

Two Children Plus One

This project brings together two renowned Scottish-based artists, Joan Eardley & Kate Downie.



Introduction

This project brings together two renowned Scottish-based artists, Joan Eardley (1921–63), whose centenary is being celebrated in 2021–22, and painter and printmaker Kate Downie (b. 1958), who has long acknowledged Eardley's creative influence. In her work, Downie has tackled similar themes to Eardley – child portraiture, the urban landscape, coastal terrain – and there is a sense of connection, an understanding in her artistic practice.

Drawn to the possibilities left open by Eardley's *Two Children* (1962–63), found incomplete on the artist's easel at her death, Downie is creating a new artwork in which she proposes to 'finish' the painting in her own way. Making studies of local children, she attempts to get inside Eardley's head, responding to and reimagining the composition with its graffiti, found objects and unfinished figures.

This exhibition will take you with Downie as she documents her journey, generously sharing her insights and discoveries as she looks, thinks, draws and paints to better understand Eardley and this, her final ambitious canvas.

Jo Meacock, Curator of British Art

Birchtree Studios, Progress Report 1



Biscuits, the price of posing. Kate and Aria. Photograph © Sally Cross 2021.

"I begin to draw inside the print and suddenly we all gasp at how the dynamic in the work has utterly changed."

My neighbours Aria, Levi and their mum Sarah Laing come to the studio. By chance, two Edinburgh friends, Dr Sally Cross and Prof. Ian Jackson, drop by at the same time. They know me, my work and, of course, Eardley's work, unlike Sarah and the children.

We all drink tea/juice/biscuits and the children get familiar with the studio – I already know them quite well from our street, so they are relaxed in the space. They draw in chalks on my door, walls and cardboard on the floor!

The print on canvas of the painting gets unrolled and stapled to the wall. I spend quite a bit of time talking with Sarah about the role her children are invited to play in the process as interactive models. Levi's knees are endearingly grubby from playing out all morning – Sarah hasn't prepared the kids in any special way and is very comfortable in herself and relaxed and interested in the process – so accommodating.

We talk about the painting, the context, the Glasgow social and physical environment that Eardley worked in around the early 1960s. As we are talking, I am drawing in charcoal beside the print. Sally looks at that very small arm reaching to the mouth of the girl on the left and says, 'That a baby's arm', not the girl's.

Sarah agrees and she sees what could be the baby's head. As Aria is only 22 months old, she is very familiar with wriggling babies. We all stare, I keep drawing, re-looking with the fresh eyes of a scientist and young mother who has never (consciously) seen an Eardley painting in her life before. Then collectively work out how the baby is placed, wriggling in the crook of the arm of the girl... I begin to draw inside the print and suddenly we all gasp at how the dynamic in the work has utterly changed.

I return to the studio in the evening and the baby is still there. Not only that, but I realise that the older girl has her right hip thrust out to support the baby's weight and that the feet position suddenly makes more sense.

On the basis of this I will ask my other neighbour, young mum Hannah, to visit with her three-month old baby Arna to model for me.

And so it begins...

Kate Downie, Sunday 24 October 2021



It's a Baby! Kate and Sarah.
Photograph © Sally Cross 2021.

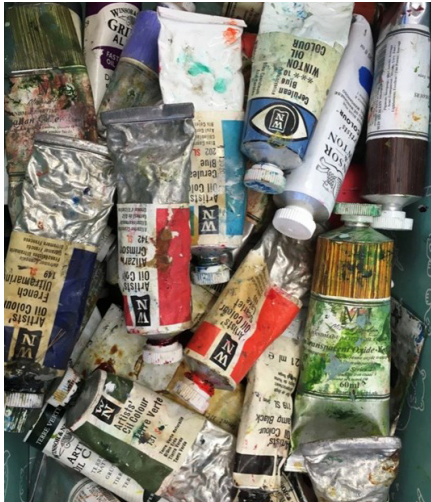


Introduced to Eardley's children. Aria and Levi.
Photograph © Kate Downie 2021.



Kate Downie, Study of girl with baby and pram,
October 2021, pastel on cardboard. © Kate Downie.
Photograph © Kate Downie 2021.

Birchtree Studios, Progress Report 2



3 paint tube collections mixed together.
Photograph © Kate Downie 2021.



Visual research table, with studio dress.
Photograph © Kate Downie 2021.

"By making these preparatory drawings, it takes me deeper into some of the situations that Eardley would have had to deal with when inviting kids into her studio as models."

