



Scotch Argus - work by Kate Foster

An exhibition in Glasgow Sculpture Studios Gallery, August 2006

Statement

I seized an invitation to sail to Arisaig from the Clyde on a boat named 'Stellaria'. For this journey, I borrowed a "non-accessioned" insect specimen from the Hunterian Zoology Museum, a textbook on waves, and a cd of electronic "Sine Music". These all dated from the 1950s or 60s, and each was made with skills that have largely become redundant. My excessive luggage also included a camera and sketchbooks. The video and drawings that came about review something of this voyage. Departing from academic conventions, my "references" are given as visual images, while the materials used came from a cupboard in the Teaching Lab. If pushed to describe the work, I'd say it was somehow a memento of cyclical time.

Some notes about Scotch Argus

Scotch Argus is a butterfly that takes flight in Scottish August sunshine, colonising tussocky grassland. Having laid their eggs, only a few adults live into September. The species survives the winter as caterpillars, hard to find within clumps of moorgrass.

All butterflies carry ideas of transformation, freedom, beauty, fleetingness and flight. Scotch Argus might bear further loads, entwined as it is within histories of climate and agriculture, and tending to reside at the peripheries of lay and scientific knowledge.

As a species, it was first noted by Dr John Walker in the eighteenth century; an entry in his notebook remarks its place of capture as having been '*in Insula Bota. Septembro.*' 'Bota' is Latinised Gaelic, meaning the Island of Bute in the Clyde.

Even the scientific names of insects are subject to transformation - but since 1816 the identity of Scotch Argus has been fixed as *Erebia aethiops* - a member of the family *Satyridae*, or "the Browns". Each identifier somehow refers to darkness or shade - Erebus was the liminal region between Earth and Hades, Ethiopians were renowned for black skin. The 'pupils' on its wing gave rise to the common name "Argus", the mythical *Argus Panoptes*, or all-seeing watchdog with many eyes. This name is easily mistaken for Argos, implying sea and voyages. It has become a butterfly seen through a classical lens.

But Scotch Argus is also a butterfly of the north, probably having been one of the first to recolonize Britain after the last Ice Age. It can cope with cool and wet climates, and is concentrated in Scotland. On the west coast, a sub-species is described, *caledonia*. Its distribution is not well known; *Erebia aethiops* is also found on European mountains, though this would seem to be denied by the common name. Insofar as is known, Scotch Argus is 'stable'. But if reintroduced, it is very reluctant to recolonise areas it has abandoned.

Unusually for butterflies, the female can be enticed to lay eggs in a dark cardboard box - rather than deep in the grass. Dr Walker captured the adult rather than the eggs, a pioneer of the techniques of insect collection and preservation. After their first four stages, some insects are selected for an afterlife within collections. Allocated an accession number in a museum, they may contribute to studies of anatomy or the broader concerns of biogeography. Some are dispatched between collections, in a variety of tailored boxes. The Hunterian collection includes a specimen that remained in limbo, described as "non-accessioned". Numberless and undated, the body of a Scotch Argus survived additional summers, pinned alongside two other Browns in a small cardboard box. On the base of the box, careful examination reveals scraps of Italian words.

The work shown

Figures - drawings extracted from textbooks and laid out as references

Wake - drawing on plotter paper

Scotch Argus - looped video

Non-accessioned - postal insect box

Acknowledgements

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