

Arts VISUAL

An unexpectedly tender portrait of landscape painter James Morrison

JAN PATIENCE

YOU'VE Been Trumped filmmaker Anthony Baxter's new documentary about Scottish landscape painter James Morrison presents an unexpectedly tender portrait of the artist as an old man.

Unlike his previous high-profile films – about former US president Donald Trump's corporate assault on the Aberdeenshire coastline and a town in crisis thanks to civic negligence of its water system in Flint, Michigan – Eye of the Storm sees Baxter in quieter, more reflective mode in his home town of Montrose.

Eye of the Storm, a reference to Morrison's habit of painting outside in all weathers for most of his career, was filmed by Baxter during the last two years of his life. The Glasgow-born artist, who trained under David Donaldson at the city's school of art in the early 1950s, died last August at the age of 88 after a career spanning six decades. Morrison's quest to paint people-free transcendent moments in time and space took him all over the world, but he is best remembered for his depictions of Glasgow tenements in the 1950s, big skies of Angus from the 1960s onwards and the vast empty spaces of the High Arctic.

For me, two scenes in Eye of the Storm, which receives its world premiere online via the Glasgow Film Festival tomorrow, stood out.

The first sees Morrison painting in his home studio in Montrose after six months of inactivity caused by illness and failing sight. After stroking a blank primed canvas tentatively, Morrison sets about creating one of the landscape paintings for which he is famous. Armed with his trusty French paint brushes lined up like soldiers, and a squirt of lapis lazuli oil paint mixed with turpentine on his palette, he starts covering the canvas rapidly with a wash of blue.

"Think back to Matisse lying on back and drawing on ceiling because he couldn't get up, doing life-enhancing drawing," he tells Baxter. "I make no claims to be a Matisse but just the freedom of all this being brought into use again makes me very content... at this stage I am just happy to put paint on the canvas."

The second scene is when we see Morrison sitting with a rapt expression



Vital flavour of nature's eternity



in his living room, watching his younger self on a laptop discuss his own death as part of a documentary he presented almost half a century ago. Speaking about how the process of painting works for him, "young Jim" tells the camera – and now his older self: "It [painting] is, for me, my argument with myself."

That "argument" persisted almost until his dying day.

As Baxter films Morrison and talks to those closest to him, a portrait slowly and lovingly emerges of an artist still chasing the light as his vision gradually deteriorates and his health fails.

Although he presented several films about art in the 1970s – notably about Joan Eardley – for BBC Scotland, Morrison was never one for the limelight of the art world. He preferred to leave the business of promoting his

work to his "dealer" – in his case, the Scottish Gallery in Edinburgh, which represented him for more than 60 years. As the gallery's managing director Christina Jansen says near the start of the film, before the opening of his 25th solo exhibition in the gallery last January: "A lot of artists of his particular generation weren't seeking fame. It was just this total desire to be creative. And with Jim, that's who he was. It's never been about him putting his career forward. That's been our job."

In the 90-minute film, Baxter skillfully weaves together interviews, archive footage, paintings, songs by Karine Polwart and animation by Catriona Black.

Black's work adds a mix of tenderness and humour to elements of Morrison's backstory, including several derring-do trips to north-west Greenland, one of which saw the artist and his fellow travellers encounter a polar bear while he painted a melting iceberg. She also conjures up a shimmering 1960s-style Kelvingrove Art Gallery to highlight a



Clockwise from left: Approaching Storm; Bergs, Otto Fiord, c1992; Anthony Baxter; Face to face with Polar Bear (Montrose Pictures – animation Catriona Black) and James Morrison at home

PHOTOGRAPHS: @JAMES MORRISON EYE OF THE STORM



self-deprecating anecdote by Morrison about a chance meeting in the gallery with a punter complaining about a painting (his) of squinty Glasgow tenements being a waste of taxpayers' money. There is a lovely painterly quality to Black's animation of key points in Morrison's narrative which matches the elemental power of his landscapes.

Polwart's music ekes out the power of both Morrison's paintings and scenes of Angus' wide-open spaces, much of it filmed from the air.

Speaking to me this week from his home, Baxter says that the idea to film the artist evolved gradually after Morrison wrote to him to say he had been moved by his depiction in You've Been Trumped of the destruction of the Aberdeenshire landscape, which was so familiar to him as an artist.

