

On 'Food For Thought'

Considering the work of three artists painting food – do they also feed the soul?



Glen Scouller, *Greenhouse and Toolshed*, Oil on panel, 61 x 85 cm (Image courtesy the artist).

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Shocking though it may seem to some of us, despite all the interest in gardening in Britain, surprisingly there is a lack of people with horticultural training. Many do it, nonetheless, and they are good at it, which is reassuring. There's a wealth of information out there on how to, but knowledge handed across generations plays its part in growing food and providing for a household's needs.

Artist Glen Scouller, is just one of many artists who has built a garden – some of it ornamental and some of it 'productive' in the sense that it provides food for the table. Speaking to Scouller, he tells me that since he first began establishing his garden with his wife, Carol, at their home in Loudounhill, East Ayrshire, he has built some thirteen

raised beds, many of which appear in his work, as well as other growing spaces and the greenhouse that often takes a central place in his domestic *plein air* paintings.

The investment in time and the physical effort of extensive garden-building is not uncommon for many of us, but pick up almost any book on the subject that is intended for the general reader and rarely will you find gardening in Scotland specifically mentioned, for 'The English Garden' seems to be considered the quintessentially British Garden. Nonetheless, in the visual arts of Scotland, gardens frequently appear and, as one might expect, frequently represent a subject of inspiration.

In this brief survey of the work of just three artists who work I've come to enjoy, I want

to explore the symbolism that the garden and its harvested produce represents in their work, and seek to throw some light upon what it is that attracts me to it.

Beginning with Scouller, I should confess from the outset that I have come to his work late, but since encountering it I have felt drawn to it frequently (I find I keep going back for more). While his wider subject matter interests me and that is something I will explore at a later date, what I currently find myself most attracted to in Scouller's art are those paintings in which food appears, or that I can see being grown.

Take, for example, the two pictures here in which Scouller's greenhouse appears. I have been questioning why it is that I feel a sense of reassurance in these works, as though I am

encountering a space of safety, sustenance, and general well-being. While gardening is said to be good for both our physical and mental health, could it be possible that the manner in which it is presented in visual art, as here, can provide similar benefits? Perhaps I should explain.



Scouller's wet-into-wet method of quickly painting in oils offers me big skies, bold colour and attractive light, but there are only a few specific plants that I could actually name from his paintings (with some obvious exceptions). What attracts me most is the sense that here is a *working garden*, and I therefore assume that in my finding a sense of reassurance referred to, I am placing some symbolic significance upon that *working* aspect of the scenes he paints. While the word *wellness* is overused, that is maybe what I take away from Scouller's most settling pictures most; above all, a feeling of being well, and this is quite a gift for art to provide to us.

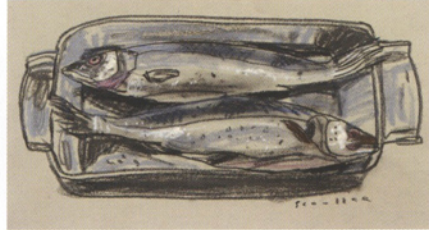
It is not just about the garden itself, though, for in Scouller's painting of a pheasant in a basket (from which he tells me his wife later made a wonderful terrine), there too, the sight of foodstuffs offers reassurance. Indeed, even his modest work in pastels on paper, humbly titled *Seabass Supper*, has the same effect.



There too, I feel there is the potential in the modest fish supper represented for the work to *symbolically* feed me, and these simple domestic subjects, whether painted or drawn, inside or out, don't leave me hungry but rather more satiated in the sense of being 'looked

after'. Whether it is food growing in a greenhouse, or fish ready for cooking in a dish, I would even go so far as to say that the mere hint of a meal to come is enough for me to feel what I am describing.

The same might be true (I think it is) of the other works seen on this page by both the

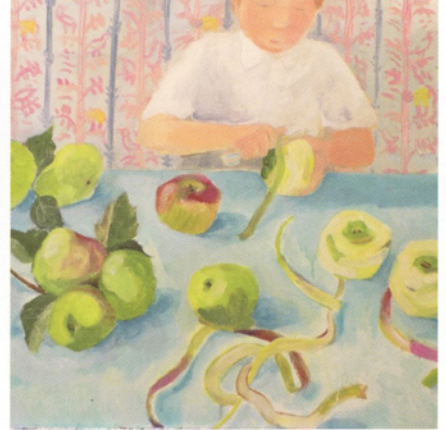


Above: Glen Scouller, *Seabass Supper*, Pastel on paper, 9.5 x 17.5 cm. nd. **Left:** Glen Scouller, *Vegetable Garden*, Oil on panel, 72 x 92 cm. **Right:** Brita Granström, *Boy Peeling Apples*, 2020, Acrylic on Canvas. nd. **Below:** Brita Granström, *Blowing Curtain (with a girl chopping rhubarb)*, nd., Acrylic on Canvas. Images courtesy the artists.

