

The exhibition “Coming into View: Eric Watt's photographs of Glasgow” was held at Kelvingrove Art Gallery in Glasgow, from the 4th March 2023 to the 31st of July 2023; the exhibition was free, and a book illustrating Watt’s works was also available for sale. Eric Watt was a secondary school teacher and a member of Queen’s Park Camera Club, a keen amateur photographer, and a respected member and former president of the Scottish Photographic Federation. The exhibition offered an insight into people’s experience of Glasgow life – particularly in the Southside - from the late 1950s to the 1990s, as interpreted and processed by Watt through the sympathetic lens of his camera.

The Kelvingrove Art Gallery location offers a welcoming, buzzing background. Positioning the photographic display on the lively ground floor, next door to the room containing the artistic production of Glasgow’s own darlings, the MacDonald sisters, helps define it as a contributor to the city’s ever-evolving history and dynamic sense of self. The photographs – a clever, representative selection that leaves the visitor wanting more - are displayed in thematic sections, and visitors felt welcome in the easily accessible, non-intimidating space, which they are invited to freely criss-cross moving from one section to another. Those familiar with Glasgow can easily place from the pictures and their descriptions, the locations dear to Watt as a Glaswegian, particularly in the Southside and the Queen’s Park area. For the others, a map pinpointing key buildings and areas could have helped add a spatial dimension to pictures of faces, life circumstances, and personal histories. Watt’s photographs show the interactions between people of Glasgow, and between them and their urban environment. They express the sense of belonging shared by the photographer and his subjects – a common identity that enables him to understand and interpret his surroundings. They prompt viewers as inheritors and live components of such identity, to question and make sense of their own role as modern Glaswegians – and in my case, a Southsider myself – by renewing their own engagement with familiar places, objects, people, and events.

Watt’s pictures are a mixture of monochrome and colour shots. Some are posed, looking straight into the camera, presenting the carefree hopefulness of smooth youthful faces, or the unmistakable traces of daily grind in the lines of workmen’s tired yet smiley mugs. The poignant ‘Pedestrian Ferry, 2 January 1971’, shows keen-eyed, hopeful young men on the way a football match at the Ibrox stadium, where later that day 66 supporters would die in a crash. Many more are natural shots, expressing emotions through gestures and facial expressions, taken during personal life landmarks or simply capturing fleeting moments of human interaction between playmates, neighbours, co-workers, or family members.

By showing what appears to be the spontaneous, good-natured mixing of characters of different ages, social backgrounds, and ethnicities in Glasgow’s spaces, many of the pictures convey the idea of a peacefully diverse society, and a multicultural, blended community. The curators’ choices regarding the juxtaposition of pictures – for example, that of an Orange Walk in the city streets [Orange Walk, 1966] displayed in the same space as that of a Sikh wedding ritual [Eating Karah Pashad, April 1977], reinforces the narrative of Glasgow as a culturally evolving space, and of Watt’s interest in this. A more cynical visitor, perhaps aware of the tensions created in this period by the growing south-Asian population, could find this emphasis on effortless cooperation, a little suspicious. They could also note how the tension between different Christian/political beliefs and related sporting affiliations as a significant cause for friction and division – still ongoing in Glasgow today – is hardly touched upon.

Captions provide a useful critical commentary to explain and contextualise some objects or events depicted that would not be considered acceptable today [Wylie Hill Christmas Display, 1960-70]. They not only label and illustrate what is within the picture frame, but they also provide essential context that is not immediately apparent in the shot, and may not be known to the modern viewer. Alongside images of circumstances still relatable for the viewer - events still ongoing, and landmarks still standing as part of Glaswegians' daily lives, Watt's photographs bring back details that shortly after become part of the past: discontinued public transport routes and ferry links across the Clyde, and buildings now demolished. Human activities and jobs such as the blacksmith shoeing his horse, a man transporting wares on a horse-drawn cart [Horse and Cart, date unknown], and the knife grinder at his toil, are shown as fully connected with their communities – but we the viewers know, and Watt must have sensed, that they will shortly disappear. A profound atmosphere of loss, longing, and sadness permeates much of Watt's work – whether present already in his outlook at the time, sensing the inexorably fast pace of change threatening the world he knew, or stimulated in the viewer as a personal reaction, is hard to tell. What many pictures show are remains, relics, and ghosts.

The challenging and exciting relationship between Glasgow and the River Clyde – the ever-changing waterfront buildings, the boat traffic and the docks, the many bridges over it – is celebrated in many of the photographs. Pride and enthusiasm for this economically productive relationship, is counterbalanced by a growing awareness of the marginalised, alienating experiences it could provide. Here the individuals are not the centre of Watt's composition, they don't command attention by occupying the urban space and the frame with confidence, but are small, indistinct, lost figures, dwarfed by the growth of their new modern surroundings.

In portraying children playing lightheartedly in a disturbing wasteland, regrettably involved in destructive acts of violence – see for example 'Boys playing in a burning car [Blackhill, April 1972] - Watt manages to express optimism and hope for the future through the joyous unawareness of youth. Watt's child subjects, posing self-consciously or caught in spontaneous play, offer light-hearted, often colourful silhouettes set in grey, grim, rainy surroundings. Watt's stubbornly positive attitude towards Glasgow's future trajectory, comes across in his willingness to photograph new additions to the city – bringing change and innovation through the erection of new buildings, the successful settling of new communities, and the introduction of new technologies and ideas. Watt sees Glasgow's people as able and willing to engage with challenges, and take a position with respect to change. Momentous social and cultural events are seen through the experiences and direct involvement of the people of Glasgow who, through the piling of binbags during strikes captured by Watt, and their coming together in civic spaces to have a say, stand behind and bring forth the change they want - see for example the picture of a diverse group of Glaswegians earnestly protesting against nuclear war and nuclear armaments in central Glasgow [CND die-in George Square, April 1983].

Watt's pictures show people's everyday lives as intrinsically overlapping with economic and social changes, and within a city that is itself changing, and visually relates the intimate and the personal to the civic, the collective, and the national.