Primed my stretched linen with Robertson's Flat White oil primer – probably the closest I can get to what the original was primed with. My linen is much finer than that used by Eardley, but it's what I have to hand.

Yesterday was mayhem in the studio, more like a studio-nursery, with not only Arna, aged 11 weeks, and her mum Hannah Thomson, but also Levi and Aria present. Starting with Hannah and Arna as they attempted to 'pose' for me, it reminded me just how wriggly a baby can be (very). This got me thinking about the unfinished, sketchy nature of the older girl in Eardley's painting compared to the more settled nature of the younger child with the skipping rope – probably because it is almost impossible to stay still with a large fractious baby brother or sister grasped in your arm.

Talking of arms, I discovered, or rather had forgotten, that a mother will almost always hold her baby in her non-dominant arm so as to leave the other dominant (usually the right) arm to defend, protect, cook, make coffee, answer the phone, reach for a cup of tea etc. Arna refused to settle in her mum's right arm but was perfectly happy in her left. However, I discovered that children hold a familiar smaller sibling with their dominant arm (or both arms) as this is their stronger arm and babies are HEAVY! Levi demonstrated holding Aria in exactly this way.

This perhaps seems like a lot of unnecessary research before even beginning the actual task of painting, but having 'discovered the baby' it requires a new level of enquiry. By making these preparatory drawings, it takes me deeper into some of the situations that Eardley would have had to deal with when inviting kids into her studio as models.

Within what seemed like minutes on day 2 Levi and Aria had discovered that my Unison pastels were way better than chalk for marking up the 'blackboard door'. It was only after they left that I realised that Levi had created a near-perfect vertical 'stripe-texture' that matches the shirt of the small girl on the right of Eardley's painting. Awesome boy. He really listens with his eyes.

Once I got the studio back to myself, I completed drawings of Levi holding a skipping rope, echoing the smaller child's pose, as well as a small pastel-on-sandpaper drawing of Arna and a very fast one of her being held in a sitting position by her mum. I carried on into a pastel of the older girl and baby. She is evolving before my eyes...

Each day I am drawn further into this beautiful painting.

Kate Downie, Tuesday 26 October 2021



Birchtree Studios, Progress Report 3 – Conversations with Joan



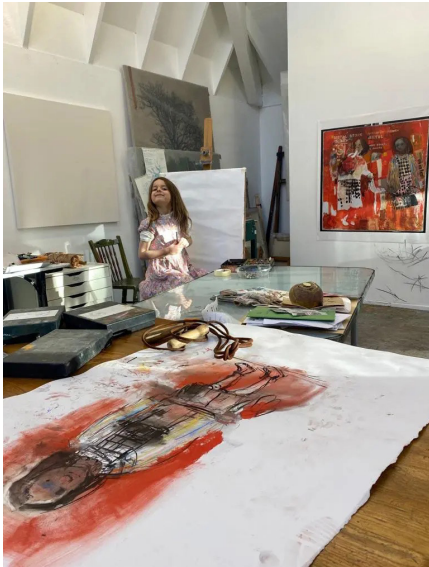
*Drawing Isaac and his sisters.
Photograph © Ruth Millar 2021.*

I started off referring to the artist as 'Eardley' out of respect for her status (like 'Picasso', 'Degas', etc.) but now, 23 days in, I think of this whole process far more as 'Conversations with Joan', such is the internal daily dialogue I seem to be having with her.

A more prosaic word about my technique so far. The colour-perfect inkjet print on canvas as kindly supplied by Glasgow Museums Photography Dept is exactly 100 x 100 cm in size. I have not painted on top of it as I first envisaged, but instead I am using it as a 1:1 scale guide as I lay down the underpainting from scratch on a stretched linen surface of the same size, primed with traditional flat white and built up in layers.

"'Conversations with Joan', such is the internal daily dialogue I seem to be having with her."

Birchtree Studios, Progress report 4 – Silver boots, painting



Scarlet – 21st-century playing-oot child.
Photograph © Alicia Bruce 2021.

“Each time I draw a child I learn more about this speed of capturing those lightning movements but also that atmosphere of total concentration they give to a task.

After drawing many wonderful local child ‘stand-ins’ from the village, I launched the red underpainting onto the new linen base which is very exciting – finally some real paint after much research and even more prevarication and theorising.

