**Glasgow International**

Various locations

20th April–7th May unless otherwise stated

by SUSANNAH THOMPSON

In 2005 Glasgow International (GI) launched as a major new festival of contemporary art in a city that had become renowned for its capacity to produce artists of international repute. By the mid-1990s Glasgow was deemed ‘miraculous’ (by Swiss curator Hans Ulrich Obrist) for its ability to develop and maintain a strong infrastructure for the production and reception of visual art outside of London. A continued succession of Turner Prize nominees and high-profile Glasgow School of Art graduates, as well as artist-run spaces such as Transmission and a new spate of galleries including The Modern Institute, enhanced Glasgow’s critical and commercial cachet. While these recent histories are now somewhat mythologised – a comparison with Renaissance Florence in *The* *Observer* was perhaps overheated – GI is nevertheless a celebration of the city and the achievements of its artists.[[1]](#endnote-1)

In its eighth incarnation and the first year under the directorship of Richard Parry (formerly Curator-Director of the Grundy Art Gallery, Blackpool), the already gargantuan festival has expanded once again. In presenting 268 artists, ninety exhibitions and over eighty events, GI 2018 was almost unmanageable, certainly if one took a completist approach (this reviewer managed around a quarter). Spanning the city across seventy-eight venues, the scale of the festival was even more overwhelming (or exhilarating) given the relative brevity of the festival’s eighteen-day duration. While some of the larger exhibitions have an extended run, there is a sense that the city’s art programming empties out in the aftermath of GI, creating a kind of biennial bottleneck: you wait two years for a good exhibition then ninety come along at once.

Nine of these formed the Director’s Programme, which comprised major new commissions and exhibitions: a large group show *Cellular World* at the Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA; to 7th October), Lubaina Himid at Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, E. Jane and Hardeep Pandhal at Kelvin Hall, Graham Eatough and Stephen Sutcliffe at Film City in Govan, Mick Peter and The Young Regenerators in an post-industrial shed in the east end and Mark Leckey (to 1st July), Kapwani Kiwanga (closed 17th June) and Tai Shani (closed 7th May) at Tramway. It was to Parry’s credit that the festival had no overarching curatorial theme, avoiding the dogged trope of many other major art events which often shoehorn disparate and eclectic practices into a narrow curatorial narrative. In spite of Parry’s relatively free approach, certain currents and patterns emerged across GI, radiating out from the nine core exhibitions into the open submission programme.

Both Mick Peter and the duo Janie Nicoll and Ailie Rutherford offered a critique of cultural tourism and regeneration. Nicoll’s and Rutherford’s *In kind*, a research project in the form of a peripatetic information kiosk manned by the artists, sought to chart the hidden economy of the festival itself. Moving between three GI venues, Trongate 103, Centre for Contemporary Arts (CCA) and Platform, the artists gathered and then presented data on ‘in kind’ work undertaken for GI, presenting their findings on a multimedia visual display unit. The project aimed to highlight the precarious labour and unremunerated goodwill on which such events often rely. *In kind* was crucial in acknowledging the gift, exchange and volunteer economies within which many artists operate, but as a GI project it also represented tolerated dissent on the part of the programmers and is the kind of quasi-social-scientific institutional critique the art world is good at being seen to embrace. Peter’s work, *The regenerators*, however, expresses its didacticism within a visually arresting, and often very funny form, complete with a manifesto. Close to Celtic Park football ground in the east end of the city, Peter’s collaborative project – undertaken with young people from across the west of Scotland and facilitated by a curatorial student group from Glasgow School of Art’s Widening Participation department – was a ninety-meter long mural, a hoarding covering the empty façade of a former gas-purifying shed (Fig.1). Part of a group of disused industrial buildings, the landscaped site surrounding had been part of a major (and controversial) regeneration of the Dalmarnock area for the 2014 Commonwealth Games. Through James Thurber-esque cartoons, viewers were taken on a tour of Glasgow’s architectural history and industrial heritage in an area which has seen almost ceaseless demolition, destruction and renewal for decades. It was one of the undoubted highlights of GI.

