

Title: Joan Eardley | Material and Process

Summary: In this episode, we discuss Joan Eardley's choice of materials and technique and try to contextualise her work in relation to what was happening elsewhere in the world at the time.

Duration: 42:27

Contributors: Lachlan Goudie (painter and broadcaster), Lesley Stevenson (conservator) and Jock McFadyen (painter).

Transcript

00:12

Lachlan Goudie

Joan Eardley is one of Scotland's most popular and influential twentieth century artists. Her powerful and expressive paintings transformed her everyday surroundings, from the Glasgow streets to the rugged Kincardineshire coastline.

I'm painter and broadcaster Lachlan Goudie and in this three-part series to mark the artist's centenary year, I'll be joined by figures from the art world and beyond to try to better understand the character of this ground-breaking artist, a painter whose incredible body of work has endured long beyond her lifetime and continues to inspire new generations of artists.

In this episode, I talk about Joan Eardley's choice of materials and technique with conservator Lesley Stevenson and try to contextualise her work in relation to what was happening elsewhere in the world at the time with artist Jock McFadyen.

Joan Eardley is renowned for the landscapes and seascapes that she painted around the village of Catterline on the Kincardineshire coast. She was especially captivated by extremes of weather; stormy skies and turbulent seas which she would paint outside and in all weathers. This determination to immerse herself in the elements was a key part of Eardley's creative approach. She repeatedly painted the same viewpoints, striving to capture the fleeting effects of light, wind and spray. But part of her aim was also to convey her own emotional response to the environment. Her Catterline canvasses combined what she was feeling with what she was seeing which explains for me why people have such an immediate reaction to her work.

Now, Jock McFadyen, I just want to begin by asking you what is it that interests you particularly about Joan Eardley's landscapes and seascapes in Catterline?

02:04

Jock McFadyen

Thank you, Lachlan. I have a whole lot of things I would like to say about Eardley. Like you I am also interested in her context because I don't really believe in a linear unfolding story of art, I rather think things mushroom here and there at the same time. So the ferment of the time I suppose is the war. And she is a direct contemporary of the Scottish painter Alan Davie who was also born in 1921 and Davie had a very different career to Eardley because he had an E-Type Jag and Eardley had a Lambretta. He was an international figure and he was part of the European abstract scene. He was a member of the CoBrA group and the CoBrA group was busy saying 'move over Paris. Copenhagen, Rotterdam, Oostende, Amsterdam, Brussels and so on, we're just as good as you. And then of course they were gazumped because Mondrian had painted his tree, he had gone to New York via St Ives and Hampstead and painted *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. Arshille Gorky had painted his mother, who didn't look that different to one of Eardley's Glaswegians, a bit less cheerful actually, and then we got surrealism, took surrealism across to the Big Apple, Peggy Guggenheim was waiting and so were the CIA and everybody forgot about the European abstract painters more or less because the next big story was the abstract expressionists. So where does this leave Eardley? Behind the curve I think.

Lachlan Goudie

What I think is interesting about what you are saying Jock is that the Scottish art scene in the 1950s was very conservative and it was dominated by art which prioritised painterliness and a sense of colour and indeed a continental French influence into Scottish art and Eardley erupts in the 1950s with another generation of Scottish artists or artists working in Scotland and I am intrigued first to figure out, does she fit into that previous Scottish tradition in any way in your opinion, artists like Lavery, Cadell, Peploe, Redpath or is she the start of something completely new in Scottish art?

04:30

Jock McFadyen

I think that she did the Grand Tour in the modern sense. She went to Rome, she went to Paris, she got Van Gogh and I think at some later stage we will probably talk about artists who work from life and those who don't. What I think is interesting and why I mention Davie is that he didn't work from life, he worked out of his head. He had tantric visions and symbolism and mysticism and it was interesting. He also was a musician. Actually, late Eardley and early Davie the attack in the paint is not that different, they are quite similar and I think broadly speaking expressionism had already been invented in painting and when you see Eardley in her sensible trousers and proper shoes and holding down a piece of hardboard against the driving rain and howling wind and the spumes coming up, she is actually part of something that has been going on for quite a long time but working from life and I think that that is something which probably pins her down to the tradition of Scottish painting. That and going to France and seeing the impressionists.