But this is not before I get to draw, Scarlet, aged six, posed in a ‘traditional’ dress but contemporary silver Doc Martens. This act made me consider whether I update the painting to the 21st century or stay close to the era in which the painting was begun. Scarlet’s mum, eminent Scottish photographer Alicia Bruce, takes pictures of us as I draw her daughter and her daughter draws me in turn... Creative acts abound. Each time I draw a child I learn more about this speed of capturing those lightning movements but also that atmosphere of total concentration they give to a task.

Before I write any further, I need to explain... This project is voluntary, powered by my longstanding love of Eardley’s work and inspired by an [article](#) by Jo Meacock published in The Guardian in May 2021. I think that it is a privilege to be allowed to do it, yet it is costly in my time, research and materials. I guess what I hadn’t taken into account was the emotional price of re-living those late months of another artist’s life, getting under her skin, with the dissonance between joy of making and despair. The kind of existential despair echoes down the years when I ask myself what/who am I doing this for? How will I afford the time? What do I do with it all when it’s ‘finished’? However, these are fairly constant inner questions that accompany artists daily producing their own art, but to do it as someone else? I smile ruefully to myself at the bizarre challenges I set myself, and decide to be grateful (mostly) for the exciting task in hand.

That awkward dissonance is perhaps one of the key motivators in Eardley’s life – that poor post-war era, the remains of a sickened Victorian city infrastructure, a polluted Glasgow that is overcrowded, post-industrial and on the verge of demolition. Like me in my earlier years, she was attracted to, or had an instinct for, that which is on the edge of being, including the children, fast growing up, about to be moved out of Townhead to better housing.

In my late twenties I had a reputation for drawing city spaces edged with buildings which were demolished soon after. Having grown up in small town USA and then a Doric-speaking village, I was perversely attracted to the intensity of cities, concentrated populations and ‘La Circulation’ on the streets of New York, Paris, Amsterdam and Leith, all places I lived in my twenties. I identify with Joan’s attraction to cheap studio rents, access to art galleries and a kind of freedom of expression

in a place so clearly far away from anyone's idea of beauty. Now decades on from that energetic explorer self, I attempt to channel the dying vigour of an artist 20 years younger than I when she began *Two Children*, and get the blooming thing underway. Keep painting, Kate...

Kate Downie, Tuesday 23 November 2021



Other general view



Close up on shoes



General view

Birchtree Studios, Progress report 5 – The Toddler

“By now the canvas is becoming weightier, the surfaces more complex with the layers of paint and conjecture.”

*The toddler's first appearance.
Photograph © Kate Downie 2021.*

Last night, I was forced to accept that there were the subtle but definite signs of a fourth figure in the Two Children paintings. A toddler, clinging to the skirts or tugging at the jumper of the older standing girl on the left. I am somehow as amazed to find the fourth child as I was to discover the baby in the older girl's arms. Am I seeing things? How do I go forward with this? Do I launch a whole new set of research into Eardley toddlers? Unsee the child?

If you look carefully at the original unfinished painting, you might see that toddler-sized 'gap'. So much time has been spent in my own studio extrapolating a future for this painting, yet it's still difficult to add to the original in such a fundamental way. What does become clearer with each day of painting is that when depicting children, scale and proportion is everything. A tiny slip of the brush can add or subtract years. It's a subtle art, that of proportion of head to limbs to trunk to hands and feet – as it changes all the time, as a child grows! Perhaps one of the most beguiling things I discover about Eardley as I submerge myself in this process is that it was never about her, and always about her subject.





Matilda Mitchell-Hall (Eardley expert and founder art collection manager at Stirling University) was the person charged with processing, cataloguing and distributing over 800 works on paper after Eardley's death. Matilda advised me to look at certain key works, sharing the observations that Eardley had made. What Matilda realised, going through so many drawings of the Glasgow children, is this: the business of girl children foregoing their playful childhood earlier than boys.

Aged from around 7 or 8, girls were expected to mind the wee ones in big families. In Eardley's early masterpiece *Children, Port Glasgow (1950–53)* this over-riding narrative is writ large and poignant. Little mothers in training: play time, adventure and opportunities closing in fast as they have to mind the wee ones. So it might be with *Two Children*, with the smaller people in their charge. By now the canvas is becoming weightier, the surfaces more complex with the layers of paint and conjecture.

