

A New Room (Film Sequence with Liz Lochhead series), Alasdair Gray, 1972

By Immi Delbourgo

A New Room (Film Sequence with Liz Lochhead series), 1972, is a painting by Alasdair Gray for a BBC film planned the previous year. There was to be no dialogue, only an interior monologue constructed of poems by future Scottish Makar, and friend of Gray's, Liz Lochhead. The pictures would form a young woman's recollection of a doomed love affair. Her partner would only appear in Gray's pictures. The series depicts the couple in moments of everyday activity. They read the newspaper and get dressed. "It took me a year to finish most of them," Gray said, of the series, "by which time [producer Malcolm] Hossick had left the BBC and gone to live in Corfu."

The film never happened, but the suite of paintings did. The idea was that the woman "would be mooning around and doing things in a state of loneliness, remembering past times with her ex-lover," Gray said. The series would have occurred entirely in a Glasgow West End tenement. *A New Room* shows the couple, turned from each other, within a warmly lit domestic space and while Gray's treatment of the couple's visages is recognisable and unfaltering in his distinct, clean lines, the work seems very different to the allegorical fantasies he is often associated with.

Gray's semi-autobiographical epic, *Lanark* (1981) was published to widespread acclaim. The artist and writer worked as a muralist, a painter, an illustrator, a playwright and a poet, but he initially undertook writing to 'subsidise' his picture-making. An exploration of the difficulties of the artist in a post-War city, *Lanark* takes place in Glasgow and in Unthank, a dystopian hell-version of Glasgow.

Gray's career began at the Glasgow School of Art with murals. Much of his work is in public spaces. Yet visual output has been seen as supportive of written, and many of his murals were wallpapered over or left to languish in mould. Gray repeatedly returned to Glasgow and his personal lexicon of iconography. It is as if each distinct work exists in one Glaswegian universe and acknowledgement of his 'pluralistic approach' has led to reconsideration.

The suburban bohemia of *A New Room*, with its jars of paint brushes and peacock feathers, is calmer and more inviting than the busy, Durer-like accompanying illustrations of Gray's written work. This corroborates the dichotomy in Gray's output, between the 'complex compositions and labyrinthine iconography' of his murals and the simple, poetic authenticity of his portraiture. The balance of this image is soothing. There may appear a severance between the dark, and at times claustrophobic, fantasies of Gray's stories and the tranquil, documentary, quality of *A New Room* and other works from the same period.

This perceptible division between the anxiety-inducing murk of some of Grays' frontispieces and the calm of his portraiture is merely visual. What prevails across the two different modes is Gray's ability to craft intricate layers to build a world which takes in the inviting and the offensive in equal measure. "I don't think Scotland a better country, Glasgow a better city than any other," Gray clarified in 1988. "But all I know of Hell and Heaven was learned here, so this is the ground I use, though sometimes I disguise the fact."

Visual clues and the context of *A New Room* give the work a distinct period and location, but it possesses a timelessness, likely due to its perennial and universal subject matter: heartbreak. The blue of the drapery in the left hand corner is almost an exact match to the lamp in the top right, their difference communicated through the flat texture of the lamp shade as compared to the folds of the woman's jumper. The colour is also akin to the sky and ocean of Gray's *Book of Jonah* mural, which he painted for a private flat in 1961. Gray picks up the turquoise hue again in the framed image of flowers above the mantelpiece in *A New Room*, only this time the colour of the lampshade is made brighter. The reddish flowers against their blue background reflect the colours of the peacock feathers, the colours of which are inverted; what organically is a blue orb in the centre of a feather Gray renders orange and sits on a blue background. The leaves of the trees outside are warmed by specks of an equivalent turquoise which suggest the artificial, yet calming, light cast by neighbouring bedrooms and passing cars. A similar blue runs around the edge of a cushion in the foreground. Sandy tresses of the woman's hair are mirrored in the shading of the statue on the grand piano, and, as her hair falls against her jumper, the vase of feathers and lamp are cast against the light ochre wall. The work is in glorious, colourful, harmony.

To go much further is speculation. The viewer may wonder if it is the woman or the man's home, or if they share it, to whom the paint brushes belong. As in many of Gray's portraits of people in their homes, a cup of tea rests at the couple's side. The woman looks beyond the picture and the man's expression is pained. Wearing his jacket and well dressed, he seems to be passing through. There is a poised clarity to the woman's expression, and her cold, decided stare suggests resolution. This image may be the vestige of the couple's final meeting.

Through the careful portrayal of the complexity of heartbreak, of the young woman's resolve and sadness, Gray excuses the viewer from feeling like a voyeur despite *A New Room* being a window on a private meeting in Glasgow. This sensitivity is indicative of Gray's care for his subjects and knowledge of his created world which draws almost wholly from Glasgow. Duncan Thaw, *Lanark's* aspiring artist and version of Gray, proposes that even when he is very successful he will walk through the streets of Glasgow 'with such regularity that folk who lived there would set their clocks by him'. In a way, Gray's legacy has meant they do.