

Tom Flynn
TheArtKey, 23 February, 2009

Two young Scottish-born artists make their mark

Now that the art market is finally witnessing a long overdue correction following the unbridled excesses of the last decade, there has been a lot of talk recently of a change in taste among art buyers. Conceptual art, for so long championed by fashionable galleries and lovingly embraced by museums and wealthy private collectors, now seems to be giving way to quieter, more thoughtful, more carefully created approaches to painting, sculpture and drawing.

Two artists who seem to exemplify this new approach are Scottish-born Paul Chiappe and Diarmuid Kelley.

I first encountered Paul Chiappe's work at last summer's Scope contemporary art fair in Regent's Park in London where his tiny drawings were being exhibited on the stand of London dealers Madder 139.

At first mistaking them for faded old black and white photographs, I almost walked straight past them without stopping. But something drew me in. Perhaps they triggered a distant memory of my mother's many albums of photos taken on an old box Brownie in Liverpool in the 1940s and 1950s. In some of the late 1950s images I appear as a ghostly figure in short trousers and school cap, exactly the sort of smudged-face schoolboy one finds posing so self-consciously in Paul Chiappe's works.

I'm glad I paused at Madder 139 and took a moment to focus in on those images for they turned out not to be photographs but meticulous pencil drawings derived from old photographs. I was instantly hooked and still wish I could afford to buy one. Many of the images are tiny and gallery staff will happily provide you with a magnifying glass with which to marvel at the draughtsmanship. But even without an aid to closer scrutiny Chiappe's work is utterly compelling.

Even now, having pondered these images in digital format (needless to say, they need to be encountered in the flesh to appreciate their magic), I'm still not sure how or why the transposition from photograph into drawing renders the works so haunting and unforgettable. Just as a photograph captures the very light present at the scene, embedding it via a chemical process into the object itself, so Chiappe somehow succeeds in ensnaring some ineffable quality of the photograph in his drawing.

It's a cliché to speak of nostalgia or memory when describing old photographs, but Chiappe's drawings relate to memory in more subtle ways even than old photographs. More importantly, they add an imaginative layer to the 'factual' status of the photographic images on which they're based. They can trigger the same melancholy mood one feels when reading the limpid prose of the late W.G. Sebald.

The anonymity of Chiappe's subjects is also an important part of their appeal. Some years ago a collecting trend emerged which focused on old photographs. Aficionados descend on flea markets, charity stalls and jumble sales in a feverish quest for discarded albums. Presumably some kind of sorting process follows which must involve a meditation on identity. Chiappe's work might be seen as a patient and careful distillation of that same collecting instinct. But he's turned it into a highly personal project that has universal appeal. In an art market still largely fixated on big, brash, empty, consumer-driven gestures, these diminutive studies of forgotten souls are mesmerising to behold.

Having studied at Edinburgh College of Art, and still only 25, Chiappe has already enjoyed his first museum show, having been included in the exhibition entitled 'Kaleidoscope: Works on Paper Recently Acquired for Scotland' at The National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh, July to September 2008. His London dealers, Madder 139 (www.madder139.com), will be exhibiting examples of Paul's recent work at the Pulse art fair in New York from 5th to 8th March. I'd urge to go along and see them. Buy one if you can.

Richard Crowe
Whitehot magazine, August, 2008

A few minutes walk from Old Street Tube Station, in a westerly direction will bring you to Whitecross Street. This is a rather self-contained little Street with eccentric numbering. Madder 139 Gallery is next door to 'Carnivale' Restaurant/Shop.

When you enter the gallery you enter a hidden world. Many of Chiappe's monochrome drawings of children are so small that you will need a magnifying glass (some are provided) to see them – and then you will struggle to see these micro-miniature faces. But they are there, and each has its own character. These are the instantaneous expressions captured from old photographic portraits randomly encountered, painstakingly copied and sometimes deliberately distorted. But why?