21st November – I feel blessed by a visit from Alex Mathie and Angela Cairns of Heroica Theatre Company. They were part of the incredible team who created [Joan Eardley – A Private View](#), a play performed across the UK, with Alex playing the title role. They also had worked with Matilda and visited my studio way back in 2016 when researching the play, so it was wonderful to touch base with them again and join by friendship so many of us who have studied Eardley's life and work from such different angles. They too could 'see' the toddler!

Kate Downie, Tuesday 7 December 2021



Alexandra Mathie and Angela Cairn of Heroica Theatre Company with the artist, Birchtree Studios. Photograph © Michael Wolchover 2021.

Birchtree Studios, Progress report 6 – Time and Place



Collage experiments

As I delve deeper into the painting process these are the things that come to the fore in my mind. Time: 1962–63. Place: Townhead, Glasgow. Narrative: Two Samson girls with younger siblings in tow set out to the scrap merchant via Joan's studio. Random junk fills the old pram – my painting includes bits and pieces like a broken anglepoise lamp, a dead flatscreen monitor – hinting at the detritus of all eras up to the present.

The family is preparing to flit to Royston as the demolition carries on all around Townhead, promising the chance of a bigger house with indoor toilets and plumbing. The older girl carries the wee one just till she can unload the stuff, toddler at her skirt. The wee sister? She's in a dwam, clutching a bit of rope – a skipping rope. Props like an apple to eat or a rope to play with would all have helped the artist to keep the kids even briefly occupied for some fast drawings and photography.

The painting has, to me, an end-of-an-era feel to it. Is that what Joan felt?

Last year Andrew O'Hagan published this [beautifully written article](#) which helped so much to contextualise the times surrounding the final paintings.

As the project develops, I realise that I cannot keep Joan alive, or paint as if she had lived to a 'ripe old age', because, quite simply, she didn't. All I have done is symbolically give her a few more months of good health to finish it – but of course in that time she would then have started another half dozen paintings that would be, in turn, left unfinished.

Finding that I can't keep her alive, it seems instead that as I paint, I am laying her to rest.

Here are some aspects of the recent painting process:

Extra graffiti, including scratched initials of some of my own studio kids. Stencilled lettering. Newspaper scraps and sweetie papers collaged, including newspaper headlines referencing COP26 which was kicking off as I began the painting. (I love that, narrative-wise – this is ultimate 'green' recycling painting, when scrap had a value.) A new skipping rope in the hands of the smaller girl which I bought it in a corner shop in Cupar. Random junk in the pram. 21st century. Red wellies that my 2-year-old model ALWAYS wears on the wrong feet. More paint, maybe too much Cadmium Red and Scarlet Lake? All those difficult checks on the dresses, helped along by my internet-sourced costume.

Is it all getting just too busy?

Kate Downie, late December 2021 / early January 2022

“Finding that I can't keep her alive, it seems instead that as I paint, I am laying her to rest.”



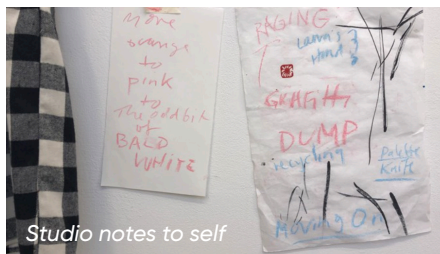
Processes and inspiration



21st Century wellies



21st Century junk



Studio notes to self



Surface texture building

Birchtree Studios, Progress report 7 – Glasgow 1962 to 1993



12 Minute Baby, 1993, monotype on paper from the Rottenrow. © Kate Downie 2022.

“It was an incredible privilege to be there and it is hard to imagine now the level of intimacy I was granted as an artist.”

This might be my final report and, once it is signed off, only pictures will be added because words cannot capture this stage: that of knowing when a painting is resolved. This is hard enough with one’s own self-generated work, harder still with this exotic limbo of being one artist whilst ‘wearing’ another. All I can say is that, beyond all the additional representation of objects and young ones added into the painting, the most challenging part always was, and will be, the faces. No-one painted them like Eardley and so the best I can do is to find the still, watchful place of those four asymmetric eyes looking out to the viewer amidst the cacophony of the city. Shy but challenging, they seem to hold their own as change swirls around them, bound by sibling certainty. This is a subject I know something about, coming from a family of six.

