

Galleries

BOUND BY NATURE

Gwen Hardie's intricate paintings and drawings of skin aim to present the human body as a part of the natural world at large, writes Jan Patience

For the self-respecting art anorak, short online films made about artists in their studios are like manna from heaven. The sudden insight into the mind of an artist opens a door which helps you to see the world, for a short burst, just as they do. For example, had filmmaker Charlotte Lagarde not taken her camera into Fife-born artist Gwen Hardie's Brooklyn studio last year, I would not have been able to see for myself the fascinating process of body to mind to canvas to paint to completion which turns her work into jewel-like ruminations on mankind's place on a swiftly turning planet.

Lagarde's film, *Slow Looking, Fast Painting*, is available online but, from today until February 23, will also be shown alongside Hardie's work in the setting of Taigh Chearsabhagh arts centre in Lochmaddy on North Uist. The work has arrived in North Uist via An Lanntair on Lewis (where it showed last summer) and the RSA's annual exhibition in Edinburgh in the spring before that.

These "skin paintings and drawings" are oval-shaped or tondos (the Renaissance term for a circular work of art); the drawings are described by the artist in Lagarde's film as "networks of lines and oddities". All represent a

small portion of the skin, specifically Hardie's own, and reveal, as she puts it, "how complex that piece of skin is".

Born in Newport in Fife in 1962 and brought up in Aberdeenshire, Hardie attended Edinburgh College of Art from 1979 to 1984 and was clearly one to watch, even from the outset. Her postgraduate diploma show, in which she set about reinventing the female form from a woman's point of view, presented monumental heads and torsos. Although she was aiming to banish sensuality from her imagery, it couldn't help but sneak through in the very subject matter and tactile use of paint.

Just three years later, she was invited to exhibit in *The Vigorous Imagination*, a show at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, which showcased the work of rising stars of Scottish art such as Steven Campbell, Stephen Conroy, Peter Howson, David Mach and Sam Ainslie. In 1990, at the age of just 28, she was the youngest living artist to be given a solo show at the National Galleries of Scotland.

Hardie left Scotland in 1984 to study in Berlin and explore new ways of painting outside the confines of Edinburgh and Scotland. She also spent time in London before moving to New York City in 2000.

Sensual handling of paint continues to be an over-arching constant in

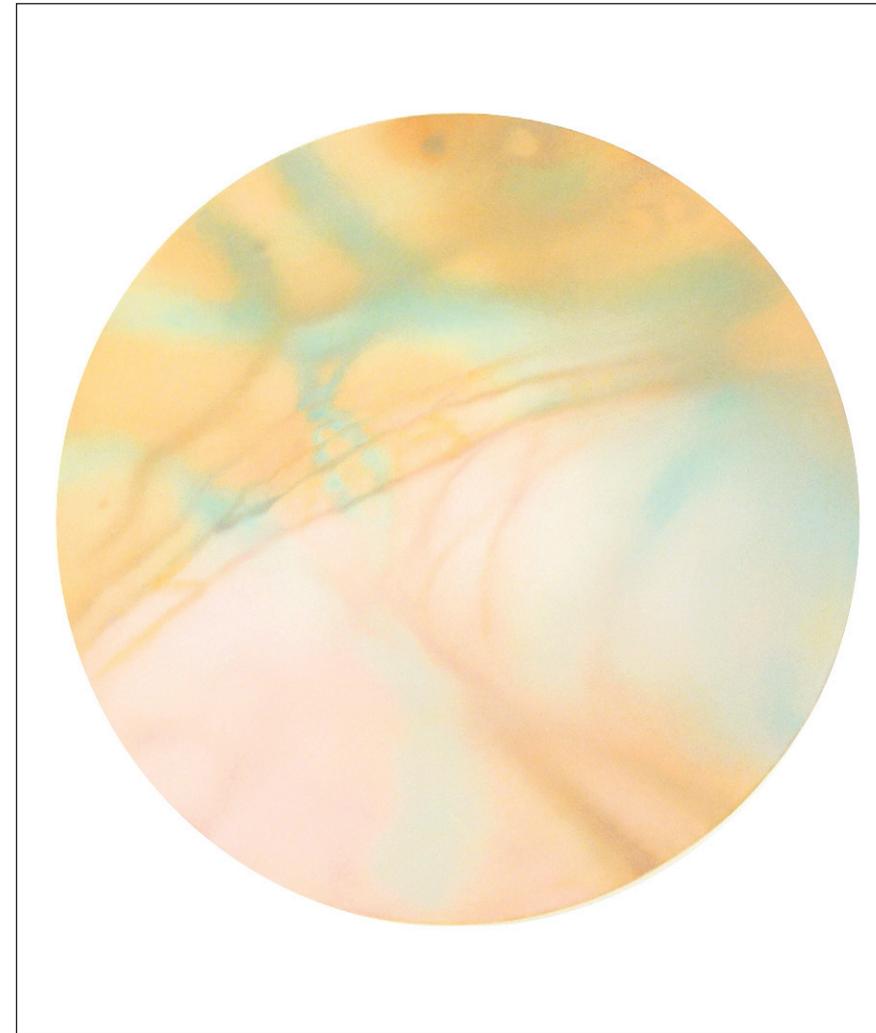
Hardie's work. Today, the wet on wet technique – a fast and furious process to recreate a tiny silken section of her own body in macro form – contrasts with the blocky, stippled feel of her earlier paintings. As the Gaelic poet and songwriter Aonghas MacNeacail observes in his poem about her work in the catalogue for this exhibition, there is "no curve that won't nourish".

MacNeacail met Hardie in her studio in New York before penning the poem and an essay for the catalogue. In the latter, he nails her art with a poet's eye when he writes: "She sees the human body as something utterly essential ... and yet she seeks to dissolve in persuasive and subtle ways the sense of the body as a separate and fixed identity..."

"By examining sunlight's effect on the skin in such a small close up, the body's surface resembles phenomena in the greater natural world, both seen from close up and far away at the same time."

Hardie, who regularly returns to Scotland to visit family, has been drawn to the outer reaches of her native land as a place where she feels her work has resonance, and will visit North Uist in late February to take part a series of talks at Taigh Chearsabhagh.

"The fundamental aim that underpins my work is how to find a way of



Fife-born artist Gwen Hardie examines flesh in minute detail in her *Boundaries* work

presenting the human body as a part of nature at large," she explains, "considering natural phenomena such as sunlight, how it rises and falls affecting what we see and elements such as water, air and earth that make up the body and the planet; so I imagine seeing my work in Taigh Chearsabhagh will be very stimulating. The question of cultural identity is an enigmatic one to me, since I carry my Scottish roots with me wherever I go, now blending with a variety of other influences, most recently American."

To me, Hardie's recent work, especially in the round, keeps reminding me of dream-catchers, which in Native American culture are web-like hoops adorned with beads and feathers, intended to protect sleepers from negative dreams while letting positive dreams through.

Whichever way you look at her work, the feeling is all good.

Gwen Hardie: Boundaries is at Taigh Chearsabhagh Museum & Arts Centre, Lochmaddy, North Uist (01870 603977, www.taigh-chearsabhagh.org) until February 23. The artist will talk about her work in person on February 21; see website for details.