In Search of the Blue Flower Alexander Hamilton and The Art of Cyanotype

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Scottish Photographic Artists Series

The Scottish Photographic Artists series presents Scotland-based artists who have created a substantial body of work that deserves the attention of a wider audience.

This series will feature artists with an international profile who are in the later stages of their careers. Introduced by Sara Stevenson, renowned Hill and Adamson scholar and former Curator of Photography at National Galleries Scotland, each artist will present their career and draw on reviews by invited writers in order to present multiple perspectives on their work. A final section will include a dynamic selection of images covering all aspects of their creative practice. Published annually and marketed through our partner Edinburgh University Press, this series further expands our range of publications.

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Introduction

Sara Stevenson

The Blue Flower – a search, personal and artistic, echoing the continual quest in Germanic and Celtic folk tradition for the elusive blue flower – symbol of the endless pursuit of something that lies beyond our reach.

One of the pleasing ideas in scientific evidence is that touch leaves a trace, contact effects an exchange. Touch a wall and you leave fingerprints; the wall has touched you and minute particles will transfer, so you become part wall. Such exchanges are the basis of interconnectedness in nature, and even genetically separated species may be woven together. Alexander Hamilton's work in cyanotype consciously exploits this and is distinguished by the physical and visual relationship between the object and the print – the process is essential to the picture. The plant is laid on the paper, which will capture an image of its delicate complexity; at the same time, sap and colouring may leach into the paper and interact with the chemistry. The erratic sun in Scotland defines the image – a silhouette combining shadow with transparency, drifting round the edges, and even showing us inside the plant. The chemical reaction follows the light, and the atmosphere – dry or damp. This is not simply what we might see of the plant but a response to its nature.

Hamilton is influenced by Ruskin, Goethe, and Beuys, all of whose ideas proposed an art in communication with the natural world. After considering the process at Edinburgh College of Art, he chose cyanotype, a partnership enabling him to explore and interpret nature. The connection is intuitive; it offers a window into nature and the trace of what was there, its unique element, which magically requires only water and the sun to reveal its essence.

He focussed from the beginning on plants. The respect and approach never changed. Each plant, leaf, petal required the same meditative approach and engagement. The cyanotype is made with fresh water drawn from a close natural source; the water is mixed with the cyanotype chemicals, and a new solution applied to paper. The plant is placed on the paper and revealed to sunlight. Simply removing the plant and bathing the paper in water completes the work. He then assesses if the result reveals what he felt and saw. The image is rejected if the plant sap destroys the trace of the plant, the water source reacts badly to the chemicals, or the image washes out. Generally, one image out of fifty will hold the trace he is seeking.

If asked to choose from his fifty-year artistic journey, he would elect his period of intense engagement with the cyanotype in France. After twenty years, his confidence had grown, but some elements of the trace were missing. In 1991, living in the village of Blenne near Fontainebleau, he found images started to truly speak. With new energy and knowledge, he returned to Scotland and made the cyanotypes published in the *Four Flowers* catalogue. His remarkable work led to exhibitions, residencies and public art commissions. Over time, Hamilton's artistic mission has been to develop an authentic bond between his cyanotypes and the natural world, creating poetic images in the process.

In Search of the Blue Flower

Early Years

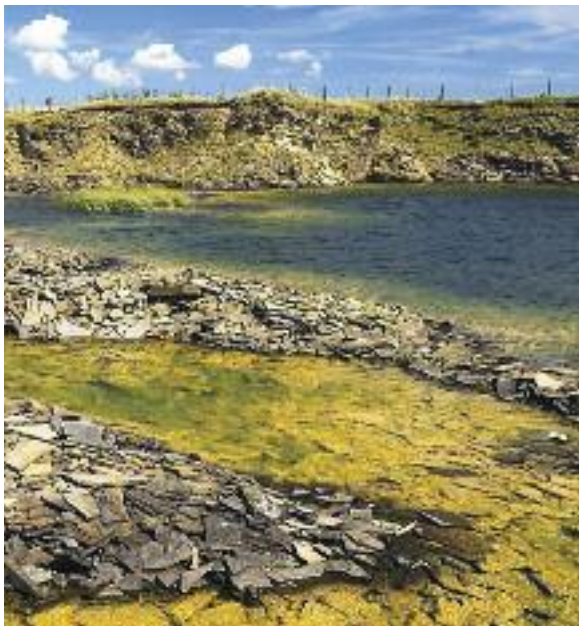
Leaving a mark; seeking to leave a trace. My earliest serious attempts at art were to observe an object, and to place it onto a prepared surface and to use chemicals and light to reveal and to leave a mark, a trace of its unique existence.