I’d like to honour Dr Elizabeth Carnegie, then Curator at the People’s Palace in Glasgow, who in 1993 invited me to become Artist-in-Residence at Rottenrow Maternity Hospital. It was there that I was provided with an un-used ward as my studio and had access to all aspects of midwifery and obstetrics – but most especially to local mothers, babies and children who accessed the services the hospital provided for so many years. (My own sister gave birth to both her children there, so it was lovely to have that family connection.)

During that residency I drew families in the waiting rooms of Royston GP surgeries, maybe the children of those Joan drew in Townhead, now themselves mothers? In the hospital I met and drew women who had had multiple pregnancies, as well those right on the cusp of parenthood. Then, soon after birth, I was able to draw the beautiful moving new-borns on the other side of labour. As a working artist with a two-year-old daughter of my own it was an incredible privilege to be there and it is hard to imagine now the level of intimacy I was granted as an artist.

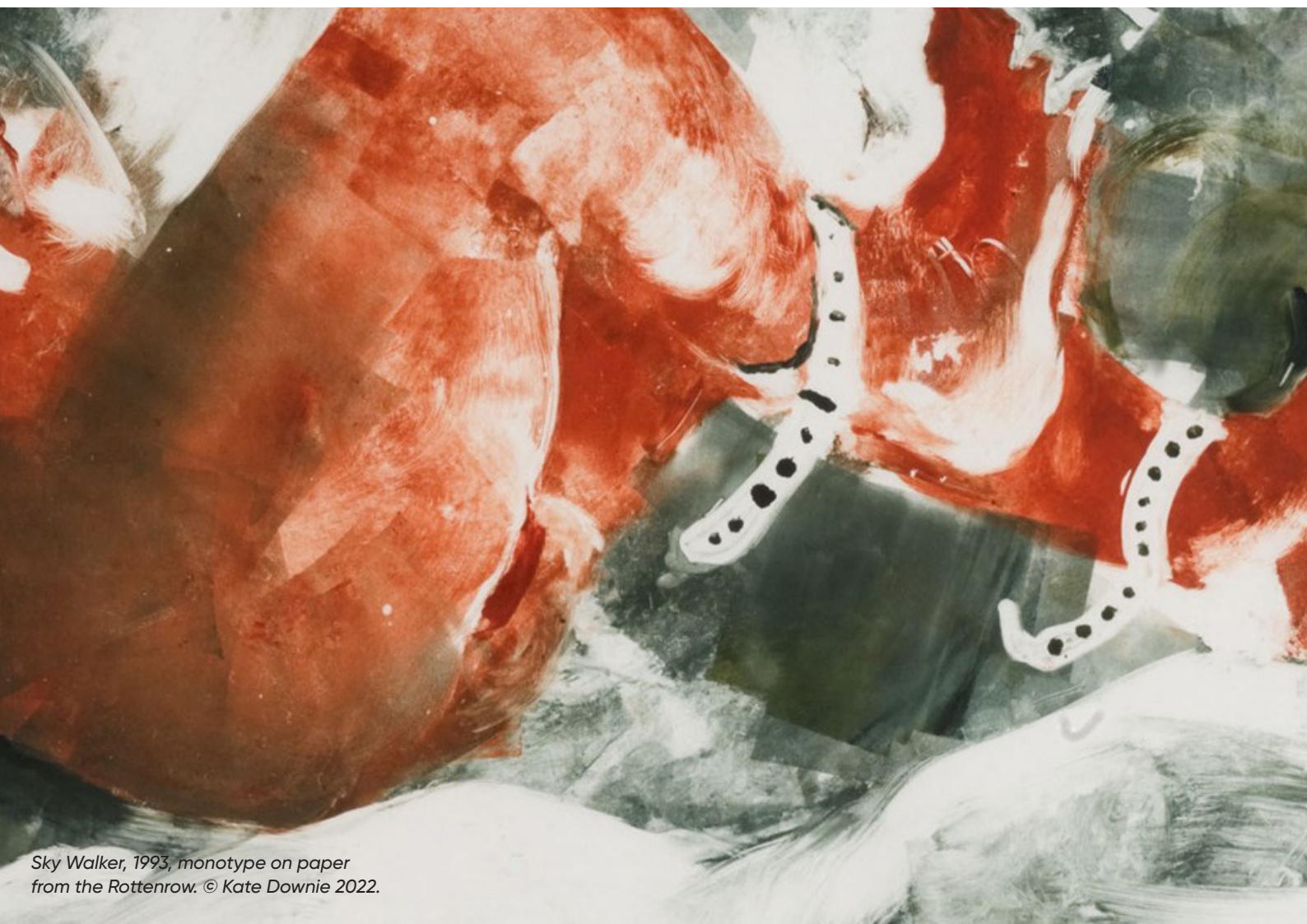
Well, until now. Thanks to Glasgow Museums and the Eardley Estate and many other helpers close and further away, I have been gifted an insight into that earlier Glasgow from the corner of a draughty studio long demolished, one that used to echo with the chat of children and the smell of paint and turps.

