place to a screening and in reply to a question said 'My father said to say this to that one' which made me rather wary of asking too many questions, I am also only too aware of Patrick O'Brian's famous dictum 'Question and answer is not a civilized form of conversation' and have rather taken to heart some advice that Simon Kuper gave in an article recently where he says that if someone worthwhile is saying something interesting one shouldn't be listening waiting for a chance to interrupt with one's own little anecdote (so when Alasdair was telling me about William Carlos Williams' visit to Ezra Pound after the war I bit my tongue and didn't tell him how important William's translation of Philip Soupault's Last Nights of Paris had been to me as a teenager (just as well really as in retrospect as it's not that interesting).

I did rather hesitatingly, over a fish supper and Hendrick's & tonic try to ask him about the relationship between writing and painting and he replied, quoting Hegel that sculpture and painting exist in space whilst drama and poetry exist in time. When I showed him the catalogue for my exhibition of Austin Osman Spare he said that he first became aware of Spare when he had been terribly ill with asthma whilst doing his national service and been hospitalized in Gibraltar and the sergeant had lent him one of Spare's books – the only other book he'd been able to find had been Jane Austen and he struggled to be able to pay much attention to a book written entirely about people who didn't have to work for a living.

I hope that you find this show as interesting as I do – I'm not entirely sure if anyone ever really notices these exhibitions

that I put on (and with so many other exhibitions in London this wouldn't be too surprising) or for that matter reads these catalogs I make (this is the third one) but if you've enjoyed or even if you haven't I would hugely appreciate hearing from you - especially if you think I should continue with them both. Leave me a review on tripadvisor or google or write me a letter.

Viktor Wynd  
– May 2018

### **With Thanks To Hendrick's Gin**

The Museum & The Society exist purely thanks to the extraordinary generosity & foresight of Hendrick's Gin who share a common aim to make the world a more unusual & pleasant place. For over a decade Hendrick's have helped & partnered our extraordinary adventures; from Lectures & Dinners at the Café Royal, to a Crying Party, Halloween Extravaganzas & Midnight Seances in a Cornish Quarry (where the dead cat spoke). But perhaps most important of all is The Gin that has been supplied, with accompanying cucumber, it has lubricated & freed our minds to float & think for which we are truly grateful & without which we would still be in bed in a dull grey world. So come, charge your glasses & drink to Gin.



15. May Hooper on her knees, 1984, 57 x 35 cm

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### Representation & Sales

Whilst the work in this exhibition has all come from Mr.Gray's home and some of it is deeply personal a few pieces may be for sale . Alasdair Gray is represented by Sorcha Dallas, please contact her directly if you are interested in purchasing any work. [sorchadallas@me.com](mailto:sorchadallas@me.com)

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Alasdair Gray's notebooks