Many of the exhibitions focused on identity and the politics of race, gender and sexuality. In the Director’s Programme, E. Jane, Hardeep Pandhal, Lubaina Himid and Tai Shani included these subjects among a range of other ideas and images. In the open submission shows, identity was frequently addressed collectively, by groups of artists such as iQhiya at Transmission, Girlz Club at Glasgow Project Room and sorryyoufeeluncomfortable at Many Studios. Postcolonial concerns also underpinned Nadia Myre’s *Code Switching and Other Work* at The Briggait, a particularly thoughtful response to the history of clay tobacco pipe production in Glasgow. In a venue close to a former tobacco warehouse and pipe factory in an area known as the Merchant City (after the so-called Tobacco Lords who lived and worked in the area in the eighteenth century and gave the city many of its colonial street names – Virginia, Tobago, Jamaica, Plantation), the exhibition subtly alluded to Glasgow’s colonial past. Myre attempted to decolonise the history of these objects –some of the first disposable mass-market items in circulation which, in their original form, came pre-stuffed with tobacco and were discarded after use – by confronting audiences with the actual and symbolic products of colonialism. Especially poignant are Myre’s handmade ceramic pieces based on found clay pipe shards, such as *Beaded net (after Gorée Island)* and *Sharing platform (new technologies)*. These demonstrate that criticism in art of oppressive socio-economic structures, as well as the woeful lack of historical knowledge of these histories in Scotland and Scottish education**,** can sometimes be more successful when implied and embedded rather than expressly stated – that politics can be revealed through a judicious handling of form and material.

Lubaina Himid’s installation, a giant, ornately decorated carriage adorned with mythical creatures, was raised high above the ground in the atrium of Kelvingrove Art Gallery. It hurtles through the space before appearing to stall, suspended in mid-air. In her rediscovery and restoration of overlooked cultural histories, Himid’s work is a subversive insertion of postcolonial feminisminto art history. The GI programme perhaps attempts to future-proof its own history in this respect. GI’s contributors are impressively varied in terms of age, career stage, geographical location, gender and ethnicity. And while it may be something of a curatorial trend to ‘rediscover and restore’ the reputations of older women artists, the salutary focus on anarchic, avant-garde feminist practice was welcome. It included the first solo exhibition in the United Kingdom of the work of the German filmmaker and artist Ulrike Ottinger at the Hunterian Art Gallery (to 29th July) and two performance projects by the Spanish artist Esther Ferrer at Pearce Institute. Older women also make up the collective XSexcentenary, whose project *Not Dead Yet* – a series of workshops, performances and actions by the artists underpinned by a contestation of conventional attitudes towards women and ageing – was based within the aptly named Ladywell Business Centre, while Linder’s distinctive collage aesthetic could be seen in her joyous, vibrant and colourful *Bower of bliss*, a performance, flag and film commissioned by the wonderful Glasgow Women’s Library, an organisation and collection which is a work of art in itself.

Like Himid, Tai Shani is an artist whose background in theatre and set design becomes apparent in her approach to installation. A spectacular stage of highly coloured abstract sculptures set the scene for her epic *Dark continent:* *SEMIRAMIS* at Tramway (Fig.2), a fantastical, erotic tale narrated by a large cast of characters. But where Himid looked back, Shani, like the artists in the Gallery of Modern Art’s *Cellular Worlds* and MAP magazine’s project *We who are about to* (various locations), looked to the distant future. Relayed over audio headsets, the story proposed a post-patriarchal future based on an adaptation of Christine de Pizan’s *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405) but equally reminiscent of the imagined futures of Ursula Le Guin or Edwin A. Abbott. Full of allusive, densely layered imagery, Shani’s experimental, multidisciplinary work demanded serious engagement on the part of its audience. Many other GI exhibitions shared the artist’s recurring interest in speculative and science fiction, adaptation and narrative – such as Graham Eatough’s and Stephen Sutcliffe’s excellent adaptation of Anthony Burgess’s *Enderby* novels – but in its depth, scope and originality Shani’s work remains outstanding.

The most talked-about contribution took the form of another apparent stage set at The Modern Institute on Osbourne Street, where the home and studio of British artist Duggie Fields was recreated room-by-room in all its Maximalist glory (closed 9th June; Fig.3). Featuring works from the 1970s to the present, including paintings, video and sound pieces along with props and artefacts from Fields’s collection, the space conveys Fields’s role as a key proponent among artists who make no distinction between art and life, and whose persona and signature style have made him a figure of pop culture. A post-pop *Gesamtkunstwerk*, this is also great fun, although the question remains that if all Fields’s furniture and possessions were here, was he living in an empty Earls Court flat for the duration of GI, with only his kiss curl for company?

1. Installation view of *The regenerators*, by Mick Peter at Dalmarnock Gas Purifier Shed, Glasgow (photograph Keith Hunter).

2. Performance photograph of *Dark continent: SEMIRAMIS* by Tai Shani. Tramway, Glasgow (photograph Keith Hunter).

3. Installation view of *Duggie Fields* at The Modern Institute, Osborne St, Glasgow (photograph Patrick Jameson).

1. L. Cummings: ‘Glasgow International 2018 review – a uniquely collaborative scene’, *The Observer* (22nd April 2018), available at www.theguardian.com, accessed 22nd May 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)