



July Fields (1960–62). Eardley ground her own pigments and painted with a sense of urgency, splattering and scraping with a palette knife

JOAN EARDLEY (1921–63) is one of Scotland's favourite Modern artists. Poets such as Edwin Morgan and even musicians have composed in response to her work, yet, south of the border, few now recognise her name. It's true that she was, by nature, shy and retiring and spent most of her short working life in only two places—the slums of Glasgow and a tiny fishing village on the Kincardineshire coast—but she had sellout London shows and, as this exhibition demonstrates to powerful effect, her art was boldly original and bursting with expressive vigour.

Anglo-English by birth—she spent her childhood on a Sussex farm and then in Blackheath, London—Eardley moved with

A balance of opposites

Mary Miers is exhilarated by an exhibition that brims with both an elemental force and a touching humanity

her mother and sister to Scotland in 1939. They settled in the Glasgow suburb of Bearsden and she enrolled at the Glasgow School of Art, where her work flourished under the tutorship of Hugh Adam Crawford. Although she disliked comparison, she was clearly interested in Expression-

ism and one painter cited as an influence is Chaim Soutine, whose work she saw in a 1942 exhibition of Jewish art put on in Glasgow by the Polish *émigré* artist Josef Herman, whose studio she liked to visit.

In 1948, Eardley embarked on a six-month travel scholar-

ship to France and Italy, where she found the clarity of colour 'incredible', but the landscape 'too beautiful' to paint. As Christopher Andrae points out in his monograph *Joan Eardley* (2013), she had far more in common with Northern European artists than Mediterranean ones—Nolde and the German Expressionists rather than Matisse. Attracted to the wild and the primitive, she found natural imperfections more interesting to draw and paint and her preferred subjects on that trip were the donkeys and fishermen, beggars and peasant life.

The exhibition opens with views of the shipyards and dilapidated townscapes of the Clyde, the overcrowded tenements and street urchins of 'the >



January Flow Tide (1960) conveys Eardley's total immersion in her subject. She preferred heaving seas and blizzards to sunny days

living part of Glasgow' that gained Eardley initial recognition and attracted comparisons with the Kitchen Sink school of Realism. Much of the material comes from a largely unknown body of works donated to the gallery by her sister, including superb black-and-white silver-gelatine prints taken by Audrey Walker, with whom she had an intense relationship.

Paintings such as *A Carter and his Horse* (exhibited at the Royal Scottish Academy in 1952), *A Glasgow Lodging* and *A Stove* show Eardley's preference for a palette of dark browns, blacks, muddy greens and a deep oxblood red, to which she would introduce dashes of her favourite lapis-lazuli blue.

Later, graffitied walls became a characteristic element of her Glasgow works, which now focused on the slum children in the litter-strewn closes of Townhead, a condemned part of the city centre where she had her studio. Attracted by their lack of self-consciousness, she found these squinting lassies in their rag-doll dresses and bony-kneed scamps in Start-rite sandals and oversized shorts willing models in exchange for a few pennies, a mug of tea and a syrup-and-cheese sandwich.

These pictures are devoid of sentimentality and contain no intended political or social message; they are simply char-

acter studies observed with a wry honesty of a genre of child with which she developed a fond rapport. For all their popularity, the images are, however, somewhat unsettling with their masklike faces, distorted features and haunting, bored-out eyes.

In 1954, Eardley began renting a rudimentary cottage in Catterline, where she befriended another tough, close-knit community facing decline, who took this mannish figure always outdoors painting and sketching entirely in their stride. Here, she immersed herself in painting the raw north-east landscape with its 'vast all-enveloping seas and skies' and found herself 'pretty well bashing at painting all the time. A sort of reckless kind of bashing... I've got about 14 paintings on the go'.

The contrast of the rural and urban suited her complex character and she rarely moved from her two working bases, the one providing a respite from the other.

The Catterline works differ in one main respect: they rarely contain people. Focusing at first on the cottages and fields, then the beach, with its nets and boats, and, latterly, the sea, they chart an increasing move towards abstraction, although the location is always identifiable. Objects are formed into

compositional shapes, as in *Cornfield at Nightfall* and *Sarah's Cottage*; the violence of the elements is conveyed with powerfully expressive knife scorings and gestural brushwork.

The show ends with a series of astonishing sea paintings, often done in the storms that Eardley preferred to summer days, when she would lash her boards to the rocks and endure hellish conditions.

Eardley would later acknowledge an interest in Jackson Pollock and the Tachistes and it's tantalising to wonder how she would have developed had she not died of cancer at the age of 42. However, as this retrospective shows, she developed a way of painting

the things that moved her that was entirely her own, her main impetus being the direct observation of a place or subject for which she felt a deep familiarity and attachment. 'It's a sort of intimate thing I like,' she said. 'I think you've got to know something before you paint it.'

Joan Eardley: A Sense of Place' is at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, 73, Belford Road, Edinburgh, until May 21 (www.nationalgalleries.org; 0131-624 6200). A catalogue of the same title by curator Patrick Elliott with Anne Galastro is published by NGS (£19.95)

Next week: American 1930s painting at the Royal Academy



Children and Chalked Wall 3 incorporates newspaper and metal foil