

The Glenfinlas *Cyanotypes*

Edinburgh Art Festival



1 – 30 August 2008

Mon – Sat 10am – 5pm

3, Alva Street

Edinburgh EH2 4PH



Venue **2a**

Glenfinlas Burn is situated in a gorge a short way beneath the Glenfinlas dam, near Brig o’ Turk in the Trossachs. It is a rich landscape, with complex movements of water and a striking variety of rock formations, plants and trees. It is here that the critic John Ruskin and John Everett Millais, the celebrated founding member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, spent several months in 1853 – Ruskin sketching and preparing the influential Edinburgh lectures he would deliver in November, Millais working on a portrait of his friend. The artist executed the painting, under the sitter’s direction, with acute attention to detail; in so doing Millais presented both an exact rendering of a specific place and a ‘manifesto’ – the conceptual landscape of Ruskin’s doctrine of nature.

When a visitor enters the setting of the Ruskin portrait, he or she is immediately struck by the ‘enclosing’ quality of the landscape which creates a shaded, even gloomy, location. The senses are initially overwhelmed by the sound of rushing water, against which roar Effie Ruskin – destined soon to be Effie Millais – quoted from Dante. Only after clambering up to the spot where Ruskin posed does a feeling of stillness emerge: the explorer gazes downstream on to a tranquil pool, bounded by rocks. Within a few minutes, however, the air fills with hordes of midges, assaulting the intruder’s face and hair. How Ruskin, Millais and Effie dealt with this monstrous horde beggars belief. To stand day after day, to paint day after day, in this hidden location, where dampness and lack of wind create the perfect conditions for the Scottish midge, must have been an act of considerable self-discipline. To add to the joy, this part of Scotland enjoys high rainfall, and the summer of 1853 was no exception. In selecting this difficult and complex site Ruskin was truly seeking to demonstrate to Millais some very important ideas on looking, and being immersed in, a particular type of Scottish landscape.

‘The place is of great importance in the history of British landscape painting for it was here that the first major example of Ruskinian Pre-Raphaelitism was created.’

(Alastair Grieve, Ruskin’s Artists, 2000)



The portrait of John Ruskin by Sir John Everett Millais (1853)

My personal journey to Glenfinlas began in 1968. En route for art college, I had left my Caithness home for the first time and had taken a summer job working close to Brig O’Turk. These two months gave me my first impressions of this remarkable landscape. I scrambled over Ben Venue, swam in Loch Achray and strode round the magical road that surrounds Loch Katrine. This is the famous ‘Scott Country’ and his romantic writings duly drew Victorians in their hundreds, among them the young Ruskin and his parents.

I was introduced to Ruskin at art college although by this stage his ideas had been pushed out of the teaching programme. Somehow, however, a fleeting slide image in art appreciation class of the English critic poised on a lump of Scottish rock left an impression on me. My curiosity encouraged me in later years to return to the Trossachs and Brig o’Turk. The house where Ruskin had stayed - the school master’s cottage - was still to be seen, but the location of the painting was, apparently, long since lost. The construction of the Glenfinlas dam had, everyone was told, buried the site under tons of concrete. As my engagement with Ruskin continued to develop, I came across a revelatory essay by the art historian Alistair Grieve. Evidently dissatisfied with the local version of events, he investigated, persisted, shrugged off the midges, and finally tracked down the historic site. With his essay Alistair includes several black-and-white photographs, revealing a site remarkably untouched and uncannily true to Millais’ painting. It was from this source that I also rediscovered where Ruskin had stood.

Why is the site important to me? My journey over the past 40 years has been to use the language of art to understand the world around me. It was often the wonderful words of John Ruskin and his relationship with nature that most moved me. He comprehended and emphasised this need to seek truth through nature. In an age where everything is filtered and processed, I am drawn to finding ways and working methods that allow nature to speak for itself. I am seeking pure connectivity with my living environment. I also want to make unique images of what I see and feel. That is why I use a process called cyanotype, a technique that allows me to achieve an undistorted link with the natural world. Only the cyanotype technique, which involves placing a plant directly onto prepared watercolour paper and then allowing the sun to draw out the image, seemed to offer me the emotional rapport I am seeking with nature. From this starting point my botanical journey began, seeking truth through nature and allowing the flora to speak for themselves. Exploring the site where Ruskin stood in 1853, seeing the plants that he would have seen, gives me also an emotional connection to this extraordinary figure, one of the most important and unique in the history of art.