Is this just a feat of endurance to capture public attention or a gimmick to capture a market niche? I do not believe that his ultimate purpose and motivation arises from either, although he may have been influenced by both. He is deeply interested in the emotions of the innocent, as they attempt to understand the world that they find themselves in. It is a slow and deliberate investigation into the human condition. And we need such tortuous modes of presentation to make us see the human condition afresh. We are so accustomed to the human face that we find it difficult to perceive its hidden secrets. We need to go on this arduous journey to discover what lies beneath these innocent faces. We see the looks of patient conformity to the dictates of adult authority. We see the dark looks of children who have endured oppression and poverty. Chiappe takes this further and brings out the enigmatic, the ghostly, the transcendent, the sinister, the macabre. Glimpses of childish fancy also break out here and there reminding us of the forgotten world of childhood.

There is a gothic element to these portraits which is even more marked in the larger examples. Some of these dominate walls, and retain the blurring and aged quality of old photographs. In some, the details of the face are almost lost in a delicate mistiness - surely another way of making us consider the human face anew. One struggles to perceive the character and nature of the individual – but the battle is not in vain

Other large works are dark in both senses of the word. An untitled picture of the façade of an old school is positively nightmarish. A little girl, dwarfed by the huge dark front door, stands solemnly facing us with a darkly enigmatic expression. The quality of the expression is achieved through intensive working over many weeks. It is this concentrated obsessive focus which eventually yields the transcendent quality. Chiappe does indeed make the surface take on a life of its own. At every stage he searches and senses the photograph for subtleties of light and shade on surfaces. Then he invests the paper surface with this information, building it up with layers and layers of fine marks. This has intensified over many workings and reworkings of the face to elicit the inner quality of the psyche. The surface is so alive that one can become transfixed by the stare which it gives forth. It communicates so many deep emotions and nuances of meaning and intention.

I would recommend viewing this exhibition.

Tim Cornwell
The Scotsman, 8th July, 2008
Small wonder - Paul Chiappe

A new exhibition showcases the work of Scotland's latest artistic wunderkind. You'll need a magnifying glass, not only to appreciate the fine draughtsmanship of Paul Chiappe, but just to see it in the first place, discovers Tim Cornwell

UNTITLED 23, in the artist Paul Chiappe's new collection, shows the sideways look of a grinning boy. Most of the image has been whited out, in the style of an Andy Warhol print, but in grey and white. Shadow leaves the suggestion of features, with a sinister, sneering twist to mouth and eyes.

Untitled 23 has the look of a full-size canvas, an image that could easily run to a metre wide. Actually it comes in at 4mm square, like several other works in Chiappe's new London show, often with faces that are barely 1mm wide. His gallery has bought several magnifying glasses to go with the display.

Chiappe was declared a "darling of the art world" by the Edinburgh press last year. He carried off two top prizes at Edinburgh College of Art's degree show on the strength of his miniature, meticulous pencil drawings. They included the college's centenary prize for the best work by a graduating student.

Now he's moving to the next stage in his professional career. His first solo exhibition in London opens tomorrow at the Madder139 Gallery. One Scottish collector has already walked in and reserved five works, the gallery said this week.

Meanwhile Kaleidoscope, an exhibition at the National Galleries of Scotland of recently bought works on paper, opens on 15 July. Chiappe's Untitled 6, newly acquired for Scotland, appears alongside works ranging from a watercolour by EA Walton to John Byrne's pastel portrait of Tilda Swinton.

In October Chiappe will be showing at the Scope Art Fair, at Lord's Cricket Ground, part of the affiliated exhibitions running near the Frieze Art Fair.

Chiappe's most striking images are his tiny pencil portraits of pinched, hollow-faced and scowling children. Untitled 6 is a pastiche of a period school photograph. He worked on the drawing over about three months at ECA.

The teachers are smudged away, and the children in pinnies and collars are clutching themselves, as if gnawed with hunger, with odd, misshapen expressions under glaring eyebrows. On closer examination, the little rows of faces include Laurel and Hardy, in bowlers.

Chiappe has gone for extremes in his new London exhibition. One work in the show is a huge linen piece that's 225 by 175cm – roughly two metres wide – of a single head blown up from an earlier drawing.

"It's the extreme scale to some of the tiny ones I've got where most of the faces are under one millimetre," he says. "Those ones I usually do with the naked eye though I recently invested in a microscope to go even smaller."

He found the microscope too difficult on the first attempt, because "you see the point of the pencil shaking".

Chiappe, from Glenrothes in Fife, became seriously interested in art at the age of about 16. His sister Antonia, three years younger, followed him to Edinburgh College of Art, where her fine silver wire creations were considered a highlight of this summer's degree show.

