The most recent resident artists at Glenfiddich are inspired by some unlikely but commonplace objects

Susan Mansfield

I'M LOOKING at a photograph of artist Dan Halter, dressed in a kilt and plaid and a big pair of furry boots, taken in the Speyside town of Dufftown. There's nothing to suggest that the red, black and white checked fabric is anything other than a bona fide tartan.

In fact, the pattern - which Halter plans to register as a tartan - is one which adorns millions of plastic mesh tote bags used all over the world by refugees and others who have to travel with a lot of luggage in a hurry. The nicknames for the bags attest to this in the US, they have been called "Chinatown totes"; in the Caribbean, "Guaya Guaymante". The German name translates as "Turks' suitecases". In the UK, some have called them "Bangladeshi bags" and in South Africa "Zimbabwe bags".

As a white Zimbabwean who had to flee the Mugabe regime and now lives in Cape Town, Halter is fascinated by the paraphernalia of exile. He also loves local colloquialisms - hence the boots. "One of the interesting dialect expressions here (in the North-east of Scotland) is 'Furry boots are you?', so I decided to have furry boots and a furry sporran."

Halter is in Scotland as part of the Glenfiddich Artists Residency Programme, which offers eight artists from around the world the chance to spend three months in the summer living and working at the Speyside distillery. It's a part of the world I never would have thought of coming to, but I've really enjoyed it," he says, though he casts a wry look at the rain slanting down outside. "The summer is worse here than the winters we get in Cape Town."

He first realised the tote bag pattern could be a tartan when he analysed it in a series of prints for a show in South Africa, but saw his time in Scotland as a chance to take the idea further, having a bolt of the fabric woven by local company Johnstons of Elgin.

He also created a large-scale version of the tartan by painting the ends of whisky casks and photographing them from above, a subtle reminder that these too are not native. "All the casks are used, bourbon casks from America, sherry casks from Spain. The pattern should be visible on Google Earth, so it is visible from outer space to another kind of Celt."

Halter, 33, was born in Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia) in the mid-90s, when the bush war, which overshadowed white rule, was at its height. One of my earliest memories is handling weapons like grenades, everyone was highly armed," his parents, who were originally from Switzerland, fled the country two years ago after a violent attack and now live in Germany.

"A lot of my work deals with the experience of being out of Zimbabwe and living abroad. I feel my roots have been severed. The place grew up in didn't exist any more. I do feel quite homeless. The rest of my family have never left off Africa for life. I was glad to grow up there, I had a great childhood, but it has a very problematic history."

He has made works using local African craft techniques such as weaving pulped paper, creating maps of Zimbabwe from banknotes (worthless, owing to inflation), or a copy of Orwell's Animal Farm. During the World Cup in South Africa, he made a project called 'Shifting the Goalposts', exchanging a goalpost from a rural football field in South Africa with one in Zimbabwe.

He has been back to Zimbabwe twice in the past year. At first I thought the situation had improved quite a lot because they had hard currency - they now use US dollars - and there was stuff on the shelves. But there is no political or economic freedom, there is no freedom of speech, it's almost impossible to make art there unless it's just pretty pictures or tourist stuff."

He found this out first-hand when he and two artist friends (one black, one white) were seized and detained by Zanu-PF agents. 'I've never been so terrified, I thought we were just going to vanish. They were convinced that we two white guys were using (the black guy) to make a film to portray Zimbabwe in a negative light, when in actual fact it was his video we were helping him with."

"They were calling for boiling water to be thrown on us, they made us sit on the floor, take off our shoes, beat us up a bit. A couple were bent on taking us to the pit to beat us to death. We got out because I was allowed to make one phone call to the international art festival in Harare which I was part of, and there was a guy working in security there who was quite high up in the politics. He took it up personally to make sure we got out."

"After an ordeal like this the quiet, verdant countryside of Speyside must come as a welcome relief. The roast that happens here is the arrival of another coach-load of tourists to observe the slow and steady process of making whisky."

However, in the various cottages dotted around the Glenfiddich estate, ideas are being distilled into art. Almost 70 artists have participated in the residency programme since it was launched nine years ago, including Ross Sinclair, Christine Borland, Alson Watt and Rosalind Nashashibi.

Though there is a marketing element - the programme has evolved to concentrate on countries which are key markets for whisky - and artists will exhibit both at Glenfiddich and at home - the programme imposes few restrictions and emphasises the integrity of the work. Each artist supplies one work for a growing collection, the first exhibition from which will take place in January at the Fleming Collection in London.

"There's no point in being prescriptive, it's about the maturation of ideas," says programme co-ordinator Andy Paipraige. "We don't want people to come and do something about whisky, we want them to come and make work about the experience of being here."

