

## Up the hill backwards: **Glasgow School of Art** First Year 1985-6 Alan Dunn

### Summer 1985



Entry to Glasgow School of Art is by portfolio submission with no interview. Throughout 1984-5 I attend the pre-GSA New Print Studio under the tutelage of Brian McGeogh and I know my portfolio is strong enough to get in. The day I receive the offer letter, my secondary school teacher Big John Crawford does a little jig of delight.

We all meet in town. The Clash play Rock Garden on Queen Street but I am elsewhere, probably shopping for dodgy cardigans. I head home to watch the



horrific Bradford stadium fire and get asked not to smoke in the house, fair enough. The four-months after being offered a place at art school are full of sun (well, technically rain), optimism and wine. I take part in my first public exhibition at Kelvingrove Art Galleries and visit Bridge of Orchy with the infamous Beinn Dorain climbing incident and sell two drawings to the Bridge of Orchy Hotel for £14 each. We go to see The Ramones, supported by The Styng Rites, at Barrowlands. The Ramones come on stage to *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* before Dee Dee screams 1234! I have never experienced such instant mass carnage.



We fly to Nürnberg on a Strathclyde Regional Council exchange, a group of Stevie Falconer, Angela, Allan C, Katrina Brown, Susan and Fiona. We stay at the KOMM and the fridge is packed with Becks for our arrival. We see Dürer

etchings, sketch everyday in the market square, organise an exhibition of drawings, visit the Steiner School and fly straight back to the second week of the Castle Toward trip, catching up with Dr Bob, Nathan and Penders. We are drunk on Pernod in Dunoon, wearing eyeliner for

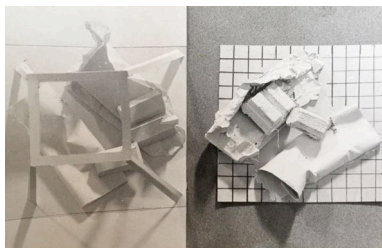


the final performance and talking about Sarah McLeod's party in Hyndland at the weekend. The sounds of this summer are 7" singles from The Cult, Dead Kennedys, CRASS, Long Ryders, Bauhaus, The Jasmine Minks and The Janitors (*Chicken Stew!*). We hang out at Stevie F's in Balornock during the day and Nicos on Sauchiehall Street in the evening. We head through to Edinburgh for the Fringe and watch The Styng Rites busking outside the Portrait Gallery and head back for Willie Nelson's opening in Douglas Street.

### September 1985 – June 1986

We are split into groups on the first day at GSA and given a studio downstairs. I am in chain-smoking Danny Ferguson's studio and he immediately piles junk up in the middle of the large white room and tells us to spend two days drawing it. At the end of the first day he tells us all that everything we have done is crap, we know nothing and to start again. At the end of the second day he tells us that everything is crap, but slightly better, and so on. I try to find a photo of Danny online and find that "in 1954 he married Margaret Dunn, herself a graduate of the Glasgow School of Art and a very fine embroideress and weaver. A handsome and athletic figure, he played football in his early days for Baillieston Juniors ... and Blantyre Victoria, where he took over as centre-half from Jock Stein." An east end boy yet he did not have a single personal conversation that I recall. I am positioned next to Pervaze Mohammed, Andrew and Cacklin' Auld Roll-Up Ian who will later exhibit his spunk paintings. Lorna Buchanan, Elaine Lynch and Alison Forsyth are there too and Dr Bob is next door with Susie Hunter.

The Meteors and King Kurt are in town and The Smiths play Barrowlands. Morrissey delights with Elvis' *His latest flame* morphing into *Rusholme Ruffians*. They are a fucking great band.



Long Ryders and the Jesus & Mary Chain. We choose a colour (blue) for collage assignment.

Pete Bevan does a one-day clay mask workshop with us but he hates mine and throws it to the floor in front of everybody, telling me to do it again. I do, and the second one is better, and I bank my thoughts about him. He even gives me Punishment Exercise of doing 150 drawings of heads over a weekend, one hundred for him and fifty for Jimmy Cosgrove. We take this in our stride as this is what art school must be like. We do screen printing for a week and then head to Culzean Castle for five days with Ken Mitchell

We are given a one-day lampshade assignment: Do something with a lampshade. And a paint-objects-white sculpture assignment. We are sent out to the city to draw from life and we do a colour workshop.