Lachlan Goudie

There is in the mythology of Eardley this kind of idea that she was independent on her own and creating her own universe but I suspect that latterly we are really beginning to understand that during her lifetime Eardley was conscious, very conscious indeed, of what was happening in these other international schools of creativity. You mention abstract expressionism which of course was bubbling over in America at the time and in Paris and across continental Europe there was this new move towards expressive abstraction. And I think it's only now that we are beginning to contextualise Eardley alongside those other artists. And I think it's vital because in my opinion Eardley is not just a Scottish powerhouse of an artist, she really stands on a British and a European stage because she is thinking about what is going on around her and she is taking all those ideas and addressing the Scottish landscape and the Scottish seascape with that information in her mind and in her heart.

06:46

Jock McFadyen

I agree, that is a very good point. I am sure she was conscious of what was going on around the place and as we probably agree when you get art movements like abstract expressionism, you get a rag-bag of artists.

Eardley is a one-off really and the reason I mentioned Davie is because Davie's career started well and he sort of faded. Eardley is going the other way around. I think her career is before her.

I think Eardley will become, it's a gamble, but I think her importance will be more and more recognised.

Lachlan Goudie

Why is it Jock that you think that beyond Scotland's borders, perhaps, it is such a struggle to convince people that Joan Eardley is a figure worth mentioning in those wider terms? One of the things that always amazes me is that we hear a great deal about Eardley's contemporaries painting in London at the time – Francis Bacon, Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossof, these are artists who were arguably working in a similarly expressive, gestural manner, and yet Eardley never gets a look-in. She is seen as this 'other', this Scots figure who is never embraced into what was happening perhaps in London. Why, as a painter yourself who lives and works in London, why do you think that is the case?

Jock McFadyen

Well, there are a few answers to that in my opinion. The art business is quite a dirty business and I suppose I see Joan Eardley as a kind of innocent, or even Scotland as an innocent compared with 1950s New York. Paris is now of course not the capital of the art world. London has made a pretty good fist of it since the Young British Artists actually. But there is a huge legacy of English artists and Scottish artists imitating or being influenced by Picasso. There is a lot of 'Picassoism' in the 1950s.

And these lay lines of art range around underneath and they are also attached to business and publishing and collecting and I simply think Eardley didn't live long enough. If she had lived as long as her contemporary with the E-Type Jag, she may actually have 'made it' in the inverted commas sense. One more thing I will just say to the question is that Eardley to me is a two-tone artist. You've got the urchins, you've got her art student, the picture of the chap on the bed in her room in Glasgow...

Lachlan Goudie

Angus Neil

Jock McFadyen

That's the one. I think she's a two-tone artist. She actually is painting her children which I feel are a little sentimental, by the way, I have to put that out there, but I think for me she is a major artist when she goes to Catterline and becomes involved with that landscape.

09:33

Lachlan Goudie

What's interesting for me is that Eardley is an artist who roots herself in distinct places. You have mentioned Glasgow and this particular display is focussing on the works that she created in Catterline and you as an artist have spent a great deal of time painting the urban landscape of East London and I wonder to what extent it is important for you to be embedded in a location or a subject and how that informs your appreciation of Eardley's work and what she was doing in Catterline.

Jock McFadyen

Thank you for noticing that. It's a slightly disappointing answer probably because I have also made work about New York, Chicago, Berlin, had a whole exhibition at the Imperial War Museum about Berlin and the wall and also I think rural France and Scotland. I just happen to live in Bethnal Green and have a studio in Hackney and so because I am there all the time in my ordinary everyday life the embedding is not such a big deal for me in fact but I think that you are right about Eardley. She totally fell in love with that landscape, and she mucked in with the community.

Lachlan Goudie

When you look at an Eardley painting especially these ones of the sea and the landscape around Catterline there is this sense of a physical wrestling match that she is throwing the paint on quickly but she is also combining all sorts of elements on there like gravel or as we will probably hear about later grass and seeds and things like this. What I like about that side of Eardley's work is the extent to which that externalises the sense that painting is a battle a lot of the time, at least it is for me. Sometimes it is presented as this sort of airy fairy vocation where people find themselves easily transferring something onto canvas but in actual fact it's possibly one of the most frustrating experiences a human being can go through to be fighting with a canvas that isn't working. And I always get the sense when I'm

looking at an Eardley painting that she's up for the fight and that she reveals what's hard about painting in as much as these images appear to be gestural and spontaneous. They are the result of years and years of hard work of thinking, processing and learning.

