**‘Cod Liver Oil’: The Art and Criticism of Cordelia Oliver**

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The artist, critic and curator Cordelia Oliver was an incisive and highly respected art critic in Scotland from the late 1950s to her death in 2009. Through her critical writing and curatorial practice, she offered a unique perspective on the production and reception of art from Scotland in the mid-late Twentieth century. This paper focuses particularly on Oliver’s role as an artist-critic and her efforts to ensure the visibility and critical reputation of painting by women in Scotland, including many of her peers and contemporaries such as Bet Low, Margot Sandeman and Joan Eardley and later painters including Carole Gibbons and Pat Douthwaite.

Keywords: women; painting; Scotland; mid-century; Modernism; art criticism; curating

# Introduction

This paper considers the relationship between the production of mid-Twentieth century painting by women in Scotland and the art criticism which responded to it, looking specifically at the work of the Scottish artist, critic and curator Cordelia Oliver (1923-2009). Cordelia McIntyre Oliver [née Patrick] was a painter and graduate of The Glasgow School of Art and became an incisive and highly respected critic of visual art and theatre for *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Glasgow Herald*, *Plays and Players*, *Plays International*, *Scottish International,* *Modern Painters* and many other publications. A prolific writer from the late 1950s to her death in 2009, she also organised numerous exhibitions on the work of Scottish artists and was deeply embedded in the cultural life of Scotland. In the late 1970s she was a member of the Williams Committee, set up by the Callahan government to look at the needs of museums in Scotland, was a curator for the Scottish Arts Council and a founding member of Glasgow’s Third Eye Centre.

Through her criticism and curating, Oliver offered a unique perspective on Scottish art for over five decades, often focussing her attention on the work of friends and associates including Bet Low (1924 – 2007), Margot Sandeman (1922 – 2009), Joan Eardley (1921 – 1963), Kathleen Mann (1908 – 2000), Winifred Nicholson (1893-1981) and Patricia (Pat) Douthwaite (1934 – 2002). As part of this special issue on painting by women in Scotland, the article has three, inter-related aims: to consider Oliver’s contribution to the history and development of mid-Twentieth century Scottish painting; to examine her particular position as an artist-critic and polymathic ‘participant observer’ of the artists she critiqued and curated; and, through a critical-biographical approach, to examine the gendered contexts of Oliver’s work as an artist and critic and her implicit yet concerted efforts to foreground and champion art by women in Scotland.

Oliver’s longevity as a critic gave her an almost unparalleled view of the shifts and developments in Scottish art over almost five decades. A particular feature of her writing was the close monitoring of the development of individual artists over long periods, in some cases tracking the careers of artists from early student days to posthumous acclaim. To her detractors (usually artists who had received less than positive reviews) Oliver could be a ‘difficult woman’. For those at the sharp end of her pen, her forthright, self-assured and sometimes strident tone earned her the nickname ‘Cod Liver Oil’: in spite of its improving effects, Oliver’s criticism could be difficult to swallow. Her particular brand of critical integrity was a feature of her obituaries. According to The Herald, ‘she will be remembered for taking no prisoners in her work. She criticised and praised without favour’.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Through its reliance on a diverse range of sources including rare and uncatalogued primary sources, a further aim is that this paper might highlight the ways in which ephemeral material, personal archives and first-hand accounts can be employed to redress historical oversights and omissions. Collectively, the sources I draw on offer a more inclusive, representative and revisionist history of recent Scottish painting than many dominant or canonical narratives might suggest. A final aim, then, is that the afterlife of this text might lie in the collation of a selected bibliography of Oliver’s critical writing. Through this gathering of sources, my hope is that the references will assist other researchers who share both Oliver’s interests and my own.

**Student Years at The Glasgow School of Art**

Cordelia McIntyre Patrick was born on the south side of Glasgow in April 1923. She studied Drawing and Painting at Glasgow School of Art (GSA) between 1940 and 1944 alongside a group of artists who would appear recurrently throughout her career as a critic and curator. As a student during the Second World War, Oliver and her peers had an unusual and distinctive art school education. Due to conscription and other war work, student and staff numbers were significantly reduced and the remaining cohort was largely comprised of women. As curator Keith Hartley has noted, ‘the scarcity of students and staff at Glasgow School of Art in the early 1940s […] led almost to a kind of atelier system which served to intensify the student experience’.[[2]](#endnote-2) While materials and resources were in short supply and some departments (ceramics, printmaking) temporarily closed, ‘the school was small enough to allow fraternising across the disciplines’.[[3]](#endnote-3) In the absence of supplies, tutors encouraged their students to be more inventive and resourceful with materials. According to Oliver, ‘ingenuity was the order of the day’.[[4]](#endnote-4) In response to a complaint about the quality of wartime carbon pencils she recalled that a fellow student was told to ‘stop complaining’, because ‘Rembrandt could have done it with his thumb and some soot’.[[5]](#endnote-5) In some cases, the scarcity of materials led to imaginative and idiosyncratic formal experimentation and cross-disciplinary making amongst the ‘war years’ student body. Dorothy Smith, a friend and contemporary of Oliver, recalled trawling hedges to find scraps of wool and, in the absence of more conventional fabrics, included her mother’s hair in Diploma Show work. [[6]](#endnote-6)

FIG 1

With materials on ration, Oliver made a dirndl skirt from boiled tailor’s canvas, stencilled with a pattern based on a Léon Baskt design for *L’Apres Midi d’un Faun* from Diaghilev’s Ballet Russes (Jessie M. King, whose work Oliver would curate and write about later in her career, was also influenced by Baskt). The garment highlights Oliver’s early interest in the relationship between the arts, characteristic of her later art and theatre criticism. As well as displaying a keen awareness of avant-garde performance through its pattern and decoration, the skirt is also a manifestation of Oliver’s interest in the visual aspects of the performing arts. Its design, and Oliver’s broader interest in peasant dress, may well have been influenced by the work of textile designer Kathleen Mann (1908-2000), who had been Head of the Embroidery Department at Glasgow School of Art in the early 1930s and went on to publish books such as *Peasant Costume in Europe* (1931) and *Designs from Peasant Art* (1939).By the time Oliver began studying at art school, Mann had been forced to resign her post due to an archaic regulation that insisted women demit their profession after they married (the ‘marriage bar’ was lifted in 1944, allowing painters such as Mary Armour to resume teaching careers they had been forced to put on hold). Mann’s husband, Hugh Adam Crawford, was Head of Drawing and Painting at GSA. He became Oliver’s tutor in her final year of study, and was an enduring, oft-cited influence on her work and ideas about painting.

An acclaimed portrait painter and muralist, Crawford was well-respected by his students of the 1930s and ‘40s, including the ‘Two Roberts’, Robert Colquhoun and Robert MacBryde, and Joan Eardley. Oliver’s focus on portraiture in her own work, and on drawing as a primary medium, can be attributed to Crawford’s teaching. In notes written in preparation for an exhibition of her drawings at Glasgow School of Art in 2006, Oliver claimed that,

My success, such as it was, depended entirely on the quality of teaching at Glasgow School of Art during those war years […] when Hugh Adam Crawford was Head of Drawing and Painting. Never was there a better teacher of drawing. I know that his wish for me was to become a serious painter of portraits and that I disappointed him by deciding to become the *Manchester Guardian*’s art critic in Scotland. [[7]](#endnote-7)

Throughout her life, Oliver frequently cited Crawford’s views in discussions of painting and in 1978 she curated the exhibition *Crawford and Company* for Glasgow's Third Eye Centre. Oliver was also instrumental in ensuring that Mann’s work was properly recognised, citing her work in numerous articles on Scottish art and design.