The Fall are in Glasgow, then the



and Pete Bevan who decides to stand behind the breakfast bar one evening and launch tins and full bags of sugar at us. Everybody is pissed, especially staff, and Susie H and I get romantic and we all do so much drawing and sketching every day and into the bonfire nights. Lorna B wants to chat about her 'condition' and Ken M, who was at Castle Toward both times I am there, can hardly stand except when he is giving the most careful and considerate tutorials about drawing.



Wine and Malboros in Kelvingrove Park, the hostel, Rock Garden and Lymburns. Norman tagging along. We are around Glasgow drawing motorways and cemeteries, reconvening in the studio to smoke and compare. Each Wednesday morning at 9.30am we attend art history lectures on the aesthetically pleasing but bone-hard Mac chairs. We do self-portrait

assignments and Ken and Pete Bevan sit in a tutorial and absolutely rave about everything I have done so far. Nothing thrown either. We have to write an exhibition review already and I choose the first thing I come across which is The Compass Gallery Christmas Exhibition. I write a bloody thorough review



but end up with a 2% mark as "Christmas Exhibitions do not count as they are not curated." I go to the all-night GSA Styng Rites dance but Susie H goes with the other Alan, flattop Alan. Rather than get a flattop, I buy The Cult's *Revolution* and drown my sorrows. At Christmas we can sign on so I hop on the train to Bellgrove and leg it to my appointment. We go to see Alex Cox's *Repo Man* for the first time at the GFT (Glasgow Film Theatre) with its soundtrack of Iggy Pop, Black Flag and Suicidal Tendencies. Emilio Estevez plays Otto and walks into the local supermarket where the tins simply say *FOOD* or *DRINK* on them. I go to the Necropolis to draw and there is a woman trying to raise the dead. It is the sound of *Psychocandy* but you still get The Broons annual for every second Christmas in this fucked-up country.

Grandpa Dunn is getting ill and we have a 3D assignment over the Festive period. The sad me makes some resolutions, including "win Best First Year Studies prize, see The Cramps and see more films."

## 1986

I make a start and watch *Yellow Submarine* and write my first song called *I've got something to do now*. Looking back, it's a JAMC-meets-Devo acoustic number. I discuss it over a pint with Penders and Dr Bob but neither offer to

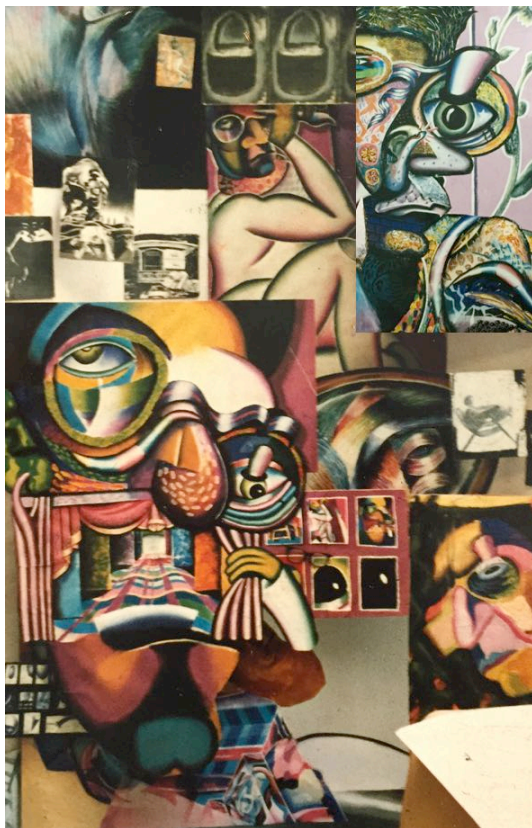


form a band. Nathan smashes me at pool and we head to Bellahouston Park for the Castle Toward exhibition and then Lymburns. Space Shuttle Challenger explodes and Ken M gives me a two-minute thumbs up tutorial. Just carry on. It is the sound of Hüsker Dü's *Makes no sense at all* and we get a Graphics brief and we lurch and drink from one



project to another, not really finding our feet but keeping half an eye on this bigger beast around us, The Glasgow School of Art. Alison Watt has a studio in Painting, way up in the gods, and we are told in hushed tones that she doesn't ever use the colour black. We go and see The Jesus & Mary Chain at Barrowlands. They play for around 30 minutes then bugger off. *Never understand*. They are supported by Pink Industry and I have the pleasure of meeting Jayne Casey in Liverpool and she becomes a strong supporter of my projects. She starts out in Big In Japan with Bill Drummond. That is another connection for another day.

I note now that I take no notice whatsoever of any work that anybody else is doing, although I think we are all doing pretty much the same things. I do self-portraits not due to vanity but as drills and vehicles to learn how to shift colour and materials around. We go to the ABC to see *The return of the living dead*.