"I've always done quite realistic drawings," he says. "I remember even in primary school meticulously copying images for art class. I would end up drawing dolphins and things from wildlife books. Basically, anything I would draw I'd make sure it was as realistic as possible."

His drawings are labour-intensive, built up with dots, though recently he has used an airbrush to try and speed things up.

The first school photographs that caught his eye were in local newspapers such as the Glenrothes Gazette, which people had sent in to try and trace old friends. "That's where I got interested in the subject of schools and classrooms," he says. "It is quite dark, but there is a humorous side to it."

While he works from prints, including vintage portraits he finds on Google, his drawings are originals, though he works hard to produce something "photographic". Untitled 6 took him about three months. "I usually start by drawing out the layout, and work into that. All of them are slightly changed from the original, adding an extra figure, taking people away, changing the tone, blurring the photograph."

"I tend to work very slowly, to try not to breathe too much when I'm producing the piece so my hand's not shaking all over the place. It's a very long process," he says. "The tiny single heads, you do need a magnifying glass to look at them. Some of them are so small that people can't even see them using a magnifying glass, but they are actually there."

- Kaleidoscope is at the Royal Scottish Academy lower galleries, Edinburgh, 15 July until 21 September.

Francesca Baseby
Scottish Art News, Autumn, 2008

For those who have not already seen Chiappe's hyperrealist graphite drawings this solo exhibition of recent works makes essential viewing.

Chiappe is a master at copying old black and white photographs of children on a minuscule scale which almost require a magnifying glass to view. The fact that such close observation is necessary works as a tool to physically draw in the viewer. Up close you realise that these are not straightforward copies. Chiappe aims to draw viewers in by distorting these images, contradicting our assumptions of their subject matter and manipulating the relationship the viewer has with them.

They may be hyperrealist, but they are also strongly illusionistic. For example, *Untitled 6* looks like an ordinary school photograph, yet on closer inspection one can see Laurel and Hardy embedded amongst the school children. This humour is immediately quashed by the macabre effect of the empty spaces where the teachers' heads should be.

Although these drawings are tiny, they carry great weight not only in their skill but in the disarming effect they have upon their viewers.

Jenny Richards
The Skinny, 26th January, 2008
Paul Chiappe @ The Modern Art Gallery

Just as Angela Carter twisted familiar fairy tales, so the magician Chiappe twists the relics of this shrine, creating a most convincing illusion

A small chamber within The Modern Art Gallery's lengthy interior hosts a collection of drawings by the emerging artist Paul Chiappe, winner of this year's John Watson Prize. The prize is awarded annually to a graduate of Edinburgh College of Art, granting them an exhibition in The John Watson School, now known to all as Edinburgh's Modern Art Gallery.

Appropriately, Chiappe's minute drawings depict scenes of Victorian children sourced from old, discarded photographs. These astonishingly realistic works are like a contact sheet of negatives revealing the defiant brow of a boy in Scout uniform or the short trouser leg of a front row squirmer. One image portrays a class of innocent school children, blocked in by faceless teachers. Looking closer with the provided magnifying glass, I discover the disturbing face of a Charlie Chaplin-like character squeezed in between rows of naive kids. Equally mesmerising is a drawing so small that to the naked eye it looks nothing more than a scratch made by a tiny hand.

Naturally, these pencil scenes evoke nostalgia, but they also exude a stale air of uneasiness within the chapel-like space. A sinister undercurrent suggests it could be a memorial to the forgotten of the Watson school; a hint perhaps to the hidden children's graveyard that rests behind this gallery?

Just as Angela Carter twisted familiar fairy tales, so the magician Chiappe twists the relics of this shrine, creating a most convincing illusion. He is in full control of the viewers, luring them to his inconceivable handiwork, which successfully persuades that he is nothing short of a genius.

Duncan MacMillan
The Scotsman, 11th January, 2008

THE artist Paul Chiappe has produced what must be the world's smallest portrait, or I think he has. The day I went to his exhibition, somebody had pinched the magnifying glass that the organisers had helpfully provided to look at it properly, so I can't be quite sure.

It is one of just four works in his John Watson Prize exhibition at the SNGMA. The others are still minute though large enough to be visible with the naked eye and reproduce vintage photographs in pencil with the most extraordinarily delicate technique.