The mutual admiration between Oliver and Crawford can be seen in Crawford’s 1943 portrait of Oliver and, in turn, her portrait of Crawford (fig 2), painted in 1945, the year after her graduation. Crawford and Oliver’s paintings of one another bear little stylistic relation to their self-portraiture. In Crawford’s portrait of Oliver (then Patrick) she is less physically recognisable than in her own works, and in terms of expression, far softer and more wistful. Crawford depicts her seated and in profile, hair swept up into a loose bun, apparently deep in thought. It is a flattering portrait of the artist as a young woman, in warm tonal harmonies of brown, russet and ochre. While fairly typical of much realist painting of the period in Britain, Crawford’s use of smudged, soft edges and visible brushwork are more painterly than the crisp lines and smoothed out surfaces used elsewhere in his work. This is clearly not a formal commission: placed in the immediate foreground, with little space around her, the sitter’s proximity to the frame suggests a familiarity between artist and subject. But where Crawford’s work is fairly typical of Scottish portraiture of the period, Oliver’s painting of Crawford, from around 1945, is both striking and curiously anachronistic. Here, the artist is pictured as a monastic or ascetic figure with close cropped hair, short beard and a collarless smock or robe of dazzling white. The dark olive complexion of the figure is distinct from Crawford’s actual skin tone and the effect is somewhat Christ-like or messianic. The painting seems curiously out of its time, simultaneously medieval and modern. While it is three-dimensional, it appears strangely flat, like the Early Renaissance saints of Masaccio and Piero della Francesca, artists who were known to Oliver, Eardley and their peers. As well as those sources, Oliver’s later writing revealed an interest in Post-Impressionist painting - in notes for an exhibition of her work held at Glasgow School of Art in 2006, she referred to an exhibition of Paul Gaugin as ‘a revelation’.[[8]](#endnote-8) With its bright terracotta background and expression of the artist as distinctly ‘other’, Oliver’s portrait of Crawford may well have been influenced by Gaugin’s self-portraits of the 1890s (see, for instance, the 1896 *Self-Portrait Near Golgotha* or 1894’s *Self-Portrait with Palette*) and while it could be regarded as rather naïve for 1940s Scotland, the painting undoubtedly demonstrates Oliver’s interest in art history, and her attempts to experiment with style through her incorporation of various elements of European Modernism which would have been known to her through Glasgow’s remarkable public collections.

Over the course of her career, Oliver often referred to the impact of seeing an exhibition of Modern German painting which had been mounted as a riposte to the famous ‘degenerate art’ exhibition staged by the Nazis in Munich in 1937. The 1938 counter exhibition was held at the New Burlington galleries in London and toured to Glasgow in 1939. It was exhibited at the McLellan Galleries on Sauchiehall Street, just one block away from Glasgow School of Art, and was hugely influential on Oliver and her friends. In 1963, Oliver reviewed an exhibition of German Expressionist work in Edinburgh for *The Guardian*, and recalled the 1939 show ‘from which experience I date my first real physical knowledge that art goes deeper than the eye and the brain.’[[9]](#endnote-9) Writing in *The Times* in 1968, she claimed that ‘Glasgow painters had been jolted out of complacency […] by the large exhibition of the work of the large Nazi-proscribed German painters – Klee, Kokoschka, Nolde, Marc and so on.’[[10]](#endnote-10) The impact of the War itself led to an influx of new artistic influences to Glasgow School of Art (and Scotland more broadly). The short-staffed School began to employ visiting and temporary staff, including a number of eminent Jewish refugees and immigrants who had fled Europe. Figures such as Jankel Adler and Josef Herman were influential on Scottish artists of the period and organisations such as The Refugee Centre, Unity Theatre and the Jewish Institute were often frequented by students eager and receptive to the practices and ideas of esteemed European Modernist artists, designers, architects, actors and directors newly arrived in Glasgow. In *The Times*, Oliver noted that ‘in the early Forties, several good painters from outside Glasgow came to live in the city’, citing Adler and Herman, alongside J.D Fergusson and Margaret Morris ‘who taught painting to all and sundry as diligently as she taught dancing.’[[11]](#endnote-11) The impact of these new creative forces into an otherwise relatively staid, insular community of artists in Scotland was something Oliver and her peers continued to acknowledge several decades later.

The circumstances brought about by the War had undoubtedly brought a degree of freedom to the young women who studied at Glasgow School of Art in the period yet they still faced the kinds of institutional barriers and obstacles outlined in Linda Nochlin’s seminal 1971 essay ‘Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?’. Alongside more invisible, insidious cultural norms, women on the teaching staff at GSA were required to relinquish their position upon marriage. As historians and curators such as Liz Arthur and Jude Burkhauser have brilliantly documented[[12]](#endnote-12), between the late 1900s and the 1940s GSA had employed a number of women who were pioneering and highly acclaimed in their respective fields. Kathleen Mann’s appointment in 1931 ‘blew away the cobwebs’ from a department still steeped in the decades-old Arts and Crafts heritage of Jessie Newbery and Ann Macbeth. The Embroidery Department had already proved itself to be ground-breaking due to Newbery and Macbeth’s influence, but Mann brought Modernist design developments and new techniques (including machine embroidery) to the School. Despite of these legacies, the gendered ‘glass ceiling’ was still firmly intact at Glasgow School of Art in the mid-Twentieth century. As such, while their very presence denoted a level of socio-economic and cultural privilege inaccessible to many other women in Scotland, young women were often viewed by their male tutors as enthusiastic amateurs, as girls who were passing time until they embarked upon marriage and motherhood, a view clearly embedded in the marriage bar. Some tutors, such as Hugh Adam Crawford, had been encouraging and supportive, but Oliver recalled another painting tutor, Henry Y Alison, who was less enthusiastic about the women he taught: ‘he still refused to let us juniors draw from life - he was heard to say that girls should be at home washing dishes.’[[13]](#endnote-13)

Throughout the Twentieth century the painting department at Glasgow School of Art was associated with machismo, swagger and, sometimes, the disreputable, sexually predatory behaviour towards women students (behaviour which was often ignored or normalised by the institution). Though this was by no means particular to Glasgow School of Art, it is salient to remember the specific contexts and environments within which women were training to become painters. A typical example of the prevailing attitude towards women as both artists and subjects can be seen in David Donaldson’s advice to young painters, which was ‘to paint from beneath your navel. Perhaps it’s the best compliment you can pay to any woman’.[[14]](#endnote-14) A junior painting tutor during the War (and an admittedly exceptional teacher of painting according to many of his graduates), Donaldson went on to become Head of Drawing and Painting in the 1960s. But it is hard to think of Donaldson’s dictum (and its assumed male, heterosexual audience) without recalling Renoir’s famous quip - when asked how he continued to paint voluptuous nude women with increasingly arthritic hands he allegedly responded ‘I paint with my prick’.[[15]](#endnote-15) In his lascivious 1980-81 painting *Annette and the elders, James and John* it appears that Donaldson followed suit. A contemporary take on Rembrandt’s 1647 *Susanna and the Elders*, Susanna is replaced by ‘Annette’, a young woman who sits at a table, nude, with two clothed ‘elders’, both painting tutors at The Glasgow School of Art in the 1980s, wine glasses in hand, in a room which appears to be a painting studio within the School. In contrast, Oliver’s paintings (and those of artists such as Pat Douthwaite, Lys Hansen and Carole Gibbons) often represent women as active artists rather than passive subjects, a feature shared in women’s self-portraiture from Artemisia Gentileschi to Suzanne Valadon.

In a self-portrait of 1944 (fig.3), painted in her final year as a student at Glasgow School of Art for her Diploma, Oliver’s sidelong stare is intense, inscrutable and unsmiling. Hair and shoulders back, chin up, her gaze is penetrating, the expression challenging and serious. Idiomatically, we might say that the sitter ‘gives good side eye’ – her look is the very opposite of the averted eyes and coquettish passivity seen in so many paintings of women in art history yet the expression is directed primarily at the reflected image of the artist herself, and conveys much of the appraising, sometimes combative stance she would adopt in relation to the work of others as a critic. The portrait won the prestigious Guthrie Award (following Joan Eardley in 1943) and was one of many she produced over the course of her career. The muted palette is very much of its era, painted in the dark, drab colours of war time Scotland. But while the work may fit stylistically into the tradition of Scottish portraiture or broader British Realist tendencies, there are aspects again of European Modernism, though this time, those divergent, figurative strands of modernist painting characterised by, for example, Picasso’s Blue and Rose periods or his neoclassical ‘pastiche’ paintings of the 1920s. Another painting shows a rare departure into landscape. *Canal at Townhead* (1943) is a student experiment in Impressionist brushwork and optical colour mixing. It seems likely that Oliver had Claude Monet’s paintings of canals in Venice and Amsterdam in mind here, in terms of both style and subject matter. Compositionally, the painting resembles Georges Braque’s Fauvist 1906 industrial landscape *Canal Saint-Martin*, an artist whose work Oliver greatly admired.