Certainly, it seems that this year's crop of artists have had no problem finding inspiration in their surroundings. New York-based photographer Matthew Sameliger hasn't stopped taking pictures since he arrived in June - he has taken "many thousands" and has to buy extra hard-drive space for his computer to accommodate them.

Sameliger, who works as a commercial photographer in New York but also has a Fine Art practice describes his first impression of the distillery as "Harry Potter meets Charlie and the Chocolate Factory." He set out to "make a portrait of every aspect of whisky-making, from growing barley to bottling and labelling, but his eye for detail makes the work more than simply documentary."

He has also been photographing the landscape. "I've been here from the summer..."
THEATRE

PLUCKED OF PURPOSE

A DREAMING VOICE

MY HANDS ARE DANCING BUT MY HEART IS COLD

THE ARCHES, GLASGOW

SELF-Absorption is rarely an attractive quality and, for my taste, there was just a shade too much of it around in this year’s Arches Live Festival. Skye Lomagan, for example, is a compelling performer, easy to watch even when she’s literally pretending to be a plastic bag. This time around, though, she’s so bent on ideas that she’s reduced to producing an overblown one-hour meditation on her own purposelessness, symbolised both by her temporary standing at an airport, and by the hopelessly laboured metaphor of the said plastic bag, a poor tattered thing stuck on a tree. In Plucked of Purpose Lomagan just looks like a brilliant actress in search of material worth her mettle; maybe she should take time out, and do some Shakespeare.

Young Ben Dunn, meanwhile, joins the queue of young artists whose theme is their own set of family relationships, happy or sad. Dunn’s A Dreaming Voice begins with the deeply tasteful conceit of saying that his dad’s dead, although he isn’t. What he means is that his dad’s relationship with his mum has broken down, and his old relationship with his dad died.

There follows an entertaining 50 minutes in which Dunn and his dad, who appears only on video, sing songs, go for walks, and act out role-play about family and love. Dunn is clearly bursting with talent, particularly when it comes to using sound and music to express his theme, and his dad is a bit of a star. In the end, though, the show’s analysis of its subject is evocative to the point of shallowness. If the breakup of parents traumatizes their children, let’s just say so and stop doing shows that end at what should be their starting point.

Ian Smith, by contrast to most Arches Live performers, is too young. The team behind Michiel La Bas turned 50 last year, and his five-minute show My Hands Are Dancing But My Heart Is Cold is one of his brief solo meditations on that experience. We enter a darkened room, sit alone on a chair in front of an elaborate, old-fashioned performance booth, and we listen to a recording of a beautiful young woman singing an infinitely seductive song about her hidden beauty mark. Smith’s hands appear through the backstop of the little puppet stage, long, polished and androgynous, they dance until the song ends.

Then we go round the back of the booth and sit behind Smith as he performs the show again. There are the lyrics of the song written in blood, empty bottles, and a mirror in which we are made to look into Smith’s grief-blanketed eyes. For myself, I could hardly bear to look; Smith’s face simply said too much about the terrible sadness of ageing. But this is miniature art of the highest order, moving out beyond self-absorption, to that moment when performance becomes poetry.

JOYCE MCIMILLAN

MUSIC

DON’T STOP BELIEVING

FESTIVAL THEATRE, EDINBURGH

The success of the television show ‘Glee’ is difficult to resist the pure live energy of their performance, or the freedom they seem to feel in expressing their own personalities through the songs. Too much music theatre has pedestrian clothes on convincing performers into a production that’s all concept, and too little live communication with the audience. For all its TV-tribute origins, Don’t Stop Believin’ avoids that pitfall by a mile and the cheers of the thousandstrong audience — and their mums — are well earned, by a young cast visibly in love with their work.

JOYCE MCIMILLAN

solstice to the autumn equinox, I’ve been paying attention to the changes in the environment. I’m an encyclopaedia and an energetic...”

He has enjoyed exchanging his apartment in the East Village for a quiet house overlooking a field of ripening barley. The field is the subject of one of a series of time-lapse sequences, which portray the same location over 24 hours edited down to a few minutes. It is, he says, a kind of distillation.

Vancouver-based Damian Moppett was immediately struck by the landscape and its history. Having made work in Canada about the Saqauach – the “bigfoot” monster said to inhabit the North American forests – he began to look for a Scottish equivalent.

His hunt took him to Popular Tales of the West Highlands, published in the 1980s, in which he discovered the “Brodachan”, a “bereaved creature that speaks only two words: ‘Mysself’ and ‘Tysofself.’” A sculpture of the monster, anrted beast is taking shape on one wall of his cottage.

But his interests in mythological monsters also links to his fascin...