



Bellanoch Swing Bridge on the Crinan Canal.

## LANDSCAPES OF WATER

Artist **Lesley Banks**' next exhibition celebrates Scotland's Year of Coasts & Waters. In conversation with Amelia Hamson, she discusses the canals residency that started it all

In 2016 Lesley Banks became Scottish Canals' first – and only – Artist in Residence. Officially a 15-month project, there hasn't been anyone else in the role, so she's continued to hold the title on an informal basis ever since. Now, in Scotland's Year of Coasts & Waters, new relevance has been given to Lesley's canal-inspired artworks, and an exhibition at the Summerlee Museum of Scottish Industrial Life was due to be on show this summer. After lockdown, uncertainty about when the museum – and the rest of the UK – will reopen looms, and looking back on when Lesley first sought inspiration from the canals provides a pleasant distraction from the monotony of life indoors. "At least it's nice to have a conversation that doesn't start with 'Mum, what's for dinner?'," she laughs.

Having been known for her figurative interiors, in 2015 Lesley was seeking a new project. "The kids were getting older, we got a dog and I was outside more. I tend to work in themes, so I decided to focus on the section of the Forth & Clyde Canal between the Falkirk Wheel and the Helix Park. I know Andy Scott who designed the Kelpies and he suggested pitching the idea to Richard Millar at Scottish Canals. It was Richard who said: 'Why are you only doing that short section? Why don't you do all of Scotland's canals?' That's when the idea took flight."

After successfully applying for a Creative Scotland Open Project Funding award, she was given the 15-month timescale and the daunting task of exploring all of Scotland's navigable waterways. "I spent months walking 137 miles of the towpaths – some bits more than once. Scottish Canals were great, giving me lots of support and places to stay."

### Finding a focus

With such a big project, Lesley recalls



Lesley on location with her painting of the top of the Falkirk Wheel.

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initially being overwhelmed before settling into a new way of working. "I wasn't really sure what to focus on to begin with, but it was really exciting and different for me to be doing something other than being inside painting people. I did panic a bit because I spent so much time just walking and thinking, but the funding gave me a time limit and purpose."

In trying to pin down what she was doing, Lesley decided to paint from the point of view of a pedestrian. "I did go out on some boats and it could have gone off in so many different directions but ultimately everything was tied up with walking. I was inspired by a book called *Wanderlust* by Rebecca Solnit that looks at the history of walking, as well as creativity and 'slow looking'."

### Gongoozler

"When I came to start painting, I created

five mini exhibitions in one – each dedicated to a single canal – called Gongoozler. I allocated each canal its own size and shape of canvas and presented them like journeys following the towpaths. It needed to have some coherence and planning it out like this made it less daunting."

The Crinan and Caledonian canals were given horizontal canvasses, as Lesley found her attention constantly being pulled from one side to the other, especially on the Crinan where at times the towpath is situated directly between the sea and the canal. "The Union, on the other hand, is a contour canal with virtually no locks, and I found myself looking ahead all the time to the next bridge, the next aqueduct, so those paintings are on vertical canvasses," she explains.

"I walked the Crinan the most as it's only 9 miles long and it's my favourite

canal. It's quite an intimate waterway that can be absolutely gorgeous at sunset/sunrise and in the mist. The Caledonian is in the Highlands and while also very beautiful is a bit big and bombastic at times and much wider."

With her previous experience of Scotland's canals confined to her local stretch of the Forth & Clyde, Lesley took a very open minded approach to her early research, taking photographs and noting down places of interest that she wanted to return to. "As you'll know, there's quite a lot of generic canal but then you can turn a corner and there'll be something really amazing."

Pencil sketches, pastels drawings, notes and photographs were all done on location, while the final oil paintings were completed in Lesley's home studio. She chose to work mainly oils on deep-edged linen, which has a nice smooth surface that she explains is suited to painting expanses of water.

"I enjoyed painting the Monkland Canal the most," she says. "They're quiet abstract and different to all of the others. It's not navigable anymore and nature has really taken over, so it's far more static than the other canals, the edges are really soft and there are leaves floating on it. I focussed solely on looking down onto the surface of the water, and Monet's abstract water lily paintings were quite an inspiration."

### Canals and coasts

After the main project for Scottish Canals, Lesley had a few spin-off exhibitions that were supported with marketing and PR from Scottish Canals, including one at the canal basin in Linlithgow. Her attention then turned to the coast as several of Scotland's canals start or end in the sea.

"Last May I was up near Castle Lachlan in Argyll on an art retreat, and began drawing the rocks where they meet the sea with crashing waves. I really loved the ruggedness of the scenery - it was a sunny day but there were shadows on the beach and the rocks. The result was a series of big square paintings that are quite monochrome in a way, quiet dark. They're almost a cross between the surface studies of the Monkland and the more detailed, realistic landscapes of the other canals in that they were painted much more simply."



**Above: A winter morning on the Crinan.**

**Right: The wide waters at Clachnaharry on the Caledonian Canal.**

**Below: This rockpool study will be on show with the canal paintings at the Summerlee Museum.**



The Landscapes of Water exhibition for Scotland's Year of Coasts & Waters that's been delayed by the lockdown was due to take place at the Summerlee Museum of Industrial Heritage this summer. But Lesley still holds out hope that it can open to the public in the autumn. "It's a selection of paintings from the Gongoozler project covering the four navigable canals, all of the Monkland Canal work as the museum is close to that waterway, and three 1m<sup>2</sup> coastal paintings with supporting

studies," she explains. "There are also a few glass cases with some of my sketchbooks open, and one funny little corner that's set up like my studio with an easel and work pinned to the wall. It's a pity because everything was hung at the museum and we went into lockdown about four days later."

### Beyond the waterways

With the exhibition comes the end of Lesley's commitment to painting the waterways, a sprawling project that's taken her across Scotland many times over the last five years. "I'm not planning on more canal-themed paintings, although I walk and run along the Forth & Clyde, my local canal, a lot, so that will always feature in my art."

While waiting for normality to resume, Lesley's new project has been put on hold, and she cites the lack of physical and mental space that stifled her creativity during the time at home during lockdown. "What I'm excited about doing, however, is a portrait I've been asked to do of a boat that's berthed on the canals around two hours north of Amsterdam," she says, brightening up. "The owner wants it painted in the marina and asked me to visit so that I could get a feel for the atmosphere - although that's also been delayed, probably until next year. That and another commission came out of the residency, and I'll be working on other small projects before I find my new theme."



**The Crinan Canal.**

Find out more about Lesley's artwork at [lesleybanks.com](http://lesleybanks.com), and watch a video made to accompany the delayed Landscapes of Water exhibition at Summerlee Museum at <https://youtu.be/6JAAdlBS700>.