Alongside her intention to become an artist, teaching became another career path for Oliver, and there is a strong pedagogical component to her subsequent criticism and curatorial practice. As a student Oliver had worked as an assistant to the artist and painting tutor Jessie Alexandra Dick to establish a Saturday morning art class for children.[[16]](#endnote-16) Like many of her contemporaries, Oliver was encouraged to embark on a teaching career after finishing art school and so, after attending a postgraduate summer school at Hospitalfield House, Abroath, under the instruction of the painter James Cowie[[17]](#endnote-17) she duly embarked upon a teaching qualification, attending Jordanhill Teacher Training College before returning to Glasgow School of Art in 1945 to complete her Art Teacher’s Diploma (ATD). She recalled of this period that some of the men she taught were ‘too arrogant to accept assistance from yet another student, and a woman at that’[[18]](#endnote-18) and many of her recollections contain anecdotes of this type, reflecting Oliver’s struggle to be taken seriously as a professional woman. Between 1945 and 1948 undertook a full-time teaching position at Craigholme School for Girls while continuing to teach evening classes in life drawing at Glasgow School of Art. The educational element of Oliver’s career continued in various forms throughout her life and can be seen in the tone of much of her criticism which is characterised by didacticism, elucidation and instruction. She gave lectures, taught at summer schools and participated in educational activities throughout her career. Her writing and curatorial practice were also very much concerned with imparting knowledge and understanding rather than ‘taste-making’ and she was vocal in her disapproval of critics who assumed the role of cultural gatekeeper.

In 1948 Cordelia McIntyre Patrick married fellow Glasgow School of Art student George Oliver and moved to London. The Olivers had parallel and often complementary careers which frequently overlapped, working together as critic and photographer on a number of book and catalogue projects. In 1950 they returned to Scotland and lived in Edinburgh until 1959. While George worked as the art editor for *Scotland’s Magazine* (formerly known as the Scottish Motor Traction’s *SMT Magazine*)*,* Cordelia pursued a career as an artist, exhibiting her paintings at the Royal Scottish Academy, the Royal Glasgow Institute and the Outlook Tower. A member of the Society for Scottish Artists from 1948, she also worked as a commercial artist and illustrator for companies such as Jenners, John Menzies, Pringle and, through George, was the illustrator for many *Scotland’s Magazine* advertisements (Glasgow School of Art archives hold numerous examples of these small commissions). She also worked as an illustrator for articles and features in *The Glasgow Herald[[19]](#endnote-19)*, starting with small sketches for the Saturday Page, edited by her friend Anne Donaldson. Oliver’s career as an art critic, then, was directly prefigured by her career as an artist for the same newspaper. Numerous drawings of theatre, opera and dance performances at the Edinburgh Festival were published by *The* *Glasgow Herald* between 1950 and 1960, and they became her most enduring art commissions. Through George Oliver’s editorial work, she was granted ‘behind the scenes’ access to performers at the Festival, sketching iconic figures including Maria Callas, Geraint Evans, Yehudi Menuhin, Joan Sutherland, Albert Finney, Edith Sitwell (fig. 4) and John Betjeman, often at rehearsal.

Oliver’s interest in performing arts was personal as well as professional. A keen singer, she had performed at the first Edinburgh International Festival in 1947 as a member of the Glasgow Orpheus Choir and had won an award for solo singing at Glasgow Music Festival in the same year. As a painting student, she regularly drew backstage at theatre rehearsals in Glasgow and had assisted her friend, the artist Tom Macdonald, in scenery painting for the newly opened Citizen’s Theatre in the mid-1940s.

Oliver’s dual interests in visual and performing art continued in her writing – she was renowned as much for her theatre criticism as for her writing on visual art and her critical perspective was often cross-disciplinary, informed by parallel themes in culture. In her notes on theatre and music at the Edinburgh Festival, she frequently refers to the major art exhibitions held each summer, enthusiastically detailing a run of French Impressionist and Post-Impressionist shows in the 1950s: Degas, Renoir, Cezanne and Gauguin and later memorable exhibitions by artists including Georges Braque. Oliver’s Edinburgh Festival drawings (a number of which are now held by the National Galleries of Scotland), highlight her understanding of drawing as foundational to artists. Quickly rendered impressions of what she observed, the drawings are almost visual fieldnotes - spare, elegant, unmediated sketches of very particular cultural moments.

A critical biography of Oliver’s life and work shows that her approach to criticism was often based on participant observation. As both artist and critic, her knowledge of art and artists in Scotland was based on extensive first-hand experience. Oliver often spoke of her choice to prioritise writing over painting in her career with a palpable sense of sacrifice or compromise. She considered herself primarily a painter who had serendipitously ‘fallen’ into criticism, before discovering her aptitude for it. That she felt she had to make a choice between the two, when so many critics have concurrent careers in both fields (including her contemporaries such as Edward Gage and Sydney Goodsir Smith and predecessors such as Stanley Cursiter), was largely due to a certain self-consciousness on her part and a firm belief that the two practices were incompatible or represented a conflict of interest. Interestingly, while Oliver wrote for *The Guardian*, the artist and critic David Sylvester was her direct counterpart at *The Guardian*’s sister newspaper *The Observer*. Both worked concurrently as artist and critic for a time and there are affinities between their critical approach in terms of the tendency of both to foreground direct, experiential responses to visual art, and to privileged the primacy of the visual in their critical writing. Another particular feature of Oliver’s critical approach was her resolutely internationalist perspective. In her writing on Scottish art (and theatre and dance) she often aimed to offer contextualisation of the works she reviewed through reference to broader international shifts and developments. Her close association with Richard Demarco’s projects in the 1970s (when many other established figures in Scotland eschewed or ignored his activities) was largely informed by their shared concern for cultural reciprocity and international exchange. Her prolific coverage of the Edinburgh International Festival over many years can also be seen as part of a wider attempt to open up the more conservative and parochial elements of Scottish culture to developments elsewhere, and vice versa. Together with (and by no means separate to) her interest in ensuring women were afforded coverage and critique, Oliver was often at pains to support projects which were avant-garde and politically internationalist, and she often travelled to accomplish these aims, including a number of research visits to Eastern Europe. Perhaps this explains why Oliver’s criticism, with its expanded sense of ‘Scottishness’, is absent from more narrowly defined accounts of the history of Scottish art. Oliver’s work is rarely, if ever, cited in the most widely-read surveys of Scottish art, though Craig Richardson’s 2011 book *Scottish Art Since 1960* (while it overlooks a number of prominent women practitioners) acknowledges Oliver’s contribution to art criticism in Scotland in a way few others have done, and is similarly inclusive in its definition of Scottish art.