Photography as the artform of the 20th century; in its beginning, the early practitioners used chemical processes to reveal glimpses of the world they saw around them. The early British pioneers John Herschel (1792-1871) and Fox Talbot (1800-1877) called it "photogenic drawing", using writing paper coated in chemicals to allow them to fix and to hold an image. As a young artist this was what fascinated me. I wanted this direct engagement with the object and the surface I was working with. As an artist it was the action of light on the surface of an object that held my fascination, the excitement of revealing an image.

Right:
Hut- Chapel Brampton
1950

Where did this all begin? Nothing in my early childhood seems connected to this awakening. I was born of Scottish parents in Chapel Brampton in England. My early years were spent in a simple hut-like building, surrounded by fields and a vegetable garden, until we moved to the urban environment of Northampton. My strongest memories were of yearning to get back to the countryside, making cycle trips back to my childhood home, until one day it disappeared, possibly a consequence of the farmer seeking more land to grow his crops.

It was the move to the very north of Scotland, to Caithness in 1962, that this sense of an artistic awakening began. At the age of twelve, I suddenly felt I was in my correct skin. I was born at last. My life could begin. The world around me appeared familiar and natural. I loved to feel as though I was held between the land and the sky. Anyone who has experienced the Caithness landscape, known as the Flow Country, will recognise the sense of a sublime feeling, of enormous skies and the endless flat land.



Above:
Achanarras Quarry
Caithness

Above right:
Dunnet Head
Caithness

The landscape of Caithness became my source of inspiration, and led me to use my Sixth Year art studies to take long walks along the course of Thurso river, to hunt out plants near Dunnet Head and to spend hours in the disused flagstone quarries at Achanarras, a perfect place to seek out good examples of fossilised fishes. The joy of finding a fossil which had laid undiscovered for thousands, if not millions of years had a profound impact on me. This emotional connection to the past and the feeling of seeing something suspended in time and space was at the core of what I would hope to convey in my own creative practice.

I was already certain that this was my path, namely, to enter art college. When I reached my final school year, I applied to various art colleges and was accepted by Edinburgh College of Art (ECA).

My arrival in Edinburgh before starting art college involved a few part-time jobs all to pay the rent on a flat at the top of Leith Walk. Through lack of funds, I discovered a new cheap food, a dessert called Angel Delight. The strawberry flavour was the best one and that became my new diet. This continued until through lack of nutrition, and the detrimental health risks of living in a damp flat, I quickly went down with pleurisy. My choice if I was to be ready for art college was to return home to recover and then start again.

Edinburgh College of Art

Having recovered, I was back in Edinburgh at the beginning of October 1968, to meet my new fellow travellers on the journey into the world of art. During my second year at ECA a student sit-in started before Christmas 1969, in which classes were disrupted and parts of buildings occupied. The main push was to shift the very outdated curriculum to embrace more experimental artforms. The challenge was a teaching staff that had predominately been selected from past students, thereby perpetuating what you might call the 'Edinburgh style', or more broadly, the style of the Scottish Colourists. The idea that you could mix photography on your canvas with paint was viewed with deep suspicion. Out of this flurry of unrest, some minor concessions were made, but generally ECA settled back into its well-trodden ways. The art of Paris had made some gains within the Scottish establishment, but the world of American art, and especially the international Fluxus, was held firmly at bay.