11:48

Jock McFadyen

Yes, she's not Cy Twombly is she? There's no lightness of touch, she's not presenting us with Italian style but I think what's interesting is most artists use photography in some way or another, for much longer than we suspect they may have. The only artists who work from life now are photographers actually because obviously you need to have the subject in front of you in order to take the photograph of them. Eardley was there, that's the point. When you see that blade of grass you know she was a witness and I think the dynamic of that really brings something to these paintings because if you see a painting of grass or cornflowers or something like that and you see a bit stuck to the canvas then you know that she was there in the same way that you know a photographer was there. If a crime was committed even terrible CCTV footage will convict someone but if you see someone committing a crime and make a quick sketch you'll be laughed out of court because painting is conjectural, it's a fiction, art is short for artifice. But Eardley was there. And that's the point. She actually pulls you right to the location with those paintings which are visceral as you very well described.

Lachlan Goudie

In that sense that you are asserting rightly that you get that impression - Eardley was there - and that she also said that in terms of her inspiration she only ever took it by looking at nature. Going back to our discussion about the wider artistic context of the 1950s and 60s when she was working what do you think was more important for her? This spontaneous personal instinctive response to the subject and to being there or some of those reference points, the Tachist paintings in Paris, CoBrA that she was more than likely aware of but doesn't often acknowledge as being a direct part of her direct inspiration. Was it the place or was it the context of art in the 1950s and 60s that is really channelling into her work?

Jock McFadyen

She was knowledgeable about art in the 50s and 60s. I think she would have been aware of everything that was happening. As we've said she lived into the 60s so already Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg would have been limbering up and paving the way for Andy Warhol if we think of art in a linear and progressive way which I don't.

The thing about painting and the thing that I think doesn't matter so much that Eardley was a witness and Davie was, let's say a visionary, let's just use that word as opposed to a witness, is that when you're painting as you well know you start off - there's Davie let's say in the Caribbean painting his skulls and those crosses with the loop at the top and those things that he referred to, and there's Eardley on top of a cliff, her Lambretta has been blown over, the howling wind and the rain and the grass stuck to pictures and all that and they can come up with something that's not that different in feeling and in attack if you like.

And the reason for that is I think when you are painting something you start off with your subject, whether it is in your head or in front of you, and pretty soon you get going and somebody digs you in the ribs and says 'move over, I'm driving now. You go and sit over there, I'm taking charge' and the thing that does that is the paint.

That's the point. it's the point of Eardley, it's the point of Davie, Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock and all the other expressionists, the proper expressionists. And I think also for artists who are not expressionists. It probably happens a little bit less with a pre-Raphaelite painter but possibly just on a smaller scale. But with those kinds of painters where the paint is in your face and it's moving to see the paint being taken by the scruff of the neck and being made eloquent and fabulous and I think that that is the point. The thing that connects them is they let the paint take over.

15:57

Lachlan Goudie

I think that that is also interesting because to let the paint win you have to be both brave and humble. You have to give in to what the materials are guiding you to do and you also have to not be afraid of sacrificing what you have done already by allowing that to happen which is one of the things that I find hardest. I paint something pretty and I don't think I'll push it any further because it's looking fine like this but you just get the feeling that Eardley would slap something on the canvas that evoked the subject and then suddenly she would be driven to get back into the painting with guts and I'm afraid of doing that a lot of the time. Looking at Eardley's paintings teaches me to be braver, teaches me not to worry, there is always another canvas I can paint. Those are the lessons that I get from her work. What do you feel that you get from looking at an Eardley?

Jock McFadyen

I feel not to be afraid of making a painting that is in bad condition. There are different kinds of artists, I mean I love photography, I love minimalism. If the paint is king it doesn't really matter that it has to be expressive. I don't think that is the case. My favourite painter is probably Holbein for the same reason, that Holbein was there. He was there with Ann Boleyn and that is fantastically powerful.

I think it depends what kind of painter you are and Eardley was quite graphic as well, you know, that graffiti is not very expressive on those tenement walls and she had a bit of a recipe for those children. Sorry, we are allowed to say something critical about Eardley as well I think. It's just such a pity she became ill because one wonders.