One of Oliver’s last works as an artist was another self-portrait, c.1960, now held by National Galleries of Scotland. In it, the artist looks back over her shoulder to face the viewer in a pose lifted from Vermeer’s c.1665 *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. The handling of paint is characteristic of Oliver’s use of simultaneously ‘blocky’, graphic brushwork which is also painterly and gestural. Unlike her earlier works, though, the palette is far lighter in this painting - the use of bright blue, green and turquoise perhaps reflect Oliver’s commercial illustration of the 1960s, which use the same cool tonal range. To denote her status as an artist, an easel protrudes into the pictorial space, though it does so at a curiously sharp angle, jutting awkwardly towards the sitter’s forehead. According to her friend, curator and artist Kathleen Chambers, she had always wanted to be a portrait painter.[[20]](#endnote-20) Oliver stopped exhibiting her art work publicly in the early 1960s when she became more established and well-known as a critic and was not known as an artist again until the very end of her life, when her work was included in three exhibitions held at Glasgow School of Art. In 2001, Oliver’s 1944 self-portrait was exhibited in *Art Booms with The Guns: The War Years at Glasgow School of Art*. In 2006, a small solo exhibition of her Festival Drawings were shown in the Mackintosh Building, and in 2012, the handmade dirndl skirt, described earlier, was on display as part of the exhibition *Studio 58: Women Artists in Glasgow Since World War 2*. Shortly before her death, Oliver’s friend and close collaborator Richard Demarco, exhibited her work at the Whitehouse Gallery in Kirkcudbright, alongside works by Margot Sandeman. Oliver’s education and experience as an artist undoubtedly gave her an expert, primary understanding of the formal and technical aspects of painting, clearly seen in her analysis and detailed description of art works, but it is the writing itself - her work as an art critic – which, together with her work as a curator, stands as her most significant legacy to Scottish art history. Within this, her advocacy of painting by women is a particularly valuable contribution, providing us with an otherwise scarce account of these practices.

**Critical Beginnings**

Richard Demarco has noted that ‘Cordelia began writing at a time when it was unthinkable for women to write outside a newspaper’s Women’s Pages’.[[21]](#endnote-21) If this somewhat overstates the case (Anne Donaldson, for example, was a respected journalist for *The Glasgow Herald* and Oliver’s route into the paper and in the mid-1950s, Diana Rowntree became *The Guardian*’s first architecture critic), it is nevertheless broadly true that her career began ‘at a time when women did not appear in the press as opinion makers’[[22]](#endnote-22) a view borne out by her anonymity in the early years of her career. Her earliest works of art criticism, published by *The* *Glasgow Herald*, were credited to an unnamed ‘Our Art Critic’. According to Oliver, the invitation to write criticism came about as a result of *The Glasgow Herald*’s chief art critic Alex Sturrock’s reluctance to review exhibitions he deemed ‘too modern’. Already a contributing artist to the paper, Oliver’s entry into art criticism was initially just an invitation to cover ‘the things he didn’t want to do’, but when Sturrock left the paper, the Assistant Editor, Reginald Biles, offered the position to Oliver.[[23]](#endnote-23) The rise of her reputation as a critic was meteoric. Soon after the formal appointment at *The* *Glasgow Herald*, Oliver received a phone call from *The Times* to review art exhibitions in Scotland, particularly during the Edinburgh Festival. Again, though, in the early years of her career she was often credited not by name, but as ‘Our Special Correspondent’. Then, based on the quality of her *Herald* reviews, she was approached by *The* *Guardian*’s Brian Redhead to write about theatre and visual art. Her reviews for *The* *Guardian* were published under her own name from the start, and Redhead’s phone call began a relationship with the paper that continued for twenty-five years. His commissioning of Oliver is significant in the context of Redhead’s period of editorship. As well as his support for Oliver, he championed Diana Rowntree and his role ‘took on increasing importance in the early Sixties, as the quality papers started to respond to demands for better coverage of social and lifestyle issues, in part trying to draw women readers into what had hitherto been essentially a club for men’.[[24]](#endnote-24) It seems likely, then, that Redhead’s support of women critics was part of this attempt to expand the publication’s readership and reflect social change. Oliver’s first review, in 1961, was included under the ‘Mainly for Women’ page. Oliver has stated that her experience at *The Guardian* was notable in that (in her words) they ‘weren’t at all anti-women’ in an era when she was one of few women critics working in Scotland. Her experience with other publications was less equitable. Recalling commissions for an Edinburgh-based literature and arts journal, for example, she remarked that on the two occasions she had been asked to contribute ‘they always remarked on women artists. I told them to stop it. It was quite sexist – very much so’.[[25]](#endnote-25) Where Oliver’s start as an art critic for *The Glasgow Herald* had been somewhat serendipitous, based on social connections and her existing work as an illustrator, *The* *Guardian* and *The* *Times* commissions were based strictly on her basis of her writing alone. This external validation was enough to encourage Oliver to consider pursuing writing as a career.

A constant throughout Oliver’s career as a critic and curator was her quiet support for art by women, and her particular focus on painting as a medium. Though in print she rarely made direct reference to gender or to the social or political position of women in the art world, it was clear that she believed the most productive action she could take in support of women’s art practice was to use her position as a critic and curator to facilitate opportunities for women. Her aim, then, was to create increased visibility for artists she thought were worthwhile through exhibitions, catalogues and reviews. As Kathleen Chambers has noted, Oliver ‘felt that women should get credit for producing good work. She never felt they did, ever. She was good at reviewing women and felt it was important that their profile was notable. She always said that she was given free reign at *The Guardian* to choose what she wrote about’.[[26]](#endnote-26)

In her curatorial work, catalogue essays, and books Oliver’s choices reveal her particular interests. In her regular exhibition reviews, no preferential treatment was afforded to women beyond their sometimes strategic inclusion (or where they weren’t represented, questions around their absence in themed or group shows) but Pat Douthwaite, Bet Low, Winifred Nicholson, Joan Eardley and Jessie M. King were artists she had specifically chosen to focus on at length and there were a number of artists that she repeatedly reviewed and clearly found interesting, including Anda Paterson and Carole Gibbons. Regardless of her preference or proximity to an artist, Oliver’s critical response was always impartial and she could vary her response from review to review, sometimes writing with enthusiasm about a painter’s recent work, at other times expressing frank and fierce disappointment in their latest exhibition. A review from 1960, for example, describes Anda Paterson’s ‘overworked art nouveau texturism’ as ‘unattractive’ while conceding that in spite of these flaws, ‘there is always evidence of a singular personality behind the highly competent brush’.[[27]](#endnote-27) Oliver regarded painting as a language in its own right, and one in which she was fluent. Her writing was often characterised by its emphasis on visual description, on form and technique. Her critical judgement often rested on how successfully she deemed an artist to have achieved their critical intentions with the visual and formal expression of these ambitions in their chosen medium. She had a particular distaste for art historical approaches which focussed on biographical details ‘without looking at the work itself’.[[28]](#endnote-28) She was also keen to disassociate herself from the kinds of critics who claimed ‘discovery’ of certain artists and was contemptuous of those who did. Although that was often her role, she avoided taking credit for her advocacy or championing of artists she felt were under-represented.

Oliver’s efforts to represent the art work of women were particularly evident when the artists in question were related to men working in the same profession. In writing about artist couples, she was careful to pay close attention to the work of both. For all of her interest in the work of Hugh Adam Crawford, for example, she frequently referred to the work of Kathleen Mann in her writing. Likewise, she was interested in the design of E.A. Walton, but mounted a show of the work of Jessie M. King. Between Ben and Winifred Nicholson, she focussed on Winifred. A friend and admirer of Tom Macdonald and Bet Low, she ensured that both artists received the same measure of critical and curatorial attention, curating separate solo shows at the Third Eye Centre. From this, we can see a consistent attempt to redress the balance of artist’s reputations, to ensure the works of wives, mothers, sisters were not overshadowed by those of their husbands, fathers and brothers. Even works produced by friends and collaborators were closely scrutinised if the woman was deemed to be less visible. Writing of a series of works by Ian Hamilton Finlay and Margot Sandeman, for example, Oliver was pointed in her view that Sandeman’s role had been overshadowed, that she had been relegated to the status of a lesser ‘collaborator’ rather than joint or co-author. Both artists had been fellow students of Oliver at Glasgow School of Art in the 1940s and she often spoke derisively of ‘wee Finlay’ without public recourse to Sandeman’s views on the matter. Between the 1960s and 1980s Finlay and Sandeman frequently collaborated on paintings and works on paper, including designs for Finlay’s Wild Hawthorn Press. Writing in *ArtWork* in 2005, Oliver praised aspects of Finlay’s work before remarking that,

He has never ceased to persuade visually creative artists to allow him to use their images – sometimes suggested by him – but then, so what? It is the image, not the suggested idea, that counts in the end […] there was a brief period, too, when his friend, the painter Margot Sandeman, allowed him to attach a tiny, verbal poem to an occasional canvas when he felt his and her work to be related in some way.’[[29]](#endnote-29)

The previous year, in an essay on the state of contemporary visual art in Scotland, she alluded to the same issue:

Among older women painters Lys Hansen’s formidable contribution can never be overlooked. And what a pity that the work of Margot Sandeman – still, with the late Joan Eardley, first among my contemporaries – is seldom if ever seen in public galleries. The occasional maverick – I think of Ian Hamilton Finlay – a political concrete poet *au fond* - can even rise to fame beyond Scotland by teaming up with (some would say making use of) talented visual artists.’[[30]](#endnote-30)

In spite of her intentions to promote the work of her friend, Oliver perhaps overstated the case in this instance – the paintings by Sandeman were clearly hers, made in collaboration with Finlay, and attributed as such, and vice versa. That her distinctive, poetic work is not more widely known is another matter.

