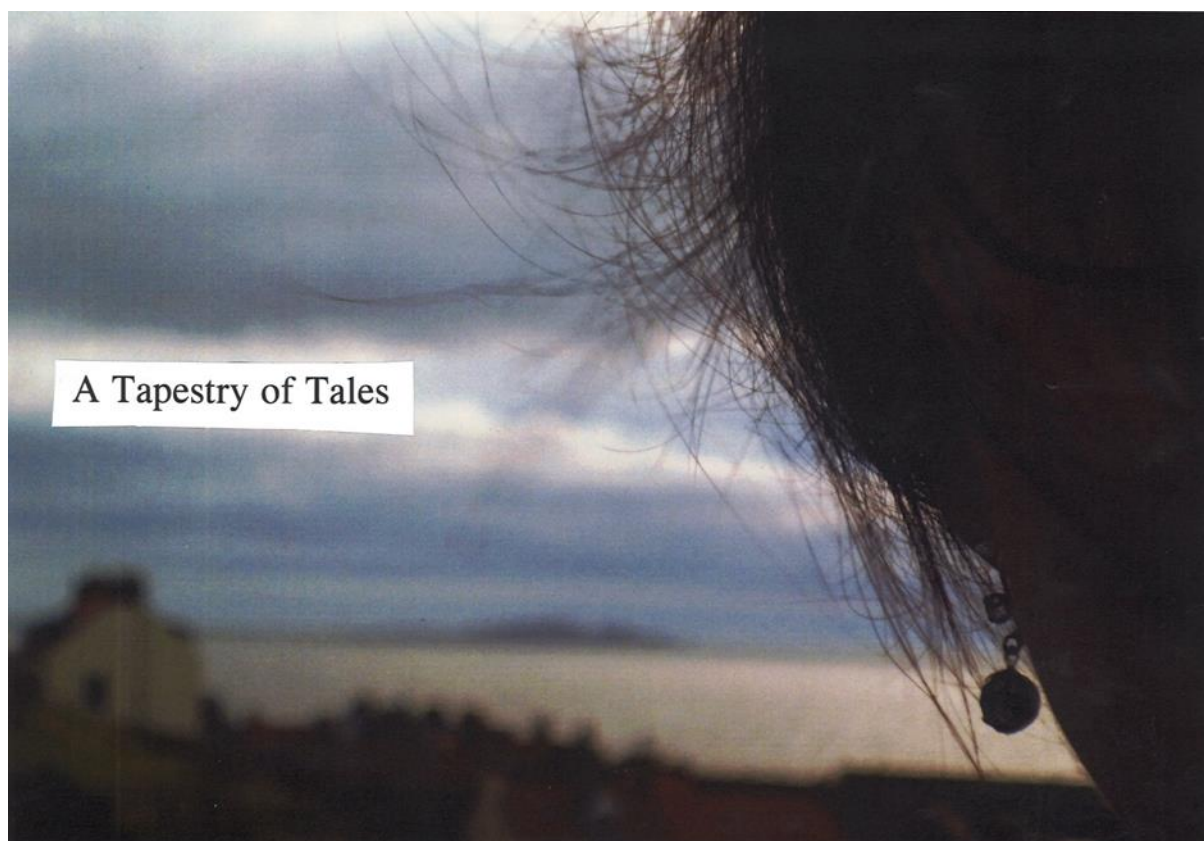


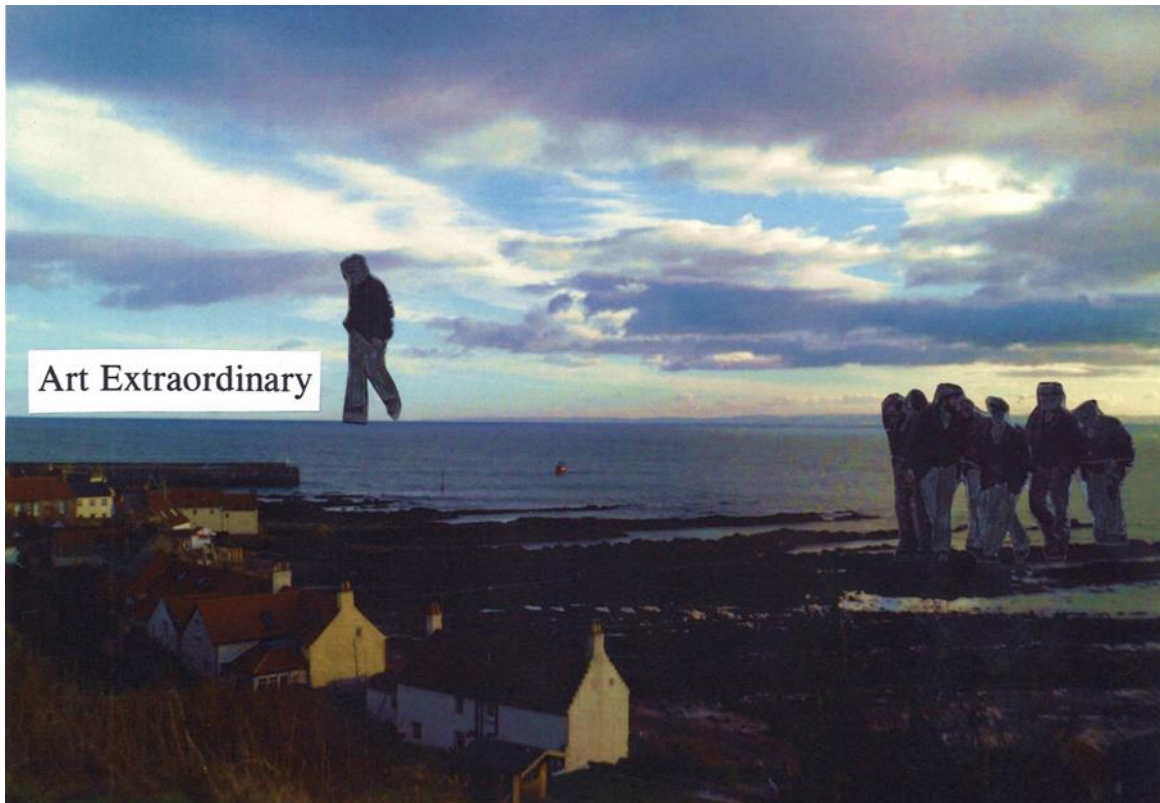
# Researching Art Extraordinary: A Fieldwork Photo-Collage Essay

Cheryl McGeachan



The cackle of the swooping gulls fills the narrow streets as I arrive in Pittenweem for the 2014 Arts festival. I am here to experience the landscape of this unusual place and to seek out unknown histories of the Art Extraordinary collection. Collected by pioneering art therapist Joyce Laing, Art Extraordinary refers to visual art forms created by individuals who create due to a *compulsion* to express an intense personal vision and is often referred to as a unique form of Scottish 'outsider art'. Most of these artists have no formal art education and often exist on the margins of conventional society, held within the care of institutions and frequently experiencing mental health difficulties of varying kinds. Over the past three years I have researched the collection and I have been captivated by the array of sculptures, paintings, tapestries, sketches, poems, writings, collages, photographs and ceramics that belong to the label Art Extraordinary and the intimate stories about people and place that they reveal. This photo-collage essay seeks to highlight visually some of the stories of my fieldwork during the project. Although a significant proportion of the research was undertaken in Glasgow Museums Resource Centre<sup>1</sup> and is not covered here, time was spent seeking out connections about place and being 'in place' to try and uncover new histories and generate stories that resonate from the collection. The pictures represented here are my own collages inspired by the

work of artist extraordinary Marylene Walker. Marylene's layering of sights, sounds, lives and experiences deeply resonated with me and I used her techniques to help tell the tales of my fieldwork. Extracts from my fieldwork diary accompany the pictures to give some context. These are not detailed interpretations or explanations of the scenes but are, in many ways, simply reflections of being 'in place' during the fieldwork. Marylene, as with the other artists extraordinary I have encountered, are deeply inspirational and I thank them for their bravery, creativity and passion.