"I knew about Jim, of course, because he was well known in Montrose, but also because he was an old friend of my uncle, the broadcaster and academic Denis Rice, who ended up appearing in the film.

"We first had a coffee together around three years ago when he had stopped painting and was struggling with his work, having lost a lot of confidence. Uncle Denis was trying – as others were – to encourage him to get back to painting and, as we talked, it became clear he was open to the idea of me filming him as he returned to painting. His enthusiasm for the idea and also his willingness to reflect back on his life spurred me on so I started doing some filming with him in short bursts."

BBC Scotland expressed an interest in the idea of a film after the initial pitch by Baxter. He started developing the idea in earnest, talking to Morrison in depth, his son John, an art historian, Rice and staff at the Scottish Gallery.

Archive footage, in the form of old BBC Scotland Scope documentaries and video material filmed in the Arctic in the early 1990s which John Morrison found in the family home after his father's death, provided a poignant counterpoint to the narrative.

"I didn't know about the footage at



the outset," Baxter says. "But it was amazing and invigorating to see Jim in action as a younger man. There he was in this freezing wilderness, painting outside as he always did, and you can see the energy he has. He's almost dancing as he paints; the canvas wobbling in the wind and with the force of him working."

After its world premiere tomorrow, Eye of the Storm will receive a UK-wide release next Friday before an airing on BBC Scotland this spring. With cinemas closed due to the lockdown, funding from Screen Scotland has enabled distributor Cosmic Cat to team up with art galleries and independent movie theatres to ensure the film can be seen digitally by audiences.

After watching the film, audiences can "attend" an interactive online exhibition of Morrison's work, created in conjunction with the Scottish Gallery. Scottish company Screen Language has also created an alternative audio experience for those with sight impairment, with guidance from national sight loss charity RNIB.

It is the kind of documentary which will win the hearts of art lovers and art naysayers alike. In telling the life story of an ordinary man with an extraordinary talent, Baxter paints a vivid picture of how, in Cezanne's words, painting gives us "the flavour of nature's eternity".

Eye of the Storm will receive its world premiere tomorrow at 6.15pm and will be available until next Wednesday at <https://glasgowfilm.org/glasgow-film-festival/shows/eye-of-the-storm-n-c-8>, tickets £9.99. Ahead of being broadcast on BBC Scotland, it will be screened as part of a UK-wide online release from March 5. See www.eyeofthestormfilm.com for details.

DON'T MISS



WHILE it's never ideal to view an exhibition online, it has become – to use a contemporary cliché – the "new normal". Plans to host the Royal Scottish Society of Painters in Watercolour's (RSW) 140th Annual Exhibition at the newly refurbished Kirkcudbright Art Gallery were shelved last year when it became clear that Covid-19 restrictions would continue well into 2021.

This is the first time the long-established artist-run body has hosted its annual show online and its website is now playing host to more than 70 paintings by 50 leading Scottish artists.

All the work is for sale and includes everything from landscapes to portraits, wildlife studies to abstract works, by artists as diverse as Derek Robertson, Jennifer Irvine and Aine Divine.

Many will surprise, especially when you think you know an artist's work. John Kingsley's Boy with a Book has a delightful pared-back Miro-esque quality while Liz Myhill's prizewinning Borderlands makes you ache to see it up close and personal.

James Fraser's Together (also a prizewinner) takes watercolour painting to another level of puzzle-solving altogether.

The works reflect a year spent in lockdown, with some artists painting the places immediately around them, from Skeabost on Skye to the Solway Firth, and others dreaming of far-off lands they are unable to visit, from Venice to Tokyo to Zanzibar.

Artist Ruth Thomas painted her work All That Remains (pictured) after witnessing first-hand bush fires in New South Wales in the winter of 2019.

Thomas explains: "We woke up on New Year's Day 2020 surrounded by bushfires. Days later, driving north to Sydney to return home to Scotland, we travelled for hours through scorched landscapes, glimpsing people searching through the remains of their homes."

"It was an ominous warning of the year to follow."

The Royal Scottish Society of Painters in Watercolour 140th Annual Exhibition, <https://www.rsw.org.uk/digital-exhibition/>