Between 1961 and 1993 Oliver published over four hundred and fifty reviews, features and articles with *The Guardian* alone, and was given far more freedom to choose the artists and exhibitions she covered than had been the case at *Th*e *Glasgow Herald* or *The Times*. We can assume from this that her choices were considered and sometimes strategic, which may explain the regularity and focus on the work of women in her critical writing. In a 1964 review for *The Guardian*, accompanied by an image of Joan Eardley’s unfinished 1963 painting *Two Children*, Oliver wrote that ‘Scotland has a number of accomplished women painters and many of these are in evidence this year’[[31]](#endnote-31) and her reviews throughout the 1960s would go on to profile these ‘accomplished women’ at each opportunity. Of the women who feature most prominently in Oliver’s critical and curatorial work, all are painters, and almost all lived, worked or were educated in Glasgow. While she had lived in the capital for almost a decade in the 1950s and spent much of her early working life reviewing Edinburgh Festival exhibitions and performances (not to mention her long association with Richard Demarco’s Edinburgh projects), Oliver made no secret of her preference for Glasgow and saw the city’s cultural production in visual art and theatre as more than equal to its east coast counterpart. In a review from 1964, for example, she wrote that her intention was ‘to correct the prevalent impression that Scottish painting begins and ends in Edinburgh’.[[32]](#endnote-32) While she was respectful of work by painters such as Elizabeth Blackadder and Anne Redpath, and favourably reviewed Mardi Barrie and other east coast painters, she often criticised the ‘Edinburgh Style’ which, she wrote ‘depends mainly, if not quite altogether, on wealth and brilliance of colour, virtuoso handling of paint, and sometimes rather exotic or romantic subject matter – “escapist” is the stronger word which some would prefer to use.’.[[33]](#endnote-33) For Oliver, Glasgow painters were less conservative and more dynamic and diverse in style and subject matter than the ‘drawing room’ painting which tended to dominate the Royal Scottish Academy and the Edinburgh galleries. As early as 1960, in a review entitled ‘Out of the West’, she stated that ‘the West of Scotland has a growing body of talent to match against the older, better known painters from Edinburgh’[[34]](#endnote-34) and her critical reputation was in part built on her lack of deference and occasional iconoclasm towards the titans of Scottish painting. When defending Robin Philipson’s inclusion in a major exhibition she wrote about him as a magnificent colourist, before adding that it had been like listening to a virtuoso vocalist who was so in love with the sound of his own voice, he had forgotten what he was singing about. According to Oliver, Philipson never spoke to her again.[[35]](#endnote-35)

From the start to the end of her career Oliver consistently wrote about the work of Glasgow School of Art graduates.[[36]](#endnote-36) In one review, she questions Bet Low’s absence from *Plus / Minus Thirty*, a group exhibition of ‘young progressive painters’. In another, from *The Glasgow Herald* in August 1960, she praises Carole Gibbons’ experimentation with abstraction - her large, ‘unwieldy’ paintings are singled out alongside Jack Knox and Douglas Abercrombie as the best of the group. In a 1965 review for *The Glasgow Herald* Oliver, as ‘Our Art Critic’ noted her ‘satisfaction’ to ‘see a good Carole Gibbons collage holding its own with an Elizabeth Blackadder landscape (also a good example of her work)’.[[37]](#endnote-37) And in an earlier review, where she finds the work of other painters disappointing, Oliver reserves special praise for Gibbons, and indulges in (for her) an unusually gendered reading of the work:

When paint is used as a language in itself, more or less fluently, as it is by Carole Gibbons in this exhibition, the critic cannot help but feel satisfaction. This painter has what I sometimes feel to be a peculiarly female (as distinct from feminine) gift: she is at the same time uninhibited and full of taste and sensitivity, often surprising us with her colour, which is seldom ‘fashionable’, and her shapes which, while abstract in so far as one cannot precisely ‘place’ them, are curiously pregnant with meaning, even at a considerable distance.[[38]](#endnote-38)

Oliver’s decoupling of the words ‘female’ and ‘feminine’ in this review represent one of the few occasions where her critical intention, while not strictly ‘feminist’, nevertheless shares many of feminism’s concerns. In her rejection of the pejorative overtures and well-worn gender norms associated with the word ‘feminine’ (e.g. as it has been used in criticisms of painting by women, with all the attendant implications of adjectives such as ‘delicate’, ‘fragile’, ‘light’, ‘pretty’ and so on) there is a suggestion that Gibbons’ formal approach, her taste, is determined by or contingent upon her sex. Written in 1961 it prefigures one of the endeavours of early feminist art history in considering the possibility of a distinctly female aesthetic.

While Joan Eardley, Bet Low and Carole Gibbons featured regularly and almost always favourably in *The Guardian* reviews from the early 1960s onwards, Oliver was not always so positive about art work by women, even if she was determined to ensure their equal representation in critical writing. She occasionally wrote about the work of Mary Armour, though thought her paintings to be poorer versions of Anne Redpath: ‘Armour’s work is to Anne Redpath’s as highly coloured prose is to poetry’.[[39]](#endnote-39) For Oliver, Lil Nielson’s paintings were overly influenced and overshadowed by Joan Eardley and her frequent reviews of Anda Paterson’s work were mixed. Even painters she clearly admired were not above reproach if they exhibited work she considered to be unresolved. While she was clearly struck by the energy and dynamism of Carole Gibbons’ work, she sometimes bemoaned its ‘occasional banalities’[[40]](#endnote-40) and elsewhere found it the ‘least cerebral but by no means the least interesting’ of the works on display.[[41]](#endnote-41)

In spite of her clear advocacy of painting by women, Oliver was not a critic who judged work in relative terms. While she had sympathy in a broad sense, she made no allowances for the obstacles faced by women in the art world when it came to critiquing their work, going so far, in a Herald article of 1964, to question ‘why it is that the annual exhibition of the Scottish Society of Women Artists always leaves me so unsatisfied’, in a review unambiguously titled ‘Women Artists’ Work Unsatisfying’. Her conclusion was that,

The blame lies in the unsuitable contrast between the dignity and formality of the RSA galleries themselves and the near-amateur quality (to be kind) of so much of the work shown. Going round the exhibition it is difficult not to suspect that many women of a certain talent succumb too easily to the quickly attuned effect. Paintings of this sort are often attractive enough at first sight, but only rarely do they hold one for more than a moment or two’ before going on to congratulate the exhibition on being ‘an improvement on last year’.[[42]](#endnote-42)

**The artist-critic as curator**

As the 1960s continued, Oliver’s reputation as a critic became firmly established and she continued to write regular broadsheet criticism until the early 1990s. Articles, reviews and essays on art, theatre and culture continued to appear occasionally until her death in late 2009. In the 1970s, Oliver was asked to organise a number of exhibitions, an activity that would continue at regular intervals for two decades. Her work as a freelance curator (or, in her words a ‘maker of exhibitions’) began with a series of exhibitions for the Scottish Arts Council, including an important retrospective of Jessie M. King in 1971. Between the 1970s and 1990s she also worked as a curator and writer for Glasgow’s Third Eye Centre, of which she was a founding member. She remained as a Board Member after the move from 5 Blythswood Square (the former gallery space of the Scottish Arts Council and once home to the Glasgow Society of Lady Artists from the late 1890s) to larger premises on Sauchiehall Street and enjoyed close working relationships with Directors Tom McGrath from 1974-77 and his successor Christopher Carrell, who remained in post until the closure of the Third Eye Centre in 1991. Carrell was instrumental in establishing an art bookshop and publishing arm of the Centre and Oliver wrote many of the exhibition catalogue essays during this period.

