

Title: Danny North | *As I Found Her: A Portrait of Eigg*

Contributors: Danny North and Curator Louise Pearson

Transcript

Louise Pearson

As I Found Her: A Portrait of Eigg is Danny North's photographic portrait of one Hebridean island, its people and their way of life. The project stemmed from the photographer's desire to belong somewhere and the joy he felt when he discovered Eigg. Visiting the island four times in 2016-17, Danny North set out to document Eigg's tight-knit community of a hundred residents and the sense of belonging that radiates from this. The portraits were made both inside the islanders' homes and in the expansive landscape. In the background there is a much broader narrative about what it might mean to live on an island, any island, away from the mainland and at the mercy of nature.

I'm Louise Pearson, a curator. In this interview I speak to Danny about the project and five works from the series which have entered the National Galleries of Scotland collection.

Danny, I'd really like to know what drew you to Eigg in the first place.

Danny North

If I were to sum it up in a single word, it would definitely be community. When I first heard about Eigg, I was visiting Scotland on holiday. I was up near Skye and the skipper of the little ferry boat that I was on explained to me about the different islands, the small isles in particular. I knew nothing about Eigg at that stage. I was quite naïve about the small isles but he went on to explain how they became owners of their own island and that as a concept really fascinated me. That this community existed on their own island plus the renewable energy sources and how that they were one of the first places in the world to run on three renewable energy sources as an idea really fired my imagination.

It started off fundamentally as being nothing more than being curious because where I grew up was quite rough and when I was younger, community was a difficult thing to find. The community I found was when I was playing in a heavy metal band with my friends and that was what we clung to but outside of that we were always getting into fights and people always looked down on us for being musicians. As I grew older and reflected on that I realised I wanted to be part of a community, it's something I have longed for since I was a young lad. And when I heard about Eigg, it festered away in my mind for months and months. I contemplated what it must be like to be there and I was really interested and then one day out of the blue I just decided I was going to go and that was that. I can't really explain what drove me, it was like a bolt of lightning to the brain, one day I just thought, 'I'm going.'

When I say I'm going, I wanted to go and photograph it. I'm very lucky being a photographer because I think that the camera quite often gives you a reason to be curious. I did a little bit of research and I found that there was a heritage trust for the island and there was a lady there called Maggie Fyffe

and I sent her an email with a few ideas such as coming up to do a photography project about community. We discussed that it was coming up to the twentieth anniversary of the buy-out. She thought it would be a really wonderful thing to do, that this project could be part of the celebrations.

The idea of community is what drew me there and I am quite naïve to be honest with you sometimes and so I set off with that in my heart and my head and no other plan or notion at that time and it was quite an adventure, truth be told.

Louise Pearson

I think sometimes just going for it is the way to start a project and the sense of community does radiate from the series when you look at the different portraits. In spending time on Eigg what did you learn about specifically island communities from photographing the residents and talking to the residents?

Danny North

I set off there with prejudices already ingrained into my mind of what it would be like. I thought it would be hard-faced and difficult. I thought the community would be like *An American Werewolf in London*, when they wander into the *Slaughtered Lamb* and everyone stops and turns, and actually I did have a moment like that on my first day there, but it was more my fault, truth be told!

When I arrived on the island I went to see Maggie and I was seeking her advice. I arrived on this island which at the time felt quite small but once I arrived felt humungous and I didn't quite understand what I had started. I went to Maggie to ask for her advice. She said 'it's Friday, it's really good weather, everybody will be down at the tearoom', which is the only place you can grab a pint on the island. 'I guarantee you half the island will be sat outside there' she said. So I headed down there and she was right, everybody was there and I went in and thought, what am I going to do, how am I going to introduce myself?

You know when you get those moments where the mouth starts talking and your brain starts asking why are you doing this?

Well, I walked outside with my can of Guinness and stood there and said 'hello everyone, my name's Danny, I've come to the island to do this thing, I hope Maggie's told you' and everyone just stopped, looked round at me then carried on talking like I didn't exist and I just thought 'oh, my God!' But then one chap called George saw me and felt quite sorry for me. He called me over and I went and spoke to him. He said, 'you absolute daft sod, what were that!?' And what followed then was me arriving at 3 o'clock in the afternoon and leaving at 3 o'clock in the morning.

By the time I left I knew half the island and it was amazing. By the time I finished the project what I came to realise about island communities in particular is that you come to rely on each other in ways that I have never experienced before outside of the island. The way that you feel a connection and depth and belonging with your best friend is almost extended to everyone that you know on the island. I witnessed community in action and I witnessed how that became so imperative just to survival. If there is an issue with your house or with your car in everyday life we can go off to Kwik Fit or call the plumber in but those things just don't exist, especially on such a small island where even the doctor doesn't live there. If you're over nine you have to go to boarding school. It's that absolute beauty of knowing that your neighbours are there for you. It's something that I thought was quite profound. I saw a brotherhood and a sisterhood that existed in those friendships that I've not seen anywhere else.

