

Geoff Stear

For Geoff Stear, living on the Isle of Harris doesn't simply mark a change in the pace of life or a chance to settle down. It's a privilege; the fulfilment of a long romance that began in his early teenage years in the books of Robert Louis Stevenson, Walter Scott, and most notably, in the boy's adventure novels of Alan Campbell McLean, which he read as a young man growing up in Yorkshire. Though it would take the passing of some forty years, and various jobs on building sites, art college lecture theatres and graphic design studios, Geoff has finally achieved his dream of moving to the Outer Hebrides and devoting himself to the realisation of his lifelong passion, creating art in a landscape which contains all the inspiration, solitude and open spaces he needs to do so.

I first came to know Geoff as a friend and as an employer, when I spent a summer helping him to complete what is perhaps his biggest artistic project to date, the redevelopment of his house and studio on the Isle of Scalpay. With the house almost finished, he invites me over to see the transformation for myself, and to give the following interview.

We are seated at the table in the finished kitchen. The walls are hung with prints and canvases, all of which Geoff has done himself. A bottle of wine is on the table. We begin.

I ask Geoff what it was that prompted his move to Harris, if it was the opportunity to take up painting, 'full-time', and if there was something in the way of life here that appealed to him.

'It was both,' he says, 'very much both. The way of life is very much a part of it; it's so opposite to my experience of cities where I've lived for most of my life. I've always loved places like this; the landscape, the solitude, the total lack of heavy communities and too many people. The solitude is a big part of it, really.'

I'm curious to know why Geoff chose the Isle of Harris as a place to move to. As an alternative to built-up urban environments like London and Birmingham, where he spent much of his professional life in advertising, it makes perfect sense that somebody devoted to painting might want to settle somewhere remote, but Geoff tells me his reasons for deciding on Harris in particular were far more personal:

'When I was a very early teenager I read these books, they were like boy's adventure books and they were set on Skye by Alan Campbell McLean and the main one which became quite a big seller in those days was called, 'The Hill of the Red Fox'. It just made me fall in love with Skye as a young lad – the culture, the crofting thing, boy's adventure, criminals and crofting and German spies on the beach and that kind of thing but all set on a croft in Skye, you know. It was one of the first things that really made me fall in love with it, and years later when I came to live here I actually took a trip over to Skye with ordinance survey maps and a compass and actually found the mountain, never knowing that it was real in the first place.'

Having tracked down the site that had been the setting for his imagination as a youngster, Geoff proceeded to camp underneath the 'Hill of the Red Fox', near Trottenish, and to spend time drawing and sketching the landscape. Many of these preliminary sketches would later appear in a Geoff's 'Hebridean Series', a collection of vibrant, abstract and thought provoking drawings and paintings that carefully balanced shapes, colours and moods to convey not only the scene, but the feeling of being there. The deep personal connection Geoff felt for the location and its significance in his own

life prompted him to give many of the paintings in the series Gaellic titles, one of which, of course, translates to 'The Hill of The Red Fox.' Several of the painting in 'Hebridean Series' were included in an exhibition at An Lanntair in 2006.

The landscapes of Harris and Skye have continued to play an active part in the composition of Geoff's work. In many of his paintings the hills of North Harris are clearly recognisable as they loom over the beaches of Luskentyre and Horragabost, capped with snow or furbished in the burnt reds and browns of the heather in autumn and early winter. Speaking about Luskentyre in particular, which he's painted many times, Geoff says:

'There's something very special about the feeling of being there and that's a part of what I'm trying to convey. A lot of my paintings are abstract but many of them contain recognisable features which are accurate to the place.'

While he's ready to admit that the landscape and natural beauty of the island, its colours and ever-changing skylines, have been an influence in his work, Geoff is very much aware of the volume of 'landscape paintings' produced by artists living here, and he's quick to differentiate himself from the type of art which is produced with the main intention of being sold to tourists. With this in mind, I ask him if he deliberately chose to represent the island in a more abstract style in order to make his work stand out against the more commercially successful artwork on offer:

'No it wasn't a conscious decision, that just *is* the way I work, and doing that kind of painting, which, I don't mean to sound rude, but does come across to me as 'pretty painting', which is fine for other people to do, but I wasn't going to start painting that way just because it might sell more. As much as I would like to sell things, I still want to do my kind of work, and it isn't that.'

What attracts him to a scene or an object that makes him want to render it in art, and then how does he go about transforming an idea into a picture?

'There has to be something unusual or special about them. With the ones that are totally 'abstract,' for want of a better description, they're totally done just out of my head and out of my imagination. I may not be thinking of any particular beach scene, I'm drawing landscapes and settings as they come to me and those drawings are done very quickly, lots of them discarded, some of them kept. It's just an instinctive way of working that comes from a build-up of ideas and just from being out in the landscape and being affected by it.'

The feeling of separation that comes with living on an island is also one which Geoff feels very strongly:

'Living here, you have a real sensation that you're in a small place surrounded by water, and it physically and mentally affects you like that. It's a simple thing, you don't think about it every day but I really do think it affects the way you think and behave; you're surrounded by water, very closely surrounded by it.'

This feeling of physical separation from the rest of the world is perhaps best expressed in 'CalMac Kiss', an abstract painting in vivid shades of orange and green that took its inspiration from a photograph Geoff had taken while on board a Caledonian MacBrayne ferry:

'The greens and the orange in the painting come from the paint and rust marks on the bow doors as you drive out of the ferry, which translated into a reflection on the water which resulted in the lip shape for 'CalMac Kiss'. It might seem a bit obvious and corny maybe, but there's a very special connection there for me, because that's what I see every time I come off or on the island on the ferry.'