The Centre’s inaugural exhibition, in 1975, was an exhibition of the work of Joan Eardley, curated by Oliver. In 1978 she curated two significant group exhibitions of Scottish painting: *Crawford and Company:* *Selected Work 1928-1978* at the Third Eye Centre and, for the Scottish Arts Council, *Painters in Parallel*, a major survey show held at Edinburgh College of Art. In the smaller Glasgow show, an homage to her old tutor Hugh Adam Crawford and his alumni, Oliver again exhibited the work of Joan Eardley, and ‘two considerable woman artists, Margot Sandeman and Bet Low [who] will certainly rate even more highly in the future’.[[43]](#endnote-43) More broadly, in terms of gender, sexuality and the production of art, Oliver’s catalogue essay was also notable (for the period) for its open discussion of the relationship between Robert Colquhoun and Robert MacBryde and of Crawford’s attempts to keep the two artists together when Colquhoun won a travelling scholarship. In Oliver’s essay, Colquhoun and MacBryde are clearly lovers and life partners rather than euphemistic ‘friends’.[[44]](#endnote-44) In her catalogue essay for *Painters in Parallel* Oliver described the exhibition as ‘the fruit of more than thirty years of looking with interest at Scottish painting (nearly twenty years of these spent as a working critic or reporter and before that, more than ten as an active worker in the field’.[[45]](#endnote-45) Bringing together the work of seventy-six painters, the exhibition represented Oliver’s breadth of experience and knowledge of her subject and gave her a further opportunity to showcase the work of artists she had long supported, including Pat Douthwaite (who had lived briefly with Colquhoun and MacBryde and other artists in England), Mardi Barrie, Carole Gibbons, Bet Low, Margot Sandeman and, of course, Joan Eardley. In spite of the inclusion of a number of significant east coast painters, the exhibition again revealed Oliver’s Glasgow bias, specifically her loyalty to her own generation of Glasgow School of Art graduates.

Following *Crawford and Company*, Oliver’s association with the Third Eye Centre continued with an exhibition and catalogue essay on Winifred Nicholson in 1979, and, in 1981, *Seven Scottish Artists*, an exhibition of the work of Pat Douthwaite, Fionna Geddes, Carole Gibbons, Jacki Parry, June Redfern, Merilyn Smith and Kate Whiteford. Both exhibitions, and those which followed, including solo shows and accompanying catalogues of work by Lys Hansen (1984), Bet Low (1986) and Patricia Douthwaite (1988), highlighted Oliver’s continuing commitment to the work of women. According to Kathleen Chambers, ‘she was very, very proud of the number of women who had been showcased through the Third Eye Centre – she felt that was important’.[[46]](#endnote-46) In the catalogue for *Seven Scottish Artists* Oliver made her views on ‘women artists’ abundantly clear, tracing a lineage of creative work by women in Scotland back to Kate Cranston and her Mackintosh-designed tearooms, Jessie M. King and the Glasgow Society of Lady Artists, founded in 1882, while decrying ‘Scotland’s brand of male chauvinism’, including Glasgow Art Club’s policy (in 1981) not to allow women as full members. For Oliver, the title of the exhibition was strategic,

… a deliberately non-discriminatory, anti-sexist title which merely serves to press home the point that the seven participants, who happen to be female – and “happen” is the operative word – are well able to hold their own in any company of Scottish artists in their age group, whether male or female’.[[47]](#endnote-47)

According to Oliver, while all of the artists were aware of ‘the changes needing to be made in male attitudes towards women (nor, be it said, in many women’s tame acceptance of the status quo)’ the work itself, simply by virtue of being produced by a woman, should not be regarded as necessarily ‘feminist’ in theme or subject matter. Oliver’s curatorial approach, then, was not to showcase feminist art, but to ensure that art by women, whatever its style or focus, had an audience. In a history of the Third Eye Centre, written in 1993 for *Variant* magazine, Oliver recalled the *Seven Scottish Artists* show:

Women, you will have noticed, whether as exhibiting artists, conference attenders or entertainers, have never been overlooked in the programming at the Third Eye. I myself was responsible for selecting an exhibition called *Seven Scottish Artists*, a title that set out quite deliberately to conceal the fact, in prior publicity, that all seven participants were female.[[48]](#endnote-48)

Oliver goes on to discuss the obstacles she faced in curating the exhibition, which had originally been planned in response to an invited exchange with The Women’s Building in Los Angeles, but was refused Scottish Arts Council funding, a decision she described as ‘inexplicable, in view of its quality’.[[49]](#endnote-49)

While she often wrote about the challenges faced by women in the art world (her discussion of Anne Redpath’s decision to give up painting while raising her children in the essay for *Painters in Parallel* is particularly notable in this respect) Oliver rarely discussed art work itself in gendered terms. The few exceptions to this were her accounts of the work of Carole Gibbons, as discussed, and, in particular, her interpretation of the work of Pat Douthwaite. In 1988, for *The Guardian*, in a departure from the mainstay of readings of the artists’ work, she referred to Douthwaite’s ‘flaunting courage’ and ‘infectious humour’, the ‘urgent subjectivity counterbalanced by the masterly technique’ and her sense that ‘every Douthwaite painting is a performance, and, like an actress supremely in command of her craft but who retains the gift of empathy with her chosen role, she continues to invent or discover apt painters’ parallels her sensations and sensibilities’.[[50]](#endnote-50) In an earlier essay written in 1970 for *Scottish International* Oliver’s opening line claimed that ‘talent for the visual arts is as plentiful in women as in men: they abound in sensibility, are every bit as perceptive as their opposite sex’.[[51]](#endnote-51)

In Douthwaite, Oliver found,

a woman artist who combines in one person – and balances in the correct proportion for her own sound development – what for convenience we will call the male and female attributes, that is strength and sensibility: a painter or sculptor who feels and sees as a woman but gives form to her conceptions without equivocation, without self-indulgence in unnecessary gesture or the cosmetic byways of colour. Joan Eardley was one such painter; another, I suspect, might be Patricia Douthwaite.[[52]](#endnote-52)

Later in the text, writing of paintings such as *Woman with Striped Sleeve* (1969) and *All the Birds Love Leda II*, (1969) she continued that the artist was ‘capable of manipulating line and phrase so that your eye must linger here, move slowly enough there (however seductively pleasing the pattern) to let the mind take over’.[[53]](#endnote-53) The essay recounts Oliver’s experiential and visceral encounter with the work, and describes the way in which Douthwaite’s work can shock and jar the viewer, ‘like suddenly confronting your hungover self unexpectedly mirrored, in the harsh daylight of the morning after, and being forced to come to terms with its unromantic reality’.[[54]](#endnote-54) In other written accounts of her work, often written by men, Douthwaite’s physical appearance as a younger women is frequently described. As an older woman, comments on her ‘beauty’ were replaced with references to her mental and emotional health. In Oliver’s writing, while she does not ignore the relationship between the artist and her work, the critical attention is respectful in its attentiveness to the form of the painting, its affective qualities, its visual force and the artist’s expressive use of paint. For Oliver, Douthwaite was a painter who had had to ‘come to terms with the facts of being human, female and imperfect. She knows the feel, from the inside out, of the brittle bone beneath the skin, the flesh that creases and perspires, the hair that is sometimes lank, the lacklustre eye; she paints, in short, the sensation of being women, unromanticised’.[[55]](#endnote-55) In her discussion of Douthwaite’s work, then, it is clear that a key point of interest for Oliver was the way in which the paintings sought to contest, undermine or question societal assumptions and expectations of the way women should look, behave or represent themselves, and the ways in which they could reject gender norms. Of the *Mary Queen of Scots* series of drawings, Oliver stated that what the artist ‘draws on is her own femaleness (not “femininity” as it us usually understood) but she gives expression to it with a single-mindedness, a completeness which most people think of as masculine’.[[56]](#endnote-56)

As her longer pieces on Pat Douthwaite demonstrate, Oliver’s writing for exhibition catalogues and magazines gave her the opportunity to write much more detailed, extended essays on the work of artists she admired, and to consider individual works of art in depth - until this point, she had had to work within the word limits and confines imposed by standard newspaper review formats. While she had contributed longer essays to journals such as *Scottish International* in the 1970s (including an incendiary piece on the state of art schools in Scotland) she had rarely been given the chance to offer sustained or extensive discussions of artists she had written about since the early 1960s.