In my second year at ECA, I moved into a flat on Howard Place, opposite the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (RBGE). With this move, the botanic gardens were to become my second home. At RBGE I became acquainted with the world of plants, the glasshouses, and the staff. I found a library on the site, one which was unexpectedly open to the public. The librarian suggested I investigate the work of Anna Atkins (1799- 1871), a Victorian woman who recorded seaweed via the medium of cyanotype. This was like a window into a world I had been seeking. I stumbled, with her help, into the world of early photographic processes. Up until the moment of discovering the work of Atkins, I understood all photography as camera-based images, but these were created without a camera. They were rather like the fossils I had found, images somehow conveying the spirit of the object they recorded. These small A4 size images with the deepest blue I had ever seen, the seaweed forms, in white against the blue background, brought memories of the Caithness walks of my childhood flooding back.

This discovery of the work of Atkins did not immediately push me in a new direction, but the window that had opened made me reflect that it might be a potential pathway. As I came to the end of my second year at ECA in 1970, a vital event was to occur, a total work of art experience, an exhibition known as *Strategy: Get Arts* (SGA). At the time, I did not fully realise that this event would shape my future engagement with the world of art.

Right:
Strategy: Get Arts
Assistants
1970
Alexander Hamilton
second right
Photo © George Oliver

As a hired group of studio assistants, we assembled outside the College and waited for the SGA exhibition to arrive from Düsseldorf. What arrived were two German trucks filled with an exotic mixture of art works, with the VW Camper of Joseph Beuys being the most dramatic to unpack. Our initial attempts to push it through the front door of the college was met by the firm resistance of Mr Brown, the College Secretary. Confused by the concept of a VW Camper being a work of art, he ordered that we park it outside. All attempts to persuade him of its merits fell on deaf ears. Watching this curious spectacle was Beuys himself. He had encountered, we imagined, similar concerns from his own College authorities in Düsseldorf. Quite unperturbed, he sought out a solution and helped to relocate the VW through a side entrance that led into the Sculpture Department. There it remained to be joined by the sledges to form *The Pack*, the first of the three works he carried out, including, *Arena* and *Celtic (Kinloch Rannoch) Scottish Symphony*. This VW episode gave rise to the positive spirit that led to all our endeavours. Each installation required ingenuity and sometimes nimble solutions to help make it work. It also made me later realise, those formal constraints of an art gallery could be challenged, and the execution of art could happen in a variety of settings. On reflection, my early engagement with community arts projects soon after leaving college was clearly influenced by SGA.

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A personal favourite was the installation of smashed chairs that cascaded down the staircase. This was a remarkable work by Stefan Wewerka, even more so considering that he arrived with no chairs to carry out the installation. My suggestion of a trip to the Sam Burns Scrapyard at Prestonpans led to a suitable solution. He picked out a group of Bentwood chairs and on our return proceeded to smash them against the steps, encouraging others to join in. The same spirt of spontaneous creativity resulted in a pile of crushed papers that Reiner Ruthenbeck, with our help, shaped into a giant mound, a work that was eagerly sought after by one of the lead dancers from the Netherlands Dance Company, only for the purchase to fall through when the artist refused not to make any more examples. As a student, observing how some collectors required certain conditions to be met before a purchase might be successful was an insightful guide to the functioning of the art market.

Our student group quickly became close to many of the younger artists. Another favourite was Blinky Palermo. His joyous installation – *Blue/Yellow/White/Red* – a painted frieze above the ECA entrance stairs saw him precariously balancing on a tall ladder. This work was so simple, but so effective. It was one of the first casualties of a negative ECA reaction after the event. The college painters were instructed to paint it out. Attempts much later in 2005 to restore the work, came at a price as the original paint could not be saved and the decision was taken to repaint in the same Palermo colours. This decision poses even more questions about the reaction of ECA at the time.

Following the installation of the works, we were hired to act as guards and guides. Before the exhibition was opened to public, a committee of city councillors was required to approve the exhibition as suitable for public engagement. The artists, conscious of Edinburgh's conservative reputation, had expected Dorothy Iannone's explicit work to be banned. A similar situation had occurred when her work was exhibited in Switzerland the previous year. A suitable protest was planned. What was not expected was that the councillors would ignore the pornographic drawings, and instead turn their attention to the water installation by Klaus Rinke, an exhibit which included a jet of water that was projected out of the front doors of the college. This waste of water was too much. In addition, further inspections by the police led to the fencing off of Günther Uecker's infamous corridor of knives. The opening of *Strategy: Get Arts* only happened once all of this was resolved. An early group to attend were the younger painting tutors, keen to see what had happened to their college. Shock turned into anger and Wewerka's chairs were quickly assaulted and thrown down the stairs.

