

Discover Aberdeen Art Gallery Tour

Gallery 4 - Human Presence

Brief Encounter by Calum Colvin, 1990

Spoken by Rachel Thibbotumunuwe, Learning Manager

Colvin is a Scottish artist, born in Glasgow 1961.

He is Professor of Contemporary Art Practice at Duncan Of Jordanstone College of Art in Dundee.

Colvin tells stories and explores myths about Scottishness through his art.

His works are complex combinations of photography, mural painting, lighting design and installation art.

Making his work often involves taking a roomful of objects and painting a design on them.

These are constructed artworks that explore Scottish identity and culture but with a foot firmly in history of art.

Fellow Scottish artist David Mach said Colvin is “an artist that gives you history, myth, comedy, tragedy, pathos and drama all at the same time. Seeing one of his works is like going to the theatre”.

Technically, these photographs are created ‘in-camera’ and not by using digital tools. Everything that you can see here was photographed on film - some of the elements are painted across a variety of furniture, toys, sculptures and the ‘walls’ of the room.

‘Brief Encounter’ is really big - each of the images that make up this triptych are about 2m by 1.5m, so if you were standing in front of them in the gallery, they would be taller than the average man.

The title itself alludes to romantic ideas - ‘Brief Encounter’ is also the title of a British romantic drama film from 1945.

There is so much to see in this colourful artwork - as we look at it, we can spot clues to help figure out the story Colvin is telling us.

There are art references in this work - ancient Greek and Roman myths

For those who are familiar with the history of British art, one of these myths was interpreted by the artist Lord Frederic Leighton, in a bronze sculpture called *An Athlete Wrestling with a Python*. (You can view this artwork via [TATE online](#) to compare it to *Brief Encounter*)

Colvin has referenced Lord Leighton's *An Athlete Wrestling with a Python* and recreated it here by painting across a variety of surfaces. However, in '*Brief Encounter*', instead of wrestling with a snake, the man is wrestling with electrical cables tipped with light bulbs.

The body of the man is painted across a sculpture of a woman - a female body that you may recognise as the ancient Greek sculpture *Venus De Milo*.

An action man doll takes on a central role in each of the three images - he is clad in tartan although sometimes he has very little on!

In one scene, while wearing a kilt, he gazes out of the window, clutching a love-heart cocktail stirrer and a pencil drawing of an atomic explosion.

We can also see what appears to be a painting of Adam and Eve co-existing in a scene with plastic toy dinosaurs.

There are a few pieces of papers with printed text lying in the foreground of the pictures. One has a quote attributed the ancient chinese philosopher LA OW ZA Laozi.

'Going on means going far, going far means returning'

This makes me think of the Scottish diaspora - millions of people who left Scotland to create their own versions home elsewhere in the world, all adding to the idea of Scottishness

Images of Hollywood legends James Dean and Marilyn Monroe can also be spotted, along with step by step instructions on how to wear a kilt, plastic flowers, pages from comic books and ceramic ornaments - a constellation of kitsch culture - a few things that the artist who was born in the 1960's would have grown up with. These days, I guess we would be thinking about communication, online games, TV boxsets, movies, social media and consumerism. Things that, even if it's unconscious, help to shape our identities.

What can you spot in *Brief Encounter* and what would you put into a picture that explores your identity?