In the 1980s, alongside her continued broadsheet criticism, Oliver began to concentrate on more extensive writing projects, including book-length critical biographies of James Cowie (1984), a monograph on Jack Knox (1983), histories of Scottish Opera (1987) and the Citizens Theatre (1999), and a range of other books and long-form catalogue texts which appeared until the 1990s. Oliver’s writings on Joan Eardley are the most sustained and extensive of all her subjects. She wrote countless reviews of Eardley’s work in the 1960s, believing her to be ‘the finest painter Scotland has had since the Glasgow School’[[57]](#endnote-57) and she was determined to ensure the artist received proper recognition. While Eardley’s work was already critically acclaimed at the time of her death, Oliver was concerned that she be remembered and properly acknowledged in the history of Scottish art. A number of memorial exhibitions were held immediately after Eardley’s death, including a Scottish Arts Council show at Glasgow’s Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum for which Oliver was asked to write catalogue preface, and one at the Scottish Gallery in Edinburgh for which she wrote the catalogue foreward. As mentioned earlier, in 1975 the Third Eye Centre’s opening exhibition on Eardley was organised by Oliver with a catalogue designed by George Oliver. In the catalogue essay, Oliver had already expressed concern over Eardley’s declining reputation, only twelve years after her death. It was not until twenty-five years after Eardley’s death, in 1988, that a full retrospective was held at The University of Edinburgh’s Talbot Rice Gallery. Many credited the decision to mount the exhibition on Oliver’s persistent championing of Eardley's work in newspapers, magazines and journals. In the same year, Oliver published her book *Joan Eardley, RSA*, the first full-length study of the artist, still considered to be the standard text. She continued to write about Eardley until her own death in 2009, contributing the entry on the artist to *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* in 2004. In Oliver’s obituary in *The Scotsman*, Giles Sutherland noted that Eardley book was still recognised as an important contribution to the rather limited corpus of criticism about the painter’s work. He further observed:

In writing about Eardley, Oliver’s prose reaches a height of perspicacity and insight rarely achieved by her elsewhere, as in an article published in *Artwork* in 2007, in which she wrote: “Some of Eardley’s finest paintings were made in those last seasons before her death in 1963. Whereas the seascapes demanded boards seven or eight feet in length, the cornfield paintings are contained within smaller, usually squarer limits, although they, too, are painted with a manifest freedom and urgency. “What they offer is an amazingly precise vision of the scene but with an additional insight into other sensations aroused by the experience – the scent of wildflowers, the hum of bees and other insects, the angry roar of the sea and the silence of a snow-bound village”.[[58]](#endnote-58)

As Sutherland acknowledges, at her best, Oliver’s critical writing on art could veer toward ekphrasis, employing rich metaphor in an attempt to express a kind of syneasthesic encounter with the work. This was particularly the case in her writing about new forms of art and emerging cross-disciplinary practices (such as her writing on the Strategy: Get Arts exhibition at Edinburgh College of Art in 1970), though it is apparent in her writing on painting too. At times, Oliver’s descriptive passages could be as evaluative and analytical as her explicit value judgements: the more poetic, the more she admired the work. Her enthusiasm, like her distaste, was never understated and she wrote with deep commitment to her critical practice. *The Herald* obituary noted that ‘her research for her books was exhaustive. When she wrote the biography of Joan Eardley, she tramped every inch of Catterline in research, standing in storms on the same Kincardineshire clifftops on which Eardley had painted.’[[59]](#endnote-59)

In 1999, forty years after her first art review in *The Glasgow Herald*, Oliver returned to a recurrent theme - an essay ‘women painters in Scotland’ for the magazine *Modern Painters*. In ‘Through Women’s Eyes’, Oliver attempts to showcase the most significant Scottish artists of the mid to late Twentieth century, reserving particular praise for older women, ‘Eardley’s contemporaries’ and ‘the ‘30s generation’.[[60]](#endnote-60) These included artists whose careers Oliver had followed, curated and written about for decades: Joan Eardley, Bet Low, Margot Sandeman, Wilhemina Barns-Graham, Elizabeth Blackadder, Anne Redpath, Carole Gibbons, Patricia Douthwaite and Lys Hansen. Later artists such Barbara Rae and June Redfern were also discussed, before a conclusion which appraised the work of younger figurative painters Joyce Cairns, Helen Flockhart and the ‘undoubtedly talented’ artists Alison Watt and Jenny Saville, whose ‘phenomenal early success’ Oliver blamed for what she regarded as a relative lack of development in their recent work. From this, we can assume that Oliver’s implicit point is that these younger artists’ success came suddenly, before they had graduated from art school, in contrast to the older generation of artists whose practices had been honed, developed and sustained over decades, their successes hard won. In the article, Oliver acknowledged that ‘for a small country Scotland has managed to produce a sizeable number of respect-worthy women painters’ but added, pointedly, that she was ‘not referring to the last two decades or so when an explosion in subsidised and commercial galleries, plus increasing media interest has helped to create a booming art market.’ Writing of an older generation, of which she was part, she noted the particular structural and institutional challenges women faced in the art world, and the concerted and sustained effort required to overcome such obstacles:

In earlier years, for women with a pressing need to find an outlet as painters, the going was much harder than it is today, but one only has to recall the best work of Bessie MacNichol and, later, Anne Redpath and Joan Eardley, different as they were in style, attitude and dedication, to realise the power of truly committed women even then to compete successfully with their far more visibly numerous male counterparts’.[[61]](#endnote-61)

**Conclusion**

In his entry on Oliver for *Oxford Dictionary of Biography*, the art historian, curator and critic Duncan Macmillan claimed, rather disingenuously, that she was ‘not at all a theoretical critic with any kind of programme unless it was to support what she saw as avant-garde’.[[62]](#endnote-62) But while Oliver’s writing may not have been theoretical (she was, after all, a critic writing primarily for an informed but general audience in broadsheet newspapers and exhibition catalogues, not academic journals) to claim she ‘had no programme’ overlooks or ignores clear and recurrent objectives: throughout her career, her perspective was international and she worked to raise the profile of Scottish art beyond Scotland by subjecting it to serious critical enquiry; she advocated for avant-garde and interdisciplinary practices, fighting against medium-specific purity, celebrating cross-disciplinarity and writing of ‘expanded field’ sculptural practices long before Rosalind Krauss coined the term; she attempted to counter Edinburgh’s perceived and self-declared dominance as the centre of cultural production in Scotland; and, most significantly, she worked tirelessly to promote the work of women by ensuring their visibility in exhibitions and critical writing. Oliver once claimed that Duncan Macmillan had never taken her seriously.[[63]](#endnote-63) She assumed that this was due to her lack of a university education but alluded to the fact that Macmillan’s lack of regard was also attributable to the fact she was a woman working in a field in which he was dominant in Scotland for a time. Whether or not this was the case, the impact of Oliver’s ‘programme’ was not so far removed from the work of feminist art historians such as Griselda Pollock, Rozsika Parker, Carol Duncan, Lisa Tickner, Marsha Meskimmon, Hilary Robinson and many others who have sought to do more than simply reinsert names or identify women counterparts within the art historical canon.