Since Geoff clearly sees a distinction between life on the island and life on the mainland, I want to know if he's witnessed a change in the style of his own art after his emigration from England, and whether he puts that down to the island itself, or to his own development as an artist.

'Definitely, yes. Which I put down partly to the landscape and to the feeling of space and air and my whole attitude to life which has changed since moving here, that feeling of not being cramped in, the feeling of big spaces and for me the feeling of being able to do what I want without the restrictions of what's expected.'

Would you say that your style or your art has changed as you as an artist have changed?

'Yeah. It's all one layer. In the years before I came here I always thought of myself as a 'serious' painter but I was having to do things in advertising or teaching or lecturing that got in the way, as well as trying to rebuild a house, which turned out to be a massive project, and I'm now able to devote myself totally towards painting rather than the other work I had to do to make a living.'

Speaking about his past, I can't help but notice that there's a feeling of regret, or missed opportunity. It must be a common experience among many aspiring artists that their creative ambitions are often thwarted by the inevitable obligations of having to make enough money to survive. Though Geoff is now in a position where he can work on painting without these obligations, I want to know if he ever lost sight of his ambitions along the way.

'Well that graphics job in advertising was a job I had to earn money that I didn't want to do, and though I took pride in doing it well it didn't mean that it was what I wanted to do. I'd trained at art colleges as a painter and that was all I'd ever wanted to do and to be. Financial circumstances drove me in other directions; I started off being a 'starving artist' working on building sites and ended up in advertising and graphic design and I was stuck in that for years, but still trying to do my own work on the side. I always thought of myself as a painter, although everybody around me was saying 'give it up and become a good advertising guy', he laughs, 'I'm very glad I didn't.'

Despite the distractions of his career, Geoff still experienced bursts of creative output throughout his working life. Painting isn't simply something that Geoff decided to do as a hobby following his retirement; the creative freedom that he now enjoys is one which he has earned through hard work and a dedication not only to his craft, but also to the belief that art and the desire to create art was always more important and more crucial to his being than success in any other field.

Given his knowledge of art, having lectured and taught on the subject, I want to find out his opinions on the artistic scene on Harris and Lewis and whether he was aware of an artistic community on the Islands prior to his move. For the first time in the interview, I get the feeling that Geoff has been made uncomfortable by the question, and he seems to be gauging how his response will come across. After a long pause, he replies:

'I feel on really dodgy ground here. I wasn't aware that there was a big 'movement' in that sense before I came here, and if I'm honest I'm still not aware of it either. That's probably not what I should be saying but, in some ways it reminds me of Cornwall in the 70's. There were a lot of artists that moved there and some have become very famous, but they weren't producing what I would call art, they were producing paintings to sell to tourists and I think the same thing is apparent here. I feel very awkward about saying this because there's nothing wrong with that and that's what some people want and that's fine, but it's not what I'm about, really.'

When I ask if he would agree that much of the art produced on the Island is made being made for people visiting, rather than living here, Geoff replies:

'Well going by what we've said previously a lot of it is made for tourists to take away, and in a way I think that's so sad, much as there's a focus on local art and Gaelic culture and language, it does seem sad that the artistic scene here isn't reaching out to the rest of the world in the way that it could. I mean, why isn't there art being made here that could speak to somebody living in New York or London or wherever? Just because it's from here it doesn't need to have that parochial sort of small feel to it. People here have just as valid things to say about the world and about their world which would easily translate to a wider audience.'

Perhaps it's his background in the more cosmopolitan artistic culture of the mainland, or the 'fresh eyes' of an incomer that allow him to see the potential in Hebridean art for an international audience, but I think Geoff's frustration at the 'small thinking' of the art scene here isn't necessarily a criticism of the place. Rather, it is informed by his enthusiasm and love for his adopted home, and his desire for more people to see it, either in person or through artists' representations of it:

'It's wonderful to live here, and it's a great privilege to produce art that relates to being here, but there is a sense of trying to keep it local, which I don't agree with. You want everyone in the world to see the art, not necessarily mine, but art produced here shouldn't be on a small scale. Why shouldn't people living here be producing art that's just as important as the art being produced by people in London? There's too much thinking on a small, or local scale. I mean if you think of other British or American artists and writers that have gone out to live in tiny places they've produced an international kind of art or literature from a very small, parochial place. I think here that may be true more of writers, whereas painters and visual artists, with a few exceptions, seem to be thinking on too small a scale, locally rather than internationally, and I'd be very keen to see a change or a shift in that kind of thinking.'

As for his own sales to tourists, Geoff receives fairly limited business, which he puts down to a lack of gallery space of his own, and to the fact that he doesn't think much of his art is in keeping with the type sold to tourists from other galleries. However, his motivations for painting don't stem from a desire for money. He seems happy finally being able to be doing what he loves to do, and living in a place he loves to live. As he says himself,

'It would be great to have commercial success, but not if it means doing something that isn't in keeping with your own passions and your own integrity. That to me is true for any writer or painter or artist; you have to do what you believe in doing and you have to believe in what you're doing, and if that becomes recognised and accepted by other people then that's a great bonus. And if there's

money attached to that as well, good! I don't mean riches, just enough to get by and keep doing what you want to do, that's enough.'