Bottom, Left: Glen Scouller, *Autumn Basket*, Oil on panel, 72 x 92 cm. nd. **Bottom, Right:** Fiona MacRae, *Quail Eggs*, Oil on paper (date/size not given). Images courtesy the artists.

calming to the eye and to the soul. The same might be said for MacRae's painting *Quail Eggs* which, like Scouller's pheasant, presents simple ingredients, as yet unprepared.

Talking to MacRae about her work over the course of a couple of hours, when I replay the recording of my interview with her, I no-



Swedish artist Brita Granström – a painter who regularly exhibits in Edinburgh and London – and Fiona MacRae who attended The Glasgow School of Art as a mature student and has since been practicing as a full time artist from her studio sheds in both Tíree and Tainuilt.

In the case of Granström's work, what I see pictured is not food being grown but that which has been harvested and is being prepared. This, one might think, is quite a different matter altogether. It is not, though. The works have the same effect upon me. In Granström's *Boy Peeling Apples*, and also in *Blowing Curtain (with a girl chopping rhubarb)*, what I see is the simple domestic industry of the kitchen and preparation of a meal. These works are simple, gentle, delicate in handling and what I would describe as serene and



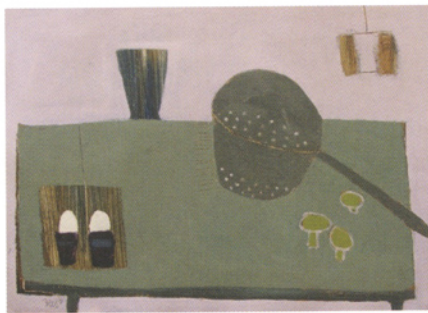
tice that we actually spoke very little of 'the work' and far more about the food depicted. "What are those fish?" was one question that led to her telling me not only how to catch my mackerel, but also many simple ways of preparing them and eating them.

Lemons figure in MacRae's paintings fairly often, and hen's eggs, too, but it was gooseberries with mackerel that she told me tasted the best, with just a little sugar added to take the edge off the tart berries.

MacRae's stylised paintings in which mushrooms and pears appear, also, have me thinking of food combinations and what I could make of these simple ingredients that, again, feed the soul. But what do I mean by *the soul*?



I do not have the book to hand to provide a specific reference to what follows, but I do recall reading – many years ago – that the course of psychiatry and psychoanalysis in the non-German speaking world was somewhat complicated by James Strachey's chronological translation of Freud's writings from the period 1891-1939. Put simply, Strachey mistranslated Freud's work in relation to the *psyche*, the *soul* and the *mind*. From an account of this that I have since found in the *New Yorker* magazine: 'Freud often spoke of the soul [but] nearly all of his many references to it were excised in Strachey's translation, and the term "die seele," (the soul) is consistently replaced with "the mind." This, it is said, has skewed our understanding of Freud's human-



Above: Fiona MacRae, *Top Tail*, Oil on paper, 28 x 37 cm, .nd
Below Left: Brita Granström, *Radishes on VE Day, 2020*, Acrylic on canvas, 30.5 x 30.5 cm
Below: Brita Granström, *The Radio's Ugly Mouth, 2020*, Acrylic on canvas, 40.6 x 40.6 cm. Images courtesy the artists.



istic views, and particularly the goal of psychoanalysis, which is to integrate one's emotional life with the intellectual.

In seeking to analyse the work of Scouller, MacRae, or Granström, I find myself struggling to express that sense of 'the soul' being fed by the imagery they present, but that is what I am driving at here: that point in my analysis of the work where dispassionate critical thinking meets with the basic human



Centre Top: Fiona MacRae, *Two Eggs*, Oil on paper (.ns/nd).
Above: Fiona MacRae, *Sprat Jar too*, Oil on paper, 75 x 55 cm, .nd
Left: Fiona MacRae, *Drift Fish*, Oil on paper, 69 x 52 cm, .nd Images courtesy the artist.

response to everything that is good about the world represented in the work.

Where Granström presents harvested radishes or beetroot from her series of rapidly produced paintings during a period of Lockdown (they are included in her recent book, *The Leaves of Lockdown; Nature Examined and Celebrated*. Brita Granström's *Inscape Paintings from a Time of Crisis*), there is something universally reassuring about the sight of food being prepared from wholesome natural ingredients and this intersects and informs the manner in which the works under being analysed are consequently discussed.

Part of this may be due to the fact that we are currently living through times of unprecedented precarity, and in which food scarcity is very much a topic of concern following the UK's exit from the EU, as well as the phenomenon of shelf-plundered supermarkets during moments of peak-panic-buying. In just such times it is ultimately reassuring that some of us know how to grow our own food.

While these works may feed my soul and please the eye, they cannot sustain me physically, though, and so they also serve as a reminder of near-lost ways, lost knowledge, and a disconnection with the growing of a resource that is essential for maintaining good physical health. While I may be able to present a brief analysis of these works, it goes without saying they I cannot eat them! Nonetheless, they spur me to get back out into the garden myself. That, too, is a gift that these artists present! ■

Glen Scouller: www.glenscouller.com
Fiona MacRae: www.fionamacrae.com
Brita Granström: www.britagranstrom.com/site/