In her writing, Oliver frequently bemoaned and lambasted the laissez-faire attitude and insularity of the most powerful art organisations and institutions in Scotland including the Glasgow Art Club, the Royal Scottish Academy and even her beloved *alma mater*, the Glasgow School of Art. While never theoretical as such, Oliver often cited specific examples of inequality she had observed in the field of art and in doing so, contested the foundations and ideological assumptions on which institutional power and the formation of the canon was based. In her occasional dismantling of the apparent greatness of contemporary Scottish ‘Great Masters’ (including Robin Philipson and Ian Hamilton Finlay) she risked her critical reputation and social capital. As such, within the forms of writing available to her, Oliver examined the structural reasons for women’s exclusion from dominant narratives of art and ensured these views were disseminated to mainstream audiences beyond academia. Given the lack of scholarship on Oliver herself (she was not included in the *Modern Scottish Women* exhibition at National Galleries of Scotland in 2016, for example), Bill Williams’ claim that Oliver was ‘rather unfairly marginalised’ as a result of her courage and conviction (often by simply asking awkward questions) seems plausible. While never identifying as a feminist in her lifetime, many of Oliver’s later, more personal and anecdotal recollections reflected on her long career and focussed directly on issues around gender bias in the art world, referring to the way her work and that of her peers had been consistently challenged, obstructed or dismissed by men in positions of power. Giles Sutherland has noted that Oliver was ‘deeply supportive of Scotland’s female artists […] one can only suppose part of the reason for this was her perception of the inherent sexism in art colleges and in institutions such as the RSA, which favoured less talented male artists over their female counterparts.’[[64]](#endnote-64)

Cordelia Oliver was an integral part of the cultural life of Scotland for much of the Twentieth century and did much to champion the work of Scottish artists at home and beyond, especially the work of women who were her peers and associates. In this respect it seems remiss that her own work has so often been overlooked in recent histories of Scottish art and criticism. Oliver’s writing was distinctive. She wrote with an artist’s primary understanding of creative practice and subjected the work of others to exacting standards without exception. The US film critic Pauline Kael, writing in the same period, was known for her witty, biting, highly opinionated and sharply focused criticism. The same could be said of Oliver. Her critical writing was brilliantly descriptive, insightful and often very funny. Wry, sardonic and occasionally vituperative, her highly personal critical voice followed Charles Baudelaire’s edict that the best art criticism should be partial, passionate and political. In her own words, ‘you should never say it is no good. You should say you do not like it. Then you are perfectly safe’.[[65]](#endnote-65)

**IMAGES**

**Figure 1.**

*Cordelia Oliver at The Glasgow School of Art*. Photograph by Flora Ritchie, cousin of Cordelia Oliver, 1944. (The Glasgow School of Art Archives and Collections). Image reproduced with kind permission of David Oliver.

**Figure 2** (in colour where possible).

Cordelia Oliver. *Portrait of Hugh Adam Crawford* c. 1945. Oil on board, 570 x 420 mm (The Glasgow School of Art Archives and Collections). Image reproduced with kind permission of David Oliver.

**Figure 3** (in colour where possible).

Cordelia Oliver. *Self-Portrait*. 1944. Guthrie Award Winner. Oil on canvas, 608 x 508 mm (The Glasgow School of Art Archives and Collections). Image reproduced with kind permission of David Oliver.

**Figure 4** (black and white). Cordelia Oliver. *Edith Sitwell*. *c.1959.* Edinburgh International Festival drawings (Photo: Alan Dimmick). Image produced with kind permission of David Oliver, with assistance from Gráinne Rice and Kathleen Chambers.

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1. **Notes**

   ‘Obituary: Cordelia Oliver; writer, critic and artist.’, *The Herald*. January 29, 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Hartley, Scottish Art Since 1900, 24, 32. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Oliver, ‘Memories of GSA 1940-1944’, 2001: 22 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid, 23 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid, 20 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Redhead, ‘Sources in the GSA Archives’, 12 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Oliver, personal correspondence with the author in the form of notes for an exhibition ‘Cordelia Oliver Edinburgh Festival Drawings 1949-1960’ held at Glasgow School of Art in 2006. Oliver’s reference to *The Manchester Guardian* is incorrect here. Founded as *The Manchester Guardian* in 1821, the title changed to *The Guardian* in 1959. The new title was in place by the time Oliver began to write for the broadsheet but she continued to refer to it as *The Manchester Guardian* when referring to her early criticism. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Oliver, ‘German Expressionists at Edinburgh’. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Oliver, Cordelia. ‘The Glasgow School in the Forties’. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See, for example, Liz Arthur’s 2010 *Glasgow Girls* and Jude Burkhauser’s 2001 *Glasgow Girls*. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Oliver, ‘Memories of GSA 1940-1944’, 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Gordon Smith, *David Donaldson*, 66. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Renoir, J, *Renoir, My Father*, 205-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Oliver, ‘Two Exhibitions’. Over twenty-five years later, Oliver wrote enthusiastically about an exhibition of Dick’s work for *The Guardian*, likening her landscapes to Derain. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. In 1984, Oliver wrote a write a monograph on Cowie as part of the Modern Scottish Painters series published by University of Edinburgh Press, [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Oliver, ‘Memories of GSA 1940-44’, 24. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. *The Glasgow Herald*, founded in 1783, was renamed *The Herald* in 1992. During the years Oliver was writing for the newspaper, its title included ‘Glasgow’. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Kathleen Chambers, curator, artist and friend of Cordelia Oliver, in discussion with the author, 26 February 2010 [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Demarco, Cordelia Oliver obituary [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Kathleen Chambers, in discussion with the author, 26 February 2010 [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Oliver, in discussion with the author, 29 August 2002 [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Leapman, Obituary: Brian Redhead [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Oliver, in discussion with the author, 29 August 2002 [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Kathleen Chambers, in discussion with the author, 26 February 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Oliver, ‘Multum in Parvo in Art Show’. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Oliver, in discussion with the author, 29 August 2002 [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Oliver, ‘Little Sparta from another angle’. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Oliver, ‘Art’. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Oliver, ‘The Scottish Academy’. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Oliver, ‘Plus / Minus Thirty’ [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Oliver, ‘Exciting Show of Contemporary Scottish Art’. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Oliver, ‘Out of the West’. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Oliver, in discussion with the author, 29 August 2002 [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. For example, Oliver, ‘Young Artists from Glasgow’, *The Herald* August 1960. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Oliver, ‘Contemporary Exhibition at Inverleith’. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Oliver, ‘Young Glasgow Group’. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Oliver, ‘Mary Armour’. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Oliver, ‘Plus / Minus Thirty’. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Oliver, ‘Finding their feet’. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Oliver, ‘Women Artists’ Work Unsatisfying’. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Oliver, Crawford and Company, 6 [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid, 7 [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Oliver, Painters in Parallel, 1 [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Kathleen Chambers, curator, artist and friend of Cordelia Oliver, in discussion with the author, 2010 [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Oliver, Seven Scottish Artists, 3 [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Oliver, *‘*A History of the Third Eye Centre’*.* [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Oliver, Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Oliver, ‘Douthwaite’, 21 [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Oliver, ‘Patricia Douthwaite and Mary Martin’, 44 [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Ibid, 45 [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Oliver, ‘A Fine Scottish Painter’. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Sutherland, Giles, ‘Cordelia Oliver’, *The Scotsman,* 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. ‘Cordelia Oliver; writer, critic and artist. Obituary’, *The Herald*. January 29, 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Oliver, ‘Through Women’s Eyes’, 93 [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Macmillan, Duncan, ‘Cordelia McIntyre Oliver’. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Oliver, in discussion with the author, 2002. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Sutherland, Giles, ‘Cordelia Oliver’, *The Scotsman*, 2010.

    58 Oliver, in discussion with the author, 2002.

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    *Please note: for a number of references for texts written by Cordelia Oliver specific*

    *dates and page numbers cannot be cited. In these instances, the source was Oliver’s own*

    *press cuttings scrapbook, which was loaned to the author. For texts published in* The Glasgow Herald *I have cross-referenced with Google News Archive and microfiche records at the Mitchell Library in Glasgow.* [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)