I am so glad that she became obsessed with Catterline because it brought her painting to that stage of allowing the door ajar so the paint could rush in and take her beyond.

17:49

Lachlan Goudie

We will tie it up. I think that we both agree that Joan Eardley is an artist who really does stand up to comparison with so much of what was happening across the United Kingdom and Europe at the time. From abstract expressionism to the great London art scene of the 50s and 60s with Bacon, Kossof, Auerbach all taking off that she is a name that needs to be looked at in those terms so thank you very much Jock, great to speak to you.

Now I am going to turn to Lesley Stevenson, and I would love to know from a conservator's perspective Lesley, what can you tell us about her choice of materials and technique and teach us about why Eardley chose to use those materials in her work?

18:32

Lesley Stevenson

Oh Gosh where do you begin, really? Well, there were a number of factors that would be dictating her choice of hardboard, a lot of them very practical considerations; availability, cost, and expediency. She obviously liked the robust quality of something quite solid and we have to remember the conditions in which she was working, outside in the blustery North East coastline and we can only imagine that a stretched canvas would have taken off like a balloon.

You have to remember that she was quite pragmatic in a way and that hardboard would have given her something nice and solid and something usable, trekking it along with her coach-style pram as we know from these wonderful black and white images we have from Audrey Walker of the conditions that she was working in outside so I think very much a practical choice, the hardboard. Easily prepared of course with the ground layer and she obviously liked to manipulate the consistency of her paint, no doubt that is something we will talk about more but canvas is very absorbent.

Lachlan Goudie

I hate working on canvas and it is curious because outside I too like to have a nice firm ground to work on and it also was a ground that had to take the attack, it physically needed to endure what she threw at it so this material which I believe is called 'Masonite', is that correct?

Lesley Stevenson

Yes that is the trade name, and that is used quite a lot in the States but generally we know it as hardboard. And it would have been available in a hardware store locally in Arbroath. She didn't need to go to an artist's suppliers, she didn't need to go to Aberdeen or Glasgow. And of course, it was available in large sheets which she could cut down. Laterally, she liked a very square format.

Lachlan Goudie

Is it right that because she was painting outside so much, she used to leave those boards outside to weather, or to absorb water prior to the storm that she chose to paint?

Lesley Stevenson

Yes, we have good documentary evidence, we have the wonderful letters that she wrote throughout her life and there are references I believe to leaving the hardboard outside. And certainly as a conservator when we are looking very closely at the surfaces as we have already discussed there is evidence of dents and scratches and from a conservation perspective the challenge is distinguishing what is Joan and what might be later post-execution damage or accident or insecurity in the paint film. But I don't think these things bothered her in the least. It was all part of this physical painting process for her.

21:28

Lachlan Goudie

You are being very diplomatic as a conservator and you are leaning to the artist's cowboy tendencies to not really care what happens in 50 years' time. I was always taught when I was painting on board I had to do in priming terms in preparation of a surface I had to do the same thing to one side as I did to the other to stop the wood bowing or buckling. But Eardley's technique was to throw it outside and see what the weather would do in preparation.

Lesley Stevenson

It seems that was very much the case, yes.

Lachlan Goudie

Tell me a little more about this homemade paint then. You mentioned that the boards were possibly available from hardware stores. Her paints, she was much more craftswoman like, she prepared it all herself and ground the pigments, is that correct?

Lesley Stevenson

Yes, it is and again there are lots of practical considerations; cost and paint is very heavy. It was a relatively remote site in Catterline but more importantly for her it probably allowed her the freedom to manipulate the consistency of the paint so that she could have much stiffer paints with less paint medium and the very runny, dilute paint that we see splashed on some of these landscapes. It would have allowed her to judge that and play with the consistency herself.

22:47

Lachlan Goudie

And in preparing this so she is mixing ground pigment with oil - linseed oil, what is the make-up of the paint that she is preparing?

Lesley Stevenson

Yes, generally paint is made up of the dried pigment, the oil is the medium and some turpentine or solvent would have been used to thin it down. Every pigment requires a different amount of oil to make a workable paint, so she would have been very, very aware of the different properties of the pigments as well.

Lachlan Goudie

Do you have any sense that there was an established range of colours that she used, did she have a pallet of colours that was always employed?