Louise Pearson

I certainly get the impression that it is a very special community for all the reasons that you are saying, people relying on each other in order to make life on the island work.

Danny North

I arrived on that island as a stranger and discovered that, because of the renewable energy system that they started all those years ago, people from all over the world fly in from universities to make films and to interview people. But they are always gone in 24-48 hours. The first time I went up there I stayed for two weeks. As an outsider, on a small island where you go there not knowing anyone feels like a lifetime, truth be told. After two weeks when I explained to someone on the island who I'd been to dinner with, where I'd been and whose house I had been in, they said 'it took me ten years to do all that.' Reflecting on it at the end, one lady who lived there called Eilidh, she put her arm around me and declared me one of their own and that companionship and that friendship did extend.

I had people come all the way down to Cornwall for my wedding from the Isle of Eigg. And what I took away from that island were friendships and the trueness of what that means to islanders.

Louise Pearson

One of the other themes that comes across in the series is the dramatic landscape of Eigg. It is recognisably quite a unique landscape and the challenges of that and also the greenery of the island really comes across in the photographs, that is the dominant colour. I am just interested to know if you found out how island residents are planning for a sustainable future? They were world leaders in that.

Danny North

We come back to community ownership and responsibility. The batteries that are getting charged somewhere in a warehouse hidden on the island, the maintenance if a solar panel goes down, if a turbine goes down, if the hydro power goes down, they have to fix it. So the idea of community responsibility, taking part not just in going to the pub or foraging, actual responsibilities and not just relying on you to fix your car but relying on you to provide energy to homes, I think that collaborative nature is for me it always feels like that's the way out of things. Once you share those responsibilities they become everybody's and on Eigg you just see how that can work beautifully.

Louise Pearson

I wonder if you want to tell us anything in particular about any of the five portraits that we have acquired.

Danny North

I'll be honest with you, I turned up on the island and I was very typically an outsider with an ego and I decided that this project was mine and I was going to make it. When I finished the project it had transcended any sort of ownership that I had of it and it had become firmly part of the history of this island and I realised that I never wanted to exploit any individuals or their stories so I have always been quite wary of that but what I can tell you is that I was welcomed with open arms by so many people there and one of those people was this young lass called Maggie.

So there was 'big Maggie' who was Maggie Fyffe and 'wee Maggie', whose parent George took me under his wing on the first day. He can be seen in one of the photographs holding the sheep. Little

Maggie was just one of the most magical humans I have ever met and it made me want to bring my own kids up on an island. She was confident and as wild as the wind blowing through. I remember me and her mum were walking through the garden and she was sat on this hammock holding a teddy.

The name '*As I Found Her*' reflects how I try to approach photography because when I came to the island I had my own ideas and when I got there I realised the only true way I could photograph this was to photograph people as I found them. And that is what I tried to do with every single portrait. There are a few that didn't quite work out that way because a lot of people are nervous and you have to encourage and compose them a bit more but little Maggie was just like 'hey, come and see this' and every time she stopped for a second I just thought 'this is so beautiful.'

So I was quite blessed with how warm people were towards what I was doing there. But, again, I think that came down to the fact I wasn't a fly-by-night. I stayed there for quite a long time and it was the best part of a week before I even picked up my camera. I went out and met people in different parts of the community and tried to get to know people so I think that once I'd done that, people trusted me and wanted to trust me, to see the outcome of this. And part of that was just how open people were to letting me photograph them in their homes and around their lives.

Louise Pearson

It is a portrait of Eigg as a community rather than portraits of individuals in the way you would traditionally associate a portraiture series. It's a different way of looking at it.

Danny North

Originally I went there with my own ideas. I stayed in a B&B where I didn't have any phone signal, I didn't have a TV in my room, the Internet worked but only if you stood and held it in a corner bending your neck 90 degrees so a lot of the time was given over purely to the experience of being on the island. As I grew out of my own ego and as that was dismantled, I started to realise what I was experiencing and what was in front of me and how precious it was. I knew that the project had to be about the community which is so difficult in a portraiture series. A portrait in its essence is isolation and it's not a wider view of a community but at the same time I knew that was what I wanted to achieve which was this natural element of discovery, not contrivance and I think that ultimately brought the whole project together. The naturalness of photographing people on their terms and not on mine.

Louise Pearson

I think that is a good point to end the interview on. It has been really great to hear more about the series so thank you very much, Danny.

Danny North

You're very welcome, thanks for having me.