Pioneering Scottish art therapist and collector of patient art Joyce Laing, defined Art Extraordinary as visual art forms created by individuals who paint, sculpt, weave, sketch or draw due to a *compulsion* to express an intense personal vision. The compulsive nature of this creativity often means that there is no desire to create for commercial gain, many of their pieces being discarded by the individuals who make them as soon as they are finished. Due to these constraints, Art Extraordinary is deemed very rare and can be extremely difficult to source and to trace. Pittenweem, the home of the collection until recently, feels intimately connected to the artists and their stories even though the pieces now sit quietly in storage at GMRC. I can almost see the artists walking the cobbled streets and hear their faint voices being swept out to sea (Extract from field diary recounting a site visit to Pittenweem Feb 2016).



Peeking out behind a rusty iron pipe peer's the smiling face of an Adam Christie sculpture. Adam, a patient at Montrose Asylum from 1901-1950, was becoming renowned in these parts of Hillside for his mysterious stone head carvings. Dave Ramsay guides me through Adam's hidden treasures in the landscape like a trusted tour-guide. It feels very exciting seeing Adam's artwork 'in place' in comparison to the materials stored in the museum archive. Adam's ability to carve discarded stone into wondrous life-like form with handmade tools highlights an intimate relation between the material and the body. Hiding his heads in the wider landscapes of the hospital makes them feel like part of the natural landscape. Through the changes to the landscape due to the reformation of mental health care in Scotland, somehow Adam's art has become misplaced appearing in seemingly odd locations. However, his work is certainly not being forgotten by the local community that treasures these hidden pieces (Extract from field diary recounting the tour of Hillside, November 2015).



Duthie Park



It is starting to get cold and I am pleased to be entering into the warmth of the winter gardens at Duthie Park in Aberdeen. Marylene describes her trip to the winter gardens as 'another world' and the plants that she encountered there as alien in nature and as I walk slowly around I can feel why this would be the case. The ways in which the plants shape and form is morphed as the light in the glass house changes gives a mysterious quality to the space. A small exhibition of photographs highlights the history of the park and the redevelopment that has occurred over time. I wonder what things used to look like and how different people have used the gardens over the years. I wonder what stories the plants could tell if they could talk? I find it a comforting place to be and I find myself unwilling to leave (Extract from field diary recounting a site visit to Duthie Park Jan 2016).



It was the year 1900, and Adam Christie was getting increasingly worse. Withdrawn, despondent and agitated his family grew frantic by his dramatic loss of weight and his endless pacing around the small family cottage in Cunningsburgh. Adam would later be diagnosed with 'delusional insanity' by the psychiatrists at the Royal Montrose Mental Asylum but beneath the thatched roof of Adam's family home his loved ones struggled to find a way in which to help him out of his despair. The incessant voices which plagued his thoughts coincided with his inability to coherently speak the internal trauma he was suffering. Adam wished to end his life. His family sought him 'asylum'. As the boat moved rhythmically through the North Sea the familiar landmarks of home grew ever more distant for Adam. Watching as his beloved Shetland slowly became replaced by the dark nothingness of the expansive ocean, Adam knew he would never return to the home of his ancestors. Accompanied by two attendants Adam, a young man at the age of thirty-two, turned to face his new future as a long-stay asylum patient.