Like Eardley, I might sometimes return to the land, the sea and the bridges between.

Kate Downie, Monday 24 January 2022



*12 Minute Baby, 1993, monotype on paper
from the Rottenrow. © Kate Downie 2022.*



*Sky Walker, 1993, monotype on paper
from the Rottenrow. © Kate Downie 2022.*

Birchtree Studios, Progress report 8 – Sharing



Screenshot from the webinar session
Photograph © Kate Downie 2022.

“The next morning, I found myself glaring at the painting and realised that alas, it was not finished.”

On 2 February I spent 12 long hours at the painting. As the 2nd turned into the 3rd, just after midnight, I felt the painting had reached a place where there was an intersection of intention between Joan Eardley and myself across time. Not quite finished but almost – but that is possibly the right place for now? As Michael, my partner and photographic chronicler of all my art for the past 22 years, was setting up his tripod and large camera to record the painting I kept diving in with the paint brushes – tiny adjustments! So hard to leave alone.

Last night I presented a special webinar session for the Royal Scottish Academy's 'Live at the Academicians Studio', chaired so generously by my friend and colleague Annie Cattrell. This is one of a series of live interview studio sessions by invited RSA artist and architect members, hosted by the Academy. A birthchild of lockdown, these online sessions offer unique insights into artists' studio practices and are now kept on YouTube as a valuable archive within the RSA website, for anyone to enjoy and research.

With over 100 people tuning in, we hosted far more than could fit comfortably in my actual studio. This planned event gifted me another deadline with an engaged audience to share all this research with. I love the sense of ownership that so many Scottish people feel for Joan Eardley and her work – the way it communicates across generations.

The next morning, I found myself glaring at the painting (as well as at Michael's dispassionate photographs) and realised that alas, it was not finished.

Drained by so much 'show and tell' online the previous night, I was slightly disturbed to realise that my private place of work had been made public by the webinar – well, duh! When excerpts of the recording were posted on social media with neither frame of reference nor explanation I admit to feeling doubly exposed.

For most of my life as an artist one only 'shares' one's work when it is complete. But then for this project, the blog as I write has become an entity in itself, a studio diary where I can take everyone with me on the journey without having to visit the studio.

Kate Downie, Saturday 5 February 2022



Studio trashed by kids. Photograph © Kate Downie 2022.



Dippers for eyes. Photograph © Michael Wolchover 2022.

Birchtree Studios, Progress report 9 – When is a Painting Finished?



Four Children 1962 to 2022
By Kate Downie RSA (after Joan Eardley)

A painting is finished not when everything is perfectly resolved but when to carry on would make the painting worse. How to know this is born of experience and the intuition that is born of experience.

After at least three possible 'last days' on the painting I finally got enough clear headspace to see a solution for the difficult grey face of the smaller girl. Attempting to use the reproduction at this stage was a waste of time. There were already too many layers and the surface had died on me. My kind artist neighbour Nichola gave me some retouching varnish. I scraped back the surface, applied a sparing layer of varnish, dived back in and painted until dark.

Joan Eardley and Kate Downie: two artists in deep conversation across 60 years.

Done.

Kate Downie, Friday 11 February 2022

"I finally got enough clear headspace to see a solution."

Thank you



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Gracefield Arts Centre
Andrew O'Hagan

Watch the film



*Four Children 1962-2022 by Kate Downie
(after Joan Eardley) Kate Downie in
conversation with Jo Meacock*

On 22 February 2022, at the conclusion of this project and exactly a year after the Guardian article which caused the germ of the idea to first form in Downie's mind, Jo Meacock and filmmaker James Gibson paid a visit to Downie's Fife studio.

In the resultant film Downie reflects on her unique project that has been both a tribute and a celebration in Eardley's centenary year. Watch the whole interview on [YouTube](#).

Postscript: Downie's final art artwork, *Four Children 1962-2022*, was purchased by Glasgow Museums in 2022 with the generous support of the Eardley Estate.