

CLARE HENRY is enthralled by Dundee's new architectural masterpiece

# Prime example of ingenuity

**P**RAISE where praise is due. Dundee provided a perfect day to launch Scotland's largest purpose-built contemporary arts space. The sun shone on the silvery Tay and streamed in to illuminate exciting contemporary art and excited Dundonians as Secretary of State Donald Dewar waxed lyrical as he inaugurated the £9m Dundee Contemporary Arts with a genuine enthusiasm and understanding rarely shown by politicians – especially where art is concerned.

Back in 1983 when she opened the Burrell, the Queen provided Glasgow with a famous quote: "Glasgow leads from the front in all things artistic." For a decade she was proved right. On Friday Dewar supplied something similar when he said: "Dundee has got its head in front."

And he's right. With surprising élan, Dundee has achieved a significant triple whammy: an architectural masterpiece (from award-winning Richard Murphy); an invigoratingly accessible contemporary art centre, plus a unique Visual Research Centre, the only such facility in the UK. This VRC arts laboratory is attached to Dundee's University Fine Art Department and equipped with £600,000 worth of cutting edge "arts engines".

With these key ingredients at the core of a project which also includes two cinemas, a fabulous new Print Studio, stylish cafe-bar, first-rate craft shop, multiple family talks and workshops plus school and community education programmes, Dundee deserves all the credit Dewar ably dispensed and more.

For, magically, this has been a team effort. Dundee's determination to re-invent itself and escape severe post-industrial decline was driven by many folk, not least Dundee City Council who initiated the arts strategy which identified the need for a new arts centre as a priority. Remembering my first 1981 visit to its precursor, Bob McGilvray's tumble down Forebank Studios, and later to Seagate, and knowing the tenacity and persistence of forerunners Dundee City Art Centre Ltd plus Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art, it doesn't surprise me that the lottery actually gave DCA more cash (£5.4m) than it requested. Chief arts officer Andrea Stark, who arrived in 1995 explains: "It's our duty to produce top-calibre, best-quality work not for the few – but to be experienced by the many." She believes Murphy's architecture helps. "We didn't want discrete spaces as in so many new galleries. We wanted a building that was part of Dundee's street scene, a sociable place where visitors feel welcome and included. Richard sweated blood, but achieved it!" DCA's clever, airy L-shape design with wonderful vistas overlooking the Tay disguises the fact that it has merely two galleries. Its opening exhibition, *Prime*, curated by DCA's new director, Andrew Nairne, and sponsored by the Henry Moore Foundation, features 14 international artists, only three Scottish.

Crowd-pullers include Kapoor's rather obvious but fun disc mirror, Warhol's famous 1964 images of

Jackie Kennedy before and after the assassination, Miyajima's flickering blue LED numbers now imitated in every city's sickening LED millennium countdown and Gallaccio's red floor-to-ceiling daisy chain curtain of flowers. Less amusing but unavoidable are Kiki Smith's six bronze dead *Crows* scattered across the floor.

Too much in this very sparse show is disappointing, including the Beuys blackboard and a politically correct Tjupurula aboriginal painting. Understatement is the name of the game in Cragg's 1986 large cast iron Eyebath, the tiny Hamilton videos and Callum Innes and Louise Hopkins's minimalist oils. A more full-blooded approach for the first show might have worked better.

Cragg's clinker rowing boat with its barrage of question mark hooks saves the day in what is really a very empty space.

**H**OWEVER, I was impressed by Catherine Yass's illuminated photographs of the Tay Bridge taken head on and close up from a boat. Bridge South shows the tide rushing in; Bridge North shows distant Dundee at dawn. Both accentuate the bridge piers phenomenal arched architectural engineering as they recede, mirror like, into infinity. Yass lays a blue negative transparency over a positive colour image to achieve astounding clarity and detail. A brilliant brainwave commission by Nairne.

Sarah-Jane Selwood's beautiful porcelain vessels are equally memorable. I've been watching Selwood since she graduated from Edinburgh in 1991 and am delighted to see Nairne breaking the ridiculous art/craft barrier. Selwood's bowls emphasise volume and space and are a great deal more than functional objects. "I like the glaze to be a skin round the form and not interfere with the shape," she told me. A recent spell in Japan has extended her range. This series of 12 explores gradual transition and disruption of form, ending in "a whisper of distortion". Selwood also shows in Billcliffe's Architectural Ceramics where you can buy masterly small dishes for as little as £40.

Dewar believes DCA's imagina-

tion moves to intrigue and stimulate; to discover and display tomorrow's talents; to encourage and enrich in the broadest sense, could be replicated elsewhere. "I'm thinking of my own city," he added revealingly.

Dewar admitted being a victim of our natural instinct to be "too comfortable with the familiar" but, conscious of the need to get people like himself through those barriers, applauds the fact that, especially in Scotland, "there is an appetite for artistic adventure". This was confirmed later when 800 people travelled from all over the UK to celebrate. Whether they will return is open to question.

For the reality is that Dundee, for all its spin and improvements, is still in limbo, a town on the way

to nowhere. Even for the premier, big names like Kapoor and Cragg failed to show up. And while cash has been lavished on this new enterprise, uptown the city's McManus Gallery remains underfunded and with no acquisition budget. DCA is a wonderful new space for temporary shows, but meanwhile Scotland's collecting policy – and cash for buying new art – is non-existent. This is a scandal – exacerbated by both Edinburgh and Glasgow actively turning their backs on home-grown stars.

Here Nairne can easily win hands down. He says DCA will take Scotland's globally recognised artists seriously, yet so far, with the exception of Christine Borland in October, his programming is London-centric. And, if he is to draw visiting tourists to Dundee as the council hopes, perhaps he's right.

Meanwhile, the DCA's integral VRC arts laboratory offers staff, students, and the general public unrivalled access to top-class cutting-edge art. The facilities are amazing with state-of-the-art technology provided by a 3D Systems thermojet, computer-aided design hardware galore, a vast automatic press for fine art publishing (the artists book being merely one of director Arthur Watson's pet projects), an artist's flat, a Henry Moore fellowship, plus work, exhibition, and studio spaces.

**T**HEN there's Centrespace, where Stephen Partridge and Elaine Shemilt exhibit *Chimera*, a four-screen video collaboration. Shemilt is professor of Printmaking at Dundee while Partridge also shows over the road in the college's Cooper Gallery to mark the inauguration of his Chair of Media Art at Dundee University, the first of its kind in the UK.

Partridge pioneered video over three decades. This mini retrospective demonstrates his range of innovation from the seminal *Easy 1974* and *Monitor 1975* to brand new work, including an important 1999 collaboration, *Intangible Bodies*. Here Shemilt's gentle monochromatic etched abstractions are juxtaposed to great effect with his original laser prints of erotically-pose girls where the body has literally been extracted by digital manipulation.

Ironically, the best of all that Dundee currently has on offer is here, in Partridge's video installation; *For One of Your Smiles*, with sound by David Cunningham. Electronic scanning and those magic pixels make *His/Hers* slow motion smiles flow continuously. Eat your heart out Douglas Gordon.

Meanwhile, Glasgow's popular *Paintings on Railings*, at the Botanic next Saturday and Sunday, continues to emulate Hyde Park, the Ponte Vecchio, and New York's West 53rd Street Museum of Modern Art by selling art accessible to all. Glasgow's GOMA entertained *Paintings on Railings* at Christmas, but what's this I hear about doubts for the future? Surely not!



Hooked: Richard Murphy and Andrea Stark survey the new Dundee Contemporary Arts project

Picture: ALAN RICHARDSON