Thick layers of destroyed spiders-web cling to the vast array of random wooden and metal objects that scatter themselves around the workshop in the grounds of the asylum. Away from the prying eyes of other patients and staff, Adam was able to construct a refuge amongst the slowly decaying treasures of a lost system of traditional asylum care. Adam, now sixty years of age, occupied with permission a space of his own, where he began to create things anew from the fragmented remains of the old Asylum Age. Dressed in a tweed jacket and cap, he set upon his projects of reassembly with his distinctive collection of tools: a heavy file for a hammer, a six inch nail for a chisel and a fragment of glass from a broken bottle would be carefully used to slowly scrape the

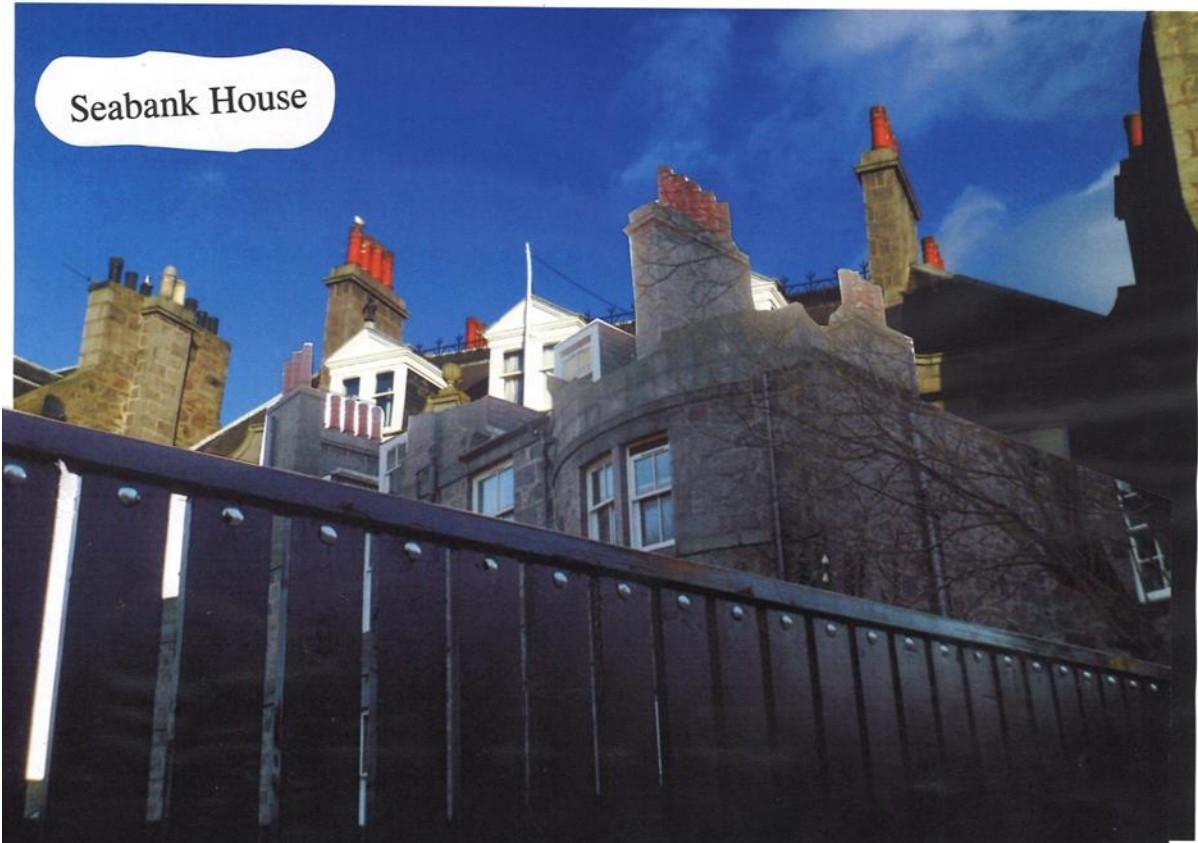


finishing touches into the stone. Time and time again, Adam would carve heads out of the disregarded stone; faces which captured the human essence so strikingly that it appeared that Adam could breathe life into stone (extract from a creative writing exercise inspired by a site visit to Montose, Nov 2015).

