

News

Eclectic tribute makes modern man of Bard

Visual art Giles Sutherland

Burns Unbroke
Summerhall, Edinburgh

★★★★☆

Here's a question. Is there anything new to be said about Robert Burns?

On the evidence of this show, the answer is a definitive yes. Rather like

his earlier English counterpart, Shakespeare, the Bard is a man (or as portrayed here, a woman) for all seasons, and very contemporary. At least this is how he is reimagined by this strong grouping of artists from all over the British Isles who have taken him to heart and made homages and homilies to a poetic, passionate soul who packed so much into his short 37 years on earth.

There's a lot of fun and diversity to be had here — from the



A portrait of Robert Burns in steel mesh by the artist David Begbie

interpretations of *To a Mouse* and *Tam o'Shanter* by local schoolchildren to multimedia installations, as well as more traditional paintings, prints and three-dimensional works.

A film by Ross Fleming reimagines Tam in a more contemporary setting — what he describes as “a gender-fluid queer ecology”. Here, on a bicycle, rather than his famous grey mare, Meg, he is pursued by a lavishly costumed collection of witches.

In an adjacent room, Laura Graham's *Raven's Ravin* is a darker, eerier work with a giant cage and accompanying video showing the silhouette of the bird that features in several of Burns's poems, including *John Anderson, My Jo* and *The Cotter's Saturday Night*: “And proffer up to Heaven the warm request, / That he who stills the raven's clam'rous nest, /

And decks the lily fair in flow'ry pride.”

There's a fair dose of celebrity here, highly appropriate given Burns's claim to such a contemporary label. The names Holly Johnson, David Mach, Adrian Wiszniewski, the Chapman brothers and Douglas Gordon will mean something to most. But among these crowd-pleasers are subtler voices. There's a beautiful black and white mural by Ciara Veronica Dunne, celebrating the complexities of Burns's life, poetic and sexual.

The Burns “cult” was attacked in the 1920s by Hugh MacDiarmid as being damaging to the national intellect and psyche. He had a point. But on the evidence here, there is nothing cultish about these artists' views on the poet. They are engaged, empathetic and full of integrity.