



National
Trust



Mapping
Contemporary
Art in the
Heritage
Experience

Contemporary Art at Gibside

Fiona Curran
Andrew Burton

12 May–30 September 2018

Foreword

by Andrew Burton, Professor of Fine Art at Newcastle University


Over the summer at the National Trust's Gibside you can discover new artworks by Fiona Curran and Andrew Burton.

These have been created as part of a research project, *Mapping Contemporary Art in the Heritage Experience*, which is exploring how contemporary art might change your experience at a heritage site. The project continues at nearby Cherryburn, where you can find new paintings by Mark Fairington.

As a group of researchers from Newcastle and Leeds Universities we are interested in finding out whether creating and siting new art in heritage places can change the ways in which these important places are understood and enjoyed.

Many artists shape their careers around making work for such special places, but we know little about its impact. How does art in heritage places change visitor experiences? Do we love it, dislike it, or just ignore it? This is what our project sets out to discover.

We welcome your involvement in this research: tell us what you think via Twitter

 @mcahe_NU #mcahe

For more information about this project, please visit

<https://research.ncl.ac.uk/mcahe/>

We hope you enjoy these new artworks which have been specially created for Gibside.



Mary Eleanor Bowes
1800, John Cox Dillman

Contemporary Art at Gibside

by Judith King, Senior Research Associate, Newcastle University

Between 12 May and 30 September 2018, visitors to Gibside can experience new work by two contemporary artists: Fiona Curran and Andrew Burton, who have been inspired by Mary Eleanor Bowes, the Countess of Strathmore and the heiress to the Gibside Estate.

Mary Eleanor (1749 – 1800) had a lifelong passion for botany, sending explorer William Paterson to collect rare and beautiful plants from the Cape in Africa. However, tricked into marriage by the charismatic adventurer Captain Andrew “Stoney” Robinson, Mary Eleanor’s life took a distressing turn. The wealth and beauty of Gibside was squandered as Stoney sold off woods, parkland and property to fund his nefarious activities.

Today, the Orangery is a poignant reminder of Mary Eleanor’s passion - this is where she kept her prized plant collections. Through her flamboyant work *Your Sweetest Empire is to Please* Fiona Curran celebrates the role that women played developing botanical knowledge in defiance of the educational restrictions of the 18th century. Fiona has created an architectural folly placed in front of the Orangery which is modelled on a Wardian Case, a container used to transport plants and seeds by ship. The folly is filled with startling exotic plants bursting out of their confinement.

“I collected many beautiful plants, particularly Ericas and Oxalias, with which the whole face of the country was beautifully decorated” From William Paterson, *A Narrative of Four Journeys into the Country of the Hottentots and Caffriaria*. Published 1789.

Fiona Curran, artist’s proposal for *Your Sweetest Empire is to Please*





work in progress in the studio on Andrew Burton's *The Orangery Urns*

Inspired by a group of urns that once graced the balustrade of the Orangery, Andrew Burton plays with the idea of returning these urns to Gibside.

He has created a group of gigantic vessels made from red and black clay whose huge size is in keeping with the scale of the landscape. The artworks, located in and around the walled garden and next to the avenue, are reminders of the way Mary Eleanor loved to walk and enjoy her gardens.

Some of the vessels are inscribed with episodes from the scandalous but harrowing story of the marriage of Mary Eleanor and Andrew “Stoney” Robinson. It’s a saga that captured the public imagination and culminated in the divorce filed by Mary Eleanor, a ground-breaking achievement for a woman in the 18th century.

“The Countess of Strathmore was the most intelligent female botanist of the age. She brought exotics from the Cape and was in the way of raising continually an increase in her collection, when, by her fatal marriage, the cruel spoiler came, and threw them away like loathsome weeds.” from Jesse Foot, *The Lives of Andrew Robinson Bowes, Esq. and the Countess of Strathmore*. Published 1810–15.



Fiona Curran *Your Sweetest Empire is to Please*

The Orangery

Fiona's work for Gibside reflects her interest in historical landscape, ownership and gender politics.

'From the midst of all the torments that Mary Eleanor was subjected to in her life, I wanted to find something to focus on that was a positive force to counteract her place in history as the 'Unhappy Countess', a victim of abuse and society gossip.'

'After discovering a specially commissioned botanical chest in The Bowes Museum at Barnard Castle in County Durham, my research began to focus on this aspect of Mary Eleanor's life.'

'It became clear that her interest in plants stemmed from her early education and her time spent in the landscape at Gibside.'

Fiona's commission for Gibside is rooted not only in the story of Mary Eleanor's confinement, but that of many women in the 18th century, captured by the writer Mary Wollstonecraft in 1792:

'Liberty is the mother of virtue, and if women be, by their very constitution, slaves, and not allowed to breathe the sharp invigorating air of freedom, they must ever languish like exotics, and be reckoned beautiful flaws in nature.'

Fiona Curran lives in Hertfordshire and is Senior Tutor for Mixed Media Textiles at the Royal College of Art in London.



Andrew Burton *The Orangery Urns*

The Walled Garden and beneath the Avenue

Andrew has researched the tempestuous story of Mary Eleanor Bowes' second marriage and has created a series of works that symbolise confinement, dependency, desperate bids for freedom and the outpourings of anger and loss.

Using the vessel form as a metaphor for the relationship between Mary Eleanor and Andrew "Stoney" Robinson, he has inscribed into the surface of the clay extracts from contemporary 18th century texts.

The Confessions of the Countess of Strathmore was a graphic and scandalous account of her 'misdemeanours' written by Mary Eleanor, probably under the direction of her husband.

In contrast, other vessels are inscribed with passages from the wonder-filled journals of Mary Eleanor's young plant collector, William Paterson, written during his journeys in the Cape. Each vessel forms a 'container' for sculptural elements that suggest other episodes and characters from Mary Eleanor's life at Gibside – her confinement and her deep interest in literature and exotic plants.

Andrew Burton is Professor of Fine Art at Newcastle University. His sculptures, often made using clay, respond to craft traditions and landscapes of Britain, India and Africa.

Artworks are located in and around the walled garden and next to the Orangery and avenue

These new art commissions are part of the research project *'Mapping Contemporary Art in the Heritage Experience'* led by Newcastle and Leeds Universities working in partnership with the National Trust, Arts&Heritage, English Heritage and the Churches Conservation Trust. *Contemporary Art at Gibside* is part of Trust New Art, the National Trust's programme of contemporary arts inspired by the places we look after.

Other commissioned artworks can be seen through the summer at:

Gibside 12 May – 30 September

Cherryburn 2 June – 4 November

Holy Trinity Church 6 July – 23 September, weekends only

Belsay Hall 21 July – 16 September

Please visit <https://research.ncl.ac.uk/mcahe/> for details.

 @mcahe_NU #mcahe

With special thanks to the Gibside team for their support for this project.

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www.nationaltrust.org.uk/gibside

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