All attempts to calm matters and discuss the work were futile and the tutors left in disgust. We were delighted with all this. The whole affair was close in spirit to a college revel, where on an annual basis the students would take over ECA during the Christmas break and create as much havoc as possible.

A sense of being part of history might not have occurred to some of us. To the majority of helpers it was all rather strange, especially watching Beuys perform his *Scottish Symphony*. He had a mesmerising presence which led everyone to be respectful and rather in awe. The Head of the Painting School, Robin Philipson was particularly taken. He saw something which his younger colleagues missed. I think for a while he tried to engage with this new world of Fluxus art, until his staff pushed back, and the conservative world of Edinburgh College of Art returned.

It would also have been the disastrous fire that nearly saw the college burn down that provoked a backlash. A room aptly named *Homage to Turner*, by Gotthard Graubner, required the setting up of a smoke machine. On one particular day, I started the smoke machine, only for it to burst into flames. As the room was windowless and lined with foam it quickly became a burning inferno. Getting everyone out and then closing the door was the priority. The fire brigade was summoned. Fortunately, their building was next door. Heavily equipped firemen brought the near tragic blaze under control. This spectacle was carefully watched by the artists, especially Beuys, who left his performance to observe in silence the efforts of the fire crew. The end of the SGA exhibition saw a return of a truck, the artworks dismantled. The college returned to its former self, but for all of us something had changed. We had witnessed a unique event in art history, sharing time and creating relationships with some of those who would become giants of modern art – Beuys, Uecker, Palermo, Richter. My world had shifted. I was determined to take on the spirit of SGA and find a way to deliver my new understanding of art. I also realised through the timing of SGA that very few fellow ECA students had actually experienced it and therefore had no connection with it. This was an incredible missed opportunity for the art school, although no one knew at that moment that SGA was going to one of the most influential events in the history of contemporary art in the UK. Going into my third year in September 1970, I started the drawing and painting programme. After SGA, lots of issues had to be resolved. During the summer break I passed my driving test, and this offered me the opportunity to seek a place to live where ideas connected to being close to nature could be developed.

I was eager to share my new country space and my ideas on the natural world with the teaching staff of the ECA Drawing and Painting School, especially as commuting by car in a rather unreliable NSU Prinz made me occasionally miss certain classes. The spring and early summer period resulted in an abundance of work. I created my own mini hydro installation, observing the growth of selected plants. A favourite was the rhubarb plant. There were also opportunities to stage events and happenings on a regular basis in the grand Sculpture Court of ECA, all studiously ignored by the staff.

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Right:
Remains of plant and water installation (1971)
Nine Mile Burn
2014

The college broke up and a glorious summer in Nine Mile Burn beckoned. Time to take stock and begin the process of recording what I had observed. My thoughts were taken back to the work of Anna Atkins. For me, the seminal question was how to allow a plant to be an equal partner in an artistic relationship, so as not to dominate or overinterpret nature. Atkins had allowed the seaweed to be the most important part of the story, to be recorded onto paper. She did not consider the resulting images to be art; for her, the process of recording was a scientific quest. I found this idea, this journey, very compelling. Seeing her work was a trigger, observing that images that were not even considered to be art were still incredibly beautiful. I renewed my acquaintance with the RBGE and began to research more into the camera-less process of creating cyanotypes. At the same time, I was directly creating plant installations and working directly with the environment.
A new preoccupation was the ivy plant.

I entered my fourth and final year at ECA in September 1971, preparing for my diploma show. The resistance from the College tutors when I brought in plants and sketches of my work in the Pentlands, was increasing. They were becoming very frustrated with the lack of paint on canvases. Conversations around my ideas and the direct use of plant materials were becoming rather fraught. I attempted to encourage the staff to see for themselves my location at Nine Mile Burn, but all attempts to invite them, were rejected. My tutors made it clear that as I was undertaking a painting course, they simply expected to see paintings.

