

# A Day in the Life II

Friday, 19 June 09

(part 1 of a 3-part series)

By Christopher Tobutt



**A** Day in the Life II – three Artists in Residence is the current project at the National Gallery, where three very different artists, Nickola McCoy, David Bridgeman, and Kaitlyn Elphinstone have been asked to 'bring their studio' to the National Gallery, so that members of the public will not only be able to see the finished works of art, but will also be able to witness them being created. The artists have been working on their projects in the National Gallery, Harbour Place, from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm each day, from Monday, 1 – Friday, 12 June. The exhibition ends on Wednesday, 15 July.

This is the first in a three-part series, featuring each of the artists. This week, *Lifestyles of Cayman* will be focusing on the art of Nickola McCoy-Snell.

One of the first things you realise when looking at Ms McCoy-Snell's artwork is that perhaps the only way to categorize it is by stating that it is nearly impossible to categorize. While Ms McCoy-Snell has recently gained a considerable reputation for her abstract and semi-abstract paintings, she has also excelled in many other different areas, working with all kinds of media whether in two, or as is the case here, in three dimensions.

One work featured in this exhibition, *Fragile Fragments*, which was the winner of the Fine Art category of the 2007 McCoy

art exhibition, crosses the boundary between painting and sculpture. It is a strong work showing a huge face, broken into many different pieces like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, and stares out from one of the walls.

In the centre of the room is a new sculpture; a large flock of birds, apparently flying, phoenix-like, from an amorphous mass of paint apparently lying on the floor.

It speaks of hope, and resurrection when all seems lost, and is a work which can lift the spirits of the downhearted or heavy-laden.

Both works explore the relationships, points of contact, and shared vitality of apparently disparate and disconnected forms; the mess of paint on the floor and the birds emerging from it are linked only by the imagination of the observer. Likewise, the different pieces of the huge jigsaw, making up the face in the older work, *Fragile Fragments*, comment on the way each separate element in a society is vital to, and complimentary of, the whole.

Ms McCoy is experimental not only in the content of her work, but also in the many different and varied techniques she uses. Not content to use a brush in the ordinary way, Ms McCoy-Snell finds all kinds of

unique and interesting ways to apply paint, or (whatever else she finds) to achieve the desired effect.

"I have toothbrushes; I have spoons; I have brushes that I've made go hard, because that way, I can just rake through things, so to get what I want," she said.

"That's one thing I love about art; I like to build, explore, invent. I spend my time just moving paint around... just trying it out, trying out different colour combinations and ... I just like the whole thing of being creative and trying new things out," she said.

In January of this year, Ms McCoy-Snell decided, on a whim, to submit some photographs of her recent paintings to the Gagliardi Gallery in London. As a result, Ms McCoy-Snell's work has been selected by a juried committee to be featured in this year's Biennale Chianciano, an exhibition which has links with the Saacchi Gallery, and will also result in Ms McCoy-Snell's work being featured in many different high-profile international art magazines; helping her work receive the international exposure it deserves.

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# A Day in the Life II

## Kaitlyn Elphinstone

By Christopher Tobutt

This week, in the second in our series on the three National Gallery Artists in Residence in A Day in the Life II exhibition, we focus on the work of artist Kaitlyn Elphinstone. Ms Elphinstone explores the aesthetics of human interaction with nature: what we understand by the term 'beauty' as it is applied to the 'natural' and 'artificial' realms; and why, at least in Western thinking, we like to keep them separated rather than mixed up. In this original and thought provoking body of work, 'Experimental Landscapes,' Ms Elphinstone's challenges our thinking and aesthetic conditioning on many levels. A printed statement about her work reads:

"The snapshot photographer idealises the world; by taking a picture, he or she has constructed his or her ideal landscape- perhaps a reflection of how we interact with the world around us. "With this exhibition I hope to explore our relationship with the natural world, more specifically, I aim to visually illustrate our efforts to define our natural landscape." Ms Elphinstone's work focuses on the apparent need of the human species to control, order, preserve, and categorise our natural environment in order to understand it.

But it also goes beyond such questions, making us search for the root cause of why we seem to need to contain and dominate the natural world; making a fetish of it by superimposing our own aesthetic constructs. Ms Elphinstone was alerted to the significance of this theme she said, when she did a survey of the 'ideal landscapes;' that photographers had taken, and discovered that all of them had made a significant effort to remove evidence of human activity from the frame. What was the reason for this profound dichotomy in our thinking, she asked, when aboriginal

cultures see the human being as an intrinsic part of the natural landscape; part of the chaos of the natural world.

This work delves deep into our concepts and given assumptions, making us reexamine the aesthetic that defines our relationship to the natural world, to the point of being, like all good art, disturbing.

Consider, for example, a mixture of natural coloured sea urchin shells, with brightly dyed ones, nestled side-by-side in a traditional museum/art gallery frame. What is it that is wrong about the dyed ones, when the whole presentation is artificial anyway?

In another presentation, different photographs of landscapes appear side by side. They were photos taken, she explained, with a camera that was impossible to control- introducing an element of disorder and chaos into the process.

Some of the photographs are distorted and badly out of focus. Here, however, the value of the work resides not in the questions it provokes concerning the perceived aesthetic of the landscape itself, but rather on our apparent need to control and capture it. Why should we be so concerned that a photograph is out of focus anyway, when the colors and tones and forms are all there? And why did the artist use a camera that you couldn't control?

In another work, 'Contained Fish,' large, hefty glass jars each containing water and a live fish are suspended, with heavy, industrial looking chains, from the ceiling, bringing the contrast between the natural world and our apparent need to contain it, control it (whilst bogusly claiming that it is 'natural,') into stark relief.

