

A letter from Mark Cousins

Dear gallery attender,

Why do you come to the Fruitmarket?
You're obviously interested in art,
but could I ask why?

What are you looking for? Beauty perhaps, or something
you've never seen before?

If so, does that mean that you're unguarded today? Are your
defences down?

LIKE A HUGE SCOTLAND is inspired by an event in the life
of a woman who was unguarded. She thought she was just going
on holiday. She didn't know that on the day in May 1949
when she climbed to the Grindelwald glacier in the Swiss Alps,
she'd suddenly be overwhelmed.

Looking back, we can see that Wilhelmina Barns-Graham was ready for
something new.

Born in St Andrews in 1912 into a strict family, her father didn't want
her to be a painter. But from an early age she was compelled by visuals.
Her brain was unusual – she was synaesthetic – and she was drawn to the
almost cubist aspect of the natural world. Her early paintings were good
but, like many of us, she probably didn't know that there was something
missing, that there was an extra gear, a kind of rooftop which she hadn't
yet accessed. The glacier was that rooftop. She had other inspiring
experiences in her life, but a gigantic 10,000 year old scoop of ice was
lying in wait for her, for her brain, and that primed engine-brain duly
revved. She wrote in her diary:

“Enormous standing forms, polished like glass...the fantastic
shapes, the contrast of solidity and transparency...it seemed to
breathe! I experienced a terrifying desire to roll myself down the
mountain side... Likeness to glass and transparency, combined with
solid rough ridges made me wish to combine in a work, all angles...
at once, from above, through, and all round, as a bird flies, a total
experience. All this and the many moods beautiful and frightening
fascinated me.”

I'm sure we all want the beautiful, but that day was frightening for
Willie – as she liked to be called – too. With my dad when I was eleven I
climbed part of the Eiffel Tower, because the lifts weren't working. It
was beautiful and frightening. Ever since I've had a bad fear of heights.
I was brought up in the Troubles in Northern Ireland, and was in the siege
of Sarajevo and made a film in Iraq during its war, but that Eiffel Tower
climb scared me more than the wars. I think it rewired my brain.

Recently I climbed to what's left of the Grindelwald glacier, in Willie's footsteps. When I did so I discovered that she had it relatively easy! In the 1940s the glacier came down to the foot of the valley. Now it's shrunk to its head, to a kernel. Our climb took hours, my vertigo kicked in, and I was terrified – shaking and crying. I was supposed to be filming, but I was too scared to take my camera out. I thought I was going to die. Then, as we reached the top, the precipice widened, the distant sound of cow bells retreated, and there was an alpine solitude. I raised my eyes and saw the glacier. It was aquatic, like a sleeping whale. I've been in the deserts of Iran and inside the great pyramids of Giza, but the visual, aesthetic, sensory experiences (and relief) of being there were...what? Like a kind of infection.

Like Willie was infected.

I followed in her footsteps, my guard was down, and I was infected by her.

Maybe that's what LIKE A HUGE SCOTLAND is: an infection.

I hope you get infected soon too, if not by this then by some visual-emotional-sensory experience. A kind of mosh pit or pilgrimage. Wash your hands afterwards.

Thank you,
Mark Cousins

LIKE A HUGE SCOTLAND (4 screens, 8 audio channels, 14'50") is a collaboration with composer Linda Buckley, editor Timo Langer and sound designer Ania Przygoda.

It repeats on the quarter hour, and will tour internationally.

Its editing was streamed live and recorded, and can be seen on the Fruitmarket YouTube channel or scan here.



A book about Barns-Graham's glacier paintings, edited by Rob Airey, will be published in 2023.

A cinema documentary about Barns-Graham – A SUDDEN GLIMPSE TO DEEPER THINGS – written and directed by Mark Cousins and produced by Mary Bell and Adam Dawtrey/Bofa Productions, will premiere in 2023.

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audio version
of this guide



Exhibition. Free.
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Open Daily 11am – 6pm

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