An installation that I created for the grand space of the ECA Sculpture Court was called *Pink Mountain*, and again this did not endear me to the teaching faculty. I had used the summer to fill the space with every spare table I could find in the college, covering the assembled structure with chicken wire, and then pasting on paper. The resulting structure, which took up most of the space, was then painted pink. Consciously or subconsciously I was perhaps still connecting to my diet of strawberry-flavoured Bird's Angel Delight, which had had such a profound physical and psychological impact on me. The installation was taking over the space the tutors had reserved to show the best work carried out by other students. As they were unable to move it, they decided the best thing was to pretend it was not there and proceeded to hang paintings from it. Once again Robin Philipson showed interest and offered positive support. At least I had finally used paint!

Preparations got underway for the final-year diploma show. Usually, a student would spend the final term on such preparations and then have a week to install. I had persuaded the canteen staff to make available a large fridge so I could create a jelly in a college dustbin. The final week saw me covering the walls in ivy, with my pièce de resistance involving the careful upturning of my frozen jelly, which dispersed as a wobbly mass across the studio floor. I thought it looked magnificent and completely encapsulated what I wanted to say. What followed was dramatic. College staff went from trying to pull it apart to physically grabbing me, which required the intervention of other staff to prevent serious injury from taking place. In a way, this was a continuation of the aggression expressed by some tutors during the *Strategy: Get Arts* 'takeover', which had such an energising impact on me. Naturally I was told I had failed. Four years and nothing in the way of a qualification to show for it. Personally, I did not even consider the consequences of my actions. My aim was to be faithful to my artistic ideals and to put together an exhibition that I was completely committed to. What the future held, did not even enter my head.

Events turned out more favourably when the college was required to show my work to an external examiner for a final decision. His reaction was much more positive, and prevailed in persuading the Head of School that I should pass, much to the annoyance of the younger ECA tutors. As a final act of defiance on my part, I did not attend my graduation ceremony and requested they post my qualification out to the caravan I was living in. What did I care, I was going to become an artist!

Edinburgh College of Art

The following month I took the remains of my diploma show down to London. The trip, by hitchhiking, involved wrapping the ivy leaf rope around my waist. I went directly to the Tate where Joseph Beuys was holding his first exhibition in the UK since the groundbreaking *Strategy: Get Arts* (SGA). I proceeded to unwrap the ivy and placed it directly into the installation space as a gesture of my memory of his engagement with SGA at Edinburgh College of Art. On leaving, a guard suggested I should follow him to the Director's Office. The Director at that time was Sir Norman Robert Reid, who had studied at ECA under William Gillies. After explaining my purpose, he attempted to call Joseph Beuys. Finally, we agreed that I could donate the work to the Tate collection. Professor Beuys would, at some point, be fully informed and a final decision made on its location within the gallery. Satisfied, I left and headed directly back to Scotland, the final chapter of my ECA diploma show completed.

My experience at ECA resulted in a strong affirmation that the path I was on was justified, that it did not connect with the 'Edinburgh School' and their perception of 'Scottish Art'. For these reasons, I decided that a return to the landscape of Caithness would help to expand my practice, with the possibility of unlocking all those emotions and ideas that I was unable to resolve as I entered the quarries, or crept underground into chambered cairns, as a teenager. Using the ideas and techniques that I had gained from four years of art training, I decided to go to a remote and hopefully uninhabited island. The choice of Stroma, an island off the coast of Caithness, only came about after another summer at the caravan, where I completed some projects and put into place a return trip to Caithness. On this trip, I met with the farmer who owned the island and sought his permission to live there.

What was important to me, was the aspiration to follow in the path of other artists and explorers, who sought an understanding through their creativity and adventure, of a deeper connection with nature. It took a year of planning to live on Stroma, to be completely immersed in a landscape and build a substantial new body of work. As I prepared to go to Stroma, I realised that cyanotypes would be the perfect medium to develop on the island. I didn't want to record through drawing, painting, or photography; I wanted to build a connection to plants, to engage very directly with the landscape. I wanted to allow the plants to speak by placing specimens on surfaces to produce images. The exploration of the cyanotype medium had truly begun.