**The Story of Scottish Art by Lachlan Goudie – Book Review**

According to the art historian Paul Stirton, ‘the historiography of modern art in Scotland should not be difficult to write - mainly because there are not many books on the subject’.[[1]](#endnote-1) Neil Mulholland has also supported this view, claiming that Scottish art has been mythologised through major exhibitions rather than art history or criticism’. [[2]](#endnote-2) If this is the case, it surely stands to reason that the relative dearth of books on the subject afford those that *have* been written far more weight in the formation of the canon. In a relatively small field, such accounts tend to become the touchstone for all subsequent histories. Certainly, this has been the case for Scottish art over the last century. After James Caw’s 1908 survey *Scottish Painting Past and Present*, with only a handful of short-lived exceptions, the most dominant and influential accounts of Scottish Art were published in the 1990s and early 2000s, notably Duncan Macmillan’s 1990 *Scottish Art 1460-1990*, revised and updated in 2000, and Murdo Macdonald’s *Scottish Art*, published as part of Thames & Hudson’s iconic *World of Art* series in 2000. It’s perhaps surprising, given this pace of publishing on the subject, that over the last six months two books on the history of Scottish art have been issued by the same publisher: a revised and updated version of Macdonald’s book in March 2021, only months after Thames & Hudson’s publication of a brand new book, *The Story of Scottish Art,* by artist and television presenter Lachlan Goudie.

Written from an artist’s perspective, Goudie’s book could have represented an escape from what the artist Mike Kelley described as ‘the oppressive, institutionalized version of art history’ where periods familiar to artists are rendered unfamiliar because of ‘the choice of figures deemed worthy to represent them.’ For Kelley, ‘historical writing becomes a duty for the artist at this point.’[[3]](#endnote-3) Sadly, what seems to have happened here is that Goudie has simply recycled the same perspectives, the same narrative and the same cast of characters we have encountered in earlier accounts, with no further update. So, while we have a beautifully presented, lavishly illustrated tome, *The Story of Scottish Art* is less ‘the’ story, than Goudie’s version of it. For the chapters on the twentieth century and beyond the book is as highly selective and contestable as its predecessors and does little to redress their (sometimes glaring) omissions and erasures. Even in these later chapters, there are still no artists of colour, and throughout the text women appear far more frequently as subjects than as producers (just 17 are mentioned within the 5000 year period covered by the book). In another remarkable missed opportunity, given the enormous changes to the reputation and impact of Scottish art internationally since the 1990s, the story stops over quarter of a century ago with early work by Christine Borland and Peter Doig. The last forty-five years, one of the most prolific and notable periods for Scottish art, is squeezed into eleven pages. Where Goudie deviates from the canon, it is only to write the author and his father into the story (barely a footnote elsewhere). This would be fine, had the title been ‘Lachlan Goudie’s Story of Scottish Art’ but it is not, and the cover endorsements claim that the book ‘will become the definitive guide to Scottish art’. I hope not.

Part of the issue here is that the scope is too broad from the outset, from the definition of Scottish art itself to the range of work discussed, from Neolithic symbols in Kilmartin Glen to installation art in 1990s Glasgow. While the book opens with ‘art’ discussed in its broadest sense, it narrows with each chapter, focussing primarily on painting: there is little design or architecture discussed after the sixteenth century. Artists such as the photographer Thomas Joshua Cooper or the sculptor Andy Goldsworthy, both internationally renowned in their field, are not mentioned at all. Meanwhile, the author dedicates 23 pages to his own artwork, and appears 18 times (more than any other entry) in his own index. To say that this overstates his role in the story of Scottish art would be an understatement. Perhaps it is fair enough that a book described as a deeply personal account is anecdotal and diaristic, but in Goudie’s hands this approach has led to the perpetuation of half-truths and mythologies. Does the artist (born in 1976) *really* remember the emergence of the New Image painters from Glasgow in the early 1980s, and how they ‘overshadowed’ his father’s generation? Is it accurate to describe the painters Steven Campbell, Ken Currie, Adrian Wisniewski as ‘gobby’? The central issue with Goudie’s book is that in his quest to present a coherent, coffee-table narrative, most of the good stuff is omitted, at times inexcusably. The work of figures such as the art historian and curator Alice Strang and the curatorial duo Mother Tongue have done much over the last decade to redress the relative absence of women and artists of colour in stories of Scottish art, but the same white, weary, roll-call of ‘the greats’ is trotted out uncritically here. There is a lot of Goudie - Lachlan and Alexander - in this book, which may be why far more successful artists such as Pat Douthwaite, Jessie M King, Anne Redpath, Elizabeth Blackadder, Bet Low, Ethel Walker, Maud Sulter, Kathleen Mann, Lucy McKenzie and many other twentieth century and contemporary artists of note have been squeezed out.

In the last two decades, Scotland has become a centre of art production. The trajectory of artists leaving Glasgow for London has been reversed. While awards, biennales and prizes are not necessarily a guarantee of ‘the best of’ Scottish art, that fact that there is barely a mention of the significant presence of Scotland and Scottish artists in the Turner Prize, the Derek Jarman Award, the Venice Biennale (both the Great Britain and Scottish Pavilion) and other ‘esteem indicators’ is startling. Rather, where they are mentioned, somewhat grudgingly, factual errors occur. Like Goudie himself, the artist Martin Creed studied in England, not Scotland. He is not, as Goudie claims, an alumnus of Glasgow School of Art. Likewise, Richard Wright is as much a graduate of Edinburgh College of Art as he is of Glasgow School of Art. The very central role of artist-led initiatives and organisations in recent developments of Scottish art are also omitted: Transmission, Collective, The Embassy and others do not appear: does he not know about them? The book ends with Goudie’s claim that the book has been ‘a pilgrimage’. If this is the case, it is a pity the author has not strayed further from a very well-worn path.

1. Stirton, P. (2007) ‘Notes Towards a Historiography of Modern Scottish Art’, *Journal of the Scottish Society for Art History*, Scottish Society for Art History, Vol. 12, p.40. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Mulholland, N. (2002) ‘Learning from Glasvegas: Scottish Art after the ‘90’’, Journal of the Scottish Society for Art History, Scottish Society for Art History, Vol. 7, p.61. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Kelley, M. (2002) ‘Artist/Critic [on the writings of John Miller]’ in Welchman, J. (ed.) (2003) *Mike Kelley: Foul Perfection – essays and criticism*, MIT Press, p. 223. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)