

Art

Female framework

» The work of more than 50 women artists connected to Glasgow School of Art is the focus of an illuminating new exhibition

IT'S the summer holidays and Glasgow School of Art is deserted when I meet the curator Sarah Lowndes. The degree shows have come down, the students are long gone. But this atmosphere of quiet repose is broken by the incongruous sound of ripping hardboard and pinging nails. The art school technician is taking down some panels to reveal a stretch of long-hidden wall cabinets in the Mackintosh Museum.

I can't remember the last time I saw them, a handsome row of shelves and immaculately burnished copper panels. They've been there all the time. Hidden in full view.

The same might be said for some of the artworks that Lowndes is preparing to show in *Studio 58: Women Artists In Glasgow Since World War II*, which brings together the work of more than 50 artists who have studied or taught at Glasgow School of Art since the 1930s.

While many of the works in *Studio 58* are from public collections and are by well-known names in the art world, from the late Joan Eardley to Turner-nominated contemporary artist Karla Black, others have been selected from the walls of family homes or retrieved from the attics of elderly artists or their descendants. The show includes the painter Nita Begg and the fashion illustrator Garcia Hunter, for example, who are not part of the established history of the art scene in Glasgow but who were important and successful in their own time and on their own terms.

"Perhaps sometimes the work by women artists hasn't achieved the attention it should have done," says Lowndes. "I'm very excited about getting some of this stuff outside of people's homes and attics. I think people will really enjoy seeing this work - in fact I think people will be blown away."

Lowndes, who has taught at the school since 2002, devised the exhibition as a direct response to the history of the school and the Mackintosh Museum. The show gets its title from the top-floor studio

Moira Jeffrey

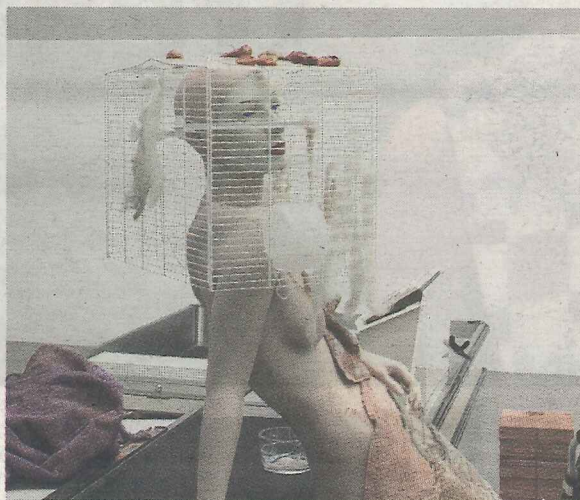
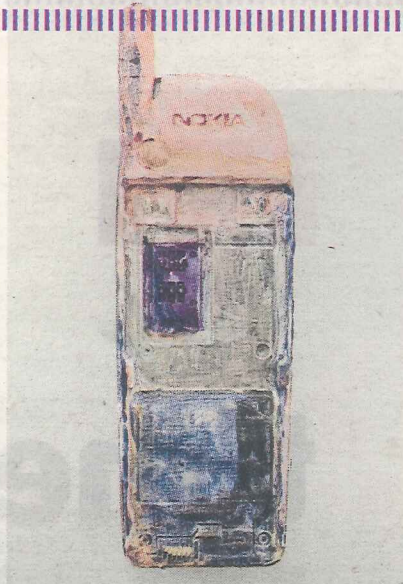


where, historically, female students worked.

"I felt that, having been teaching here, one of the things that I picked up from students and even staff was that women's work wasn't as celebrated as it might have been," she says. But she is quick to frame the show as a positive event rather than some kind of corrective remedy. "I would like to think it's a celebration of the achievements of women," she says, "especially given the historical difficulties many have experienced around income, managing a family, keeping going."

Studio 58 brings together several generations. There were the "firewatchers", as Lowndes describes them, who studied during the war and who shared fire-watching duties overnight on the school's roof, among them the pioneering art and theatre critic Cordelia Oliver. There were the artists of the 60s and 70s, many of whom worked commercially, like Hunter, and a raft of textile artists who drew on the school's strong history of textile design and embroidery. A generation of radical artists of

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» School's out: clockwise from top left, works by Hayley Tompkins, Karla Black, Garcia Hunter and Cathy Wilkes

the 80s and 90s, such as Ann Vance and Anne Elliot, were involved in film, photography, public art and activism. In recent times artists such as Christine Borland and Cathy Wilkes have spoken, in very different ways, about the body and female experience.

It might be hard to draw conclusions from such disparate approaches and careers, but Lowndes says she has been struck by unlikely parallels in both the lives and art of these post-war artists.

Many, she says, worked from home, making art when their children had gone to bed. She cites historic examples like Begg, who studied in the 40s, and left some 500 paintings when she died, but at times was too shy to attend her own openings.

Some came to art school later in life, slowly and pragmatically, gaining confidence as they grew older - like Black, who worked as a journalist before attending art school, and the embroiderer Hannah Frew Paterson, now 81, who first came to the art school on day release from the thread manufacturer JP Coats in 1961.

Many have been inspiring teachers - including Paterson, who taught at the school for 22 years, and whose students included the artist and activist Adele Patrick, who graduated with a MA in Design in 1986 and helped found the Glasgow Women's Library, where she still works.

Key among those teachers is the recently retired Sam Ainsley, who taught, supported and mentored the generation of students who went on to build Glasgow's international

reputation for contemporary art. But Lowndes also sees aesthetic relationships across the decades. "Nita Begg, for example, made both still lifes and landscapes," she says. "And it's the still lifes I find really interesting because she had three children and I think these are indoor landscapes. You see that in contemporary artists like Hayley Tompkins or Cathy Wilkes."

Mary Redmond has chosen the small vestibule outside the director's office to site her work for the show. As Lowndes talks, she points to a timber hatch in the vestibule that I've often walked past without really noticing. It was used to move large paintings down from the studio above without using the stairs. When the timber is removed, the space will be flooded with daylight. Similarly *Studio 58* may offer the chance to see both history and the present in a new light. «

Studio 58: Women Artists In Glasgow Since World War II is at the Mackintosh Museum, Glasgow School of Art, from Saturday until 30 September. www.gsa.ac.uk