The cinema is scarier than the film, with fights, chases, fire and police. I come up with a few possible names for the band we never form. The Ourways. Fuckabilly & The BillBillys. The Pain Tickets. Ma Homelands. The Got-A-Lights? Music starts to get cut-up through Big Audio Dynamite but psychobilly and skiffle linger. Terry and Gerry. The The, The Very Things, Microdisney and Half Man Half Biscuit. I do not remember any music ever being played in the studios. The soundtrack is conversation. The smell is cigarettes and tins of F.P. Cow's Cow Gum.

Thomas Joshua Cooper gives a lecture about Bob Dylan and Tom Waits. I spend time with Ruth Greer, Jonny Beaver and Graeme Joyce and meet Jonny's brother Anton in Liverpool later. Nathan's covers band play The Vic with *Steppin' stone*, *Silly thing*, *You*

*really got me*, *Los Rancheros* and *I wanna be sedated*. We wander back along The Clyde in the early hours but it gets scary down there. And then

there is Chernobyl. The studio is purple and surreal with eyes like The Residents. Hiding behind an eye.

The sheep in Scotland are contaminated and Maradona wins the World Cup for Argentina. The GSA Director Tony Jones leaves at the end of the academic year and I meet him later in his new office as Chancellor & President-emeritus at the Art Institute of Chicago.



Through the year we also do introductory photography, murals and typography assignments. What is first year at GSA? Is it time to kill your fathers and mothers, or at least your Secondary School teachers? It is rigorous. First year is not easy and Susie, Lorna and Norman all fail the year. All the staff I recall are male. Painting is by far the largest department and although Campbell, Howson, Currie and Wiszniewski leave two years prior, their scent lingers weakly. The other annexed departments have the lure of the unknown. Our art history lectures are generic Renaissance and Modernism.

Looking back, is there anything in first year that points to a way ahead? As I write in relation to Environmental Art, I use the period to absorb as much as possible and at the time, the Blast First stable seems to be about style over content. It doesn't matter what the Butthole Surfers or Sonic Youth are singing about, it is the overall patina that is exciting. Blast First feels curated, branded and catalogued by Paul Smith and this is something I carry into Environmental Art, albeit subconsciously.



There is a leaning towards monochrome over colour and of course towards 2D rather than 3D. None of my works are yet titled, except one, the Wiszniewski-esque pastel drawing named after a Some Bizzare compilation I can not actually afford, *If You Can't Please Yourself You Can't, Please Your Soul*. It features characters from the underground that will crop up over the next few years, including Einstürzende Neubauten, Cabaret Voltaire and Genesis P. Orridge. *Notes from the underground*.

First year is acclimatisation and a little bit of toughening up. It is the beginning of a studio culture and the start of looking for your weaknesses to develop and comfort zones to steer you away from. It is about recognising tiny moments that may become crucial, such as David Harding's talk.

## Images



New Print Studio, Anna S, AD, Allan C, Soria, Denise B, 1984, photo: Brian McGeogh



The Clash in Rock Garden, possibly with Kettles in the background? 1985, photo by S. Clegg (<http://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-the-clash-uk-rock-group-with-joe-strummer-at-glasgow-rock-garden-on-52442962.html>)



Barrowlands, 1985



Nürnberg, Susan, Katrina B, Stevie F, Angela, Brian M, Marion Love, Willie N, 1985, photo: AD



KOMM image c/o [http://tela.sugamegs.org/\\_asxtela/asxcards/12DrummersDrumming1984-05-11KommNurembergWestGermany.html](http://tela.sugamegs.org/_asxtela/asxcards/12DrummersDrumming1984-05-11KommNurembergWestGermany.html)



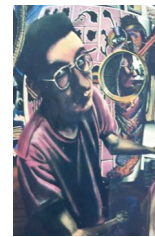
Alan Dunn cardboard assignment, 1985



Alan Dunn book assignment, 1985



Alan Dunn studio, 1986



Alan Dunn self-portrait in mirror, 1986



Alan Dunn self-portrait in mirror, 1986



Alan Dunn GSA studio, 1986



Alan Dunn self-portrait in mirror, 1986



Alan Dunn *If You Can't Please Yourself You Can't, Please Your Soul*, 1986

[www.alandunn67.co.uk](http://www.alandunn67.co.uk)  
[a.dunn@leedsbeckett.ac.uk](mailto:a.dunn@leedsbeckett.ac.uk)  
 August 2015