Lesley Stevenson

By that time there was a huge variety of pigments available to artists as there is today and we know looking at the works that they very much evoke quintessentially Scottish landscapes so they are very much on the muted dark side but with splashes of colour whether it is a poppy or a flower. As we have seen throughout her career, her sense of colour is really a very significant characteristic and that design but I think she had quite a broad pallet all in all if you look right across her work.

Lachlan Goudie

That is interesting because my sense is that I agree Eardley is hugely sensitive with her understanding of light and colour but she's not really seen as a colourist, at least she has never been described as that to me. And yet what you are describing I'm recalling is the Tate has a wonderful painting of fishing nets drying on the shore at Catterline (*Salmon Net Posts*, c. 1961-62) and there is a cerulean blue cobalt mixed into that sky which zings so intensely. It does sort of remind me to look at her and think about well, those colourists were not so long ago in Scottish art history, so she was looking for lessons there too.

24:42

Lesley Stevenson

Yes, I think the larger landscapes tend to be quite gloomy I think apart from *Summer Fields*, of course, but when you look at her sketches, which are an absolutely integral part to her working process, the colour use in those is particularly immediate and really stunning.

Lachlan Goudie

I understand that she left 1,300 works on paper and personally it is an area that I was less aware of and although they might look a bit scrappy, they are almost a testing point as she pushes her own taste for abstraction to its farthest limits. What do you like particularly about those sketches of which we have so many?

Lesley Stevenson

I think they are a wonderful insight into her methodology. The fact that there were 1,300 sketches left on her death show how important they were to her technique. So we have these huge paintings and what is not always immediately apparent is the degree of planning that must have gone on behind these compositions and these sketches are the very start, the very germ of the idea when she was working outside and they are just small sheets of paper that she added to unusually, sticking them together while she was working and they probably weren't intended to be seen in an art gallery setting at all, they were *aide memoir* really.

Lachlan Goudie

That is so charming. You point out that she paper clipped lots of bits of paper together and you almost get the sense that either there is this absent mindedness of what is happening, she is just drawing and thinks 'I need more paint' so she adds it on, or whether it is actually as you are pointing out something very methodical about her approach and realises that they composition needs to be expanded, she will make it grow because as you are suggesting, she was much more careful about the staging posts of creating a painting than you might think when you see these explosions of splatter on canvas.

26:50

Lesley Stevenson

Yes I think so, I think she was incredibly fearless and inventive. Her creativity got the better of her when she was outside and she had all these small pieces of paper and then the landscape would open up in front of her, the clouds would be blowing across and she would be wanting to expand the composition, she would always be thinking of that step ahead, to the finished oil, so they were very, very much preparatory drawings in the very traditional, conventional art historical sense.

Lachlan Goudie

They are so stunning, sketches like *Stormy Sea* etc, she is drawing something but then she is scribbling on top but then she is almost making 'Mr Messy' scribbles all over the top of that and she's layering mark making on top of mark making on top of mark making even within these initial studies and that gives me the impression that she might have been thinking ahead but she was also wanting to make a real success out of these individual postage stamp sketches, they were works of art in themselves for her.

Lesley Stevenson

Yes, yes, absolutely and we need to remember that there would be months of the year, long periods when the weather would be such that she would be confined indoors. I think those became a source of solace for her, she would be able to remember being outside, and even periods of good weather when she probably didn't want to paint outside, she would have this archive of sketches to ponder and to plan from.

28:24

Lachlan Goudie

In things like the wonderful *Catterline in Winter* there are lots of areas where you can admire thinly painted washes of pigment, others where the paint is broadly brushed in and other, grander areas where it is very thickly congealed as in pastel. Tell us a little bit about why there is such variety on the surface of paintings by Joan Eardley.

Lesley Stevenson

It's all part of her creative process. She was constantly inventing and manipulating and I think she loved to play with the texture of the paint. We see her etching sometimes with the back end of the brush, into the wet paint, which is a very direct method, an almost three-dimensional, sculptural quality to the mark making. But then there are other areas where the paint is very, very dilute, almost a wash and looking closely at the paintings we can see that while there is some wet and wet working where the paint is blending on the support there are other areas which were obviously very well dried and then she came back days, weeks, months afterwards possibly and reworked. That is what makes her such a fascinating painter. There is no end to the variety of her mark making and of her creativity.