Sarah Urwin Jones

The Herald, Saturday 29th December, 2007

It's been a rather good year for Paul Chiappe, the 2007 winner of the John Watson Prize, awarded annually to a graduate of Edinburgh College of Art. Chiappe is an artist of ultimate illusion, his pencil drawings recreating with staggering veracity (and affection) ancient photographs of unknown children, lined up as if in a school photo. Part of the award is this tiny exhibition, which provides a platform for the best of his degree show. He also features in Edinburgh College of Art's Centenary Show, Ten Decades, at the City Art Centre, where his 21st-Century offering sits alongside such former alumni as Dame Elizabeth Blackadder and John Houston.

Susan Mansfield

The Scotsman, Friday 28 December, 2007

Memorable moments of 2007, visual art

Six who made an impact in 2007:

PAUL CHIAPPE

CHIAPPE'S delicate, hyperrealist pencil drawings, inspired by old school photographs, have been the talk of the town since he graduated from Edinburgh College of Art's MFA programme in June. His work is currently on show in ECA's Ten Decades exhibition at the City Arts Centre and at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art.

It's Nice That, August 2007

Someone once took me to task for using the word 'awesome' for undeserving things. For something to be truly awesome it has to fill you with immeasurable admiration and perhaps a little fear. Paul Chiappe's minute, hyperrealistic drawings of found photos are, I promise you, quite awesome.

Jack Mottram

The Herald, Friday 22nd June, 2007

"Of course, there is much at the exhibition that hangs on a wall or sits on a plinth, and some of it is bound together, albeit loosely, by another theme, made by artists with an obsessive bent. Paul Chiappe's work is mesmerising. He draws immaculate miniatures based on Victorian photographs, the precision of his draughtsmanship a counterpoint to the shifting memories that are his subject."

Isla Leaver-Yap
MAP, Issue 5/ Spring, 2006

Paul Chiappe possesses a ghostly kind of alchemy. Abstaining from the blush of colour and forgoing the sensationalism of scale, this young artist has developed a style of hyperrealist drawing quite apart from any of his contemporaries.

Drawing usually implies an air of freedom, the hastily conceived act of improvisation. And with a lineage that dates from the first cave paintings, the simplicity of the medium chimes with ideas of the accidental and absent-minded sketch. But not for Chiappe

With sublime detail akin to Serse, and with a knowing nod to Chuck Close and Vija Celmins, this Edinburgh College of Art graduate executes drawing with a clinical precision that is both beguiling and transcendent. Chiappe draws not from life, nor from memory, but from a strange twilight zone usually reserved for photography alone. The figures he renders are hesitant, drifting back and forth, at once fading and surfacing amid terse monochrome shadows.

Chiappe bases his material mainly on found images such as vintage school photographs from local Fife newspapers, and spends at least three months on each pencil drawing. His final-year show comprised only a clutch of works of this kind, and his dedication to detail is intrinsic to each piece. 'I've stuck solely to pencil and always worked very small,' says Chiappe. 'Drawing in miniature can become quite obsessive.'

The laboriousness is fanatical; the daily working and re-working of each drawing becomes an act of devotion. 'It's taking drawing to an extreme,' he adds. 'I really like using these 1920s photographs to draw from. The duality is much better, and the characters are more interesting,' he says, although some of his later work has moved on to contemporary family photographs.

Immersed in meditative complexity and intensity, the works are treated as ghosts. Chiappe toys with notions of memory and history and parallels them with the fragility of his medium. While the wilful rebellion against pop aesthetics and the process of quiet resistance against the alacrity of modern living are together perhaps not unique, they are indeed revelatory for such a young artist. The critic Michael Newman wrote 'drawing, with each stroke, re-enacts desire and loss', and this newcomer's languorous style beautifully embodies such a paradox.

Jack Mottram
The List, Issue 525, 7-21 July, 2005

"Paul Chiappe is, by way of contrast, one of the quiet artists. His pencil drawings are breath-taking, both in terms of the subject matter - Victorian children stare glumly out of the frame - and in terms of his consummate grasp of technique."

Duncan MacMillan
The Scotsman, Tuesday 21 June, 2005

"Traditional skills are not entirely absent here, though. Paul Chiappe's pencil drawings are quite extraordinary in their delicate minuteness."