29:45

Lachlan Goudie

Because of course one of the big risks of painting so thickly, so speedily, the surface of the canvas can become very slippery with paint and you can compromise the integrity of the painting if you don't allow drying time in between each painting session. You mentioned earlier that Joan Eardley was often working on numerous canvasses at once. Is there a sense that she would put one aside for a good length of time to allow it to dry or would she the next day just pick it up again and go hell for leather despite it being wet?

Lesley Stevenson

I think that would all have been dictated by the weather and the light but we certainly know that she was working on multiple paintings at any one time and was working very, very quickly. There is a rigorousness and speed and that's another reason why she chose hardboard, why she was making her own paint, was to allow that pace of working that was so important to her.

Lachlan Goudie

And one of the most amazing things about many of her Catterline works, paintings like *Seeded Grasses and Daisies, September*, is the sheer variety of textures that she manages to create, so she incorporates all sorts of unexpected things on to the surface of her canvasses. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

31:00

Lesley Stevenson

Yes that is quite a distinctive characteristic. We do have paintings in the collection that have grasses and flowerheads deliberately adhered to the surface, using the paint like an adhesive really, like a glue and this collage, this approach to collage we see in her earlier works, in the Glasgow children paintings there are often pieces of foil or newspaper attached to the surface, I think it harks back to the Cubists in fact in the early years of the twentieth century where they were quite often making unusual additions to their paint.

Lachlan Goudie

One of the things about Eardley and looking at the impastoed collage surfaces of these canvasses is for me attention. To what extent is this calculated, the design of the painting dictating the need for collage here and there or, as this painting style suggests, is it really just instinct, spontaneous, 'I've got to throw something on it', where is the dividing line?

Lesley Stevenson

That is of course the big question and I suspect there is an element of both, there is an element of accident, grasses and seed heads being attached to the paint and then her own manipulation. It is fantastic evidence to a conservator when you find things like this, it's not always deliberate of course. We do see very deliberate seeded grasses and all sorts of wonderful vegetation attached as well as grit and sand to give texture to the paint. Recently a grasshopper was found on an *Olive Grove* painting by van Gogh. And we know in our own collection that a seed head was found on Cezanne's *Montaigne Saint Victoire*, so this is gold to a conservator as evidence of the artist working outside and in many cases not really caring, wanting to embrace the joy of painting and the happenstance of the circumstances in which you are working.

33:07

Lachlan Goudie

I think that is the sensitive interpretation. When I am painting and I often paint on beaches where the wind whips up and the sand gets thrown up onto the surface of the paint and it is just the accidents but also the great inspiration of your environment that transfers itself onto your canvas. But also there is a sense that I have experienced and that maybe is in Joan Eardley too, it is just surrendering to your environment where, almost like a child finger painting, you can get so transfixed and inspired by what you're doing that you might just pick up a finger of mud and just squish it into the painting because that is what you feel this moment requires. And I think that automatic, unconsidered response to the environment is something that I feel underpins a lot of Joan Eardley's approach.

Lesley Stevenson

Definitely, and I think her love of the outdoors and her capacity for invention in quite difficult surroundings and her real yearning for these terrible weather days when the gales are blowing, that tells us so much about the person. She painted because she needed to paint. She was hugely compassionate about her work and I think it was something she felt physically that she had to do. She was quite indifferent to conventional levels of finish and so these accidents, these happy accidents on hardboard sheets probably flying off and getting scratched and dented and abraded wouldn't have bothered her in the slightest.

34:43

Lachlan Goudie

Now, the National Galleries of Scotland has paintings by another great Scottish painter of seascapes William McTaggart. He painted on the Argyll coast, big canvasses in the open air.

As you look at the surface of McTaggart's work and then in contrast Eardley's, do you have any insight do you think into whether she was painting with an awareness of predecessors like McTaggart or John Constable, who I think she admired a great deal. Are there any technical connections between those *En plein air* landscape painters?

Lesley Stevenson

I think the approach certainly and the love of the outdoors and probably the combination of representation and abstraction that we have discussed before. This playing with the paint medium but trying to capture something which is almost impossible to capture in many ways: the sea. The sea is the common denominator between McTaggart and Eardley and she talks in her letters about the impossibility of rendering that in paint, not that it stopped her. She would be trying and trying and trying. But I think she was very worldly, very erudite, well read. She was very much aware of her art historical precedence. I think she definitely would have been looking at Constable and McTaggart, yes.

Lachlan Goudie

I think that is important. Looking at these great gestural canvasses there is a sense sometimes that people underestimate the intellectual clout of Joan Eardley and the awareness of her context and where she was coming from.

Now tell me does this period, the early 1960s when Joan Eardley died, terribly young at 42 in 1963. This period seems to have generated an extraordinary body of work. Do you as a conservator see any technical coherence to the body of work, paintings like *Catterline in Winter, Boats on the Shore*, do you feel that there is a building of momentum or perhaps creative urgency in what she's doing in that last period?

36:48

Lesley Stevenson

Absolutely. It would be easy to imagine that she had some sense of her own mortality at this time and maybe well things would be different these days I suspect, it is quite tragic just as Jock said, we don't know what she would have done but it seems like she was definitely on the rise and had reached such a pinnacle in her early 40s that the tragedy is that she passed away so prematurely. I suspect she could have gone on to far greater things. She was an artist who did not stand still, literally. She was constantly inventing and challenging herself. She is such an instinctive painter it seems likely that she would have had decades of further wonderful work to produce. Very sad.

Lachlan Goudie

It is sad, but in your relationship with the microscopic grains of pigment on her canvasses, do you personally ever get the sense that you get a little insight into her, perhaps more so than other people who don't have the privilege of this close access to her work that you have?

Lesley Stevenson

Yes, conservators are very, very privileged and we have to keep that in mind when we are working and of course it is a very, very unique relationship when you can look in such detail and with magnification at the surface of a painting.

I feel it's a combination looking at the paintings and the works on paper together you do get a wonderful insight but it's difficult to know exactly what's going on in anyone's head so it's a danger of over interpreting, but she certainly is a real painter's painter in that the facilities she had will I hope put her in good stead for the future.

38:45

Lachlan Goudie

Absolutely. Well, before we end I'd quite like to know what's going on in Jock McFadyen's head. I'm sure you've got maybe a question or two for Lesley about the technique and the materials Jock.

Jock McFadyen

It's very interesting. I was interested when you talked about the sketches and the relationship with the pictures because when you see those paintings and when you see abstract expressionism paintings, let's say de Kooning you don't imagine that there's time for any preamble or casing the joint when it comes to the picture frame.

I had no idea that there would have been pre-sketching and scheming out before she got to the cliff as it were. But when you said that I sort of thought 'oh yes of course, she was quite conventional. She had been to a Scottish art school, she had got van Gogh and van Gogh was *the* plein air painter, as it were and so she possibly was quite conventional and that enabled her to spring into the paint from a safe place, from a pre-planned place and that had never occurred to me because I imagined she was in the curve of abstract expressionists to keep going back to them I suppose but I had supposed previously that she had just dived in but evidently not.

40:30

Lesley Stevenson

That's really interesting because when you look at them and the immediacy of the paint layers and all the accidental splashes and dents and marks you imagine that she just went to it, the weather, the light was such that she dashed out of her cottage but, yes, it is a truly conventional aspect of her work.

Jock McFadyen

Well it almost makes you want to accuse her of being a Mannerist. I make my big huge paintings and I don't draw before I make those paintings and I've seen her doing these easel paintings which are probably 4x2, 3x2 or something like that and she has preceded them with lots of planning and I have learned that today, so thank you very much. I do schematics for my big paintings but I do it on the canvas and not with a previous sketch.

Lesley Stevenson

I think she got a lot of enjoyment, she obviously really loved sketching and it was something that she could do inside as well as outside.

Jock McFadyen

Well I love her illustrated letters which are obviously deeply influenced by Van Gogh landscapes – all those dots and dashes... I wonder if she was influenced, do you know what I mean?

Lesley Stevenson

Yes absolutely there are definite parallels, yes.

Lachlan Goudie

Well look I am going to draw our discussions to a close. It has been fascinating speaking to you both. It is a great pleasure to talk to people who are moved by Joan's work so much and also who know it in intimate detail. So Lesley Stevenson, Jock McFadyen, thank you so much.

I'm Lachlan Goudie. This is a three-part series brought to you by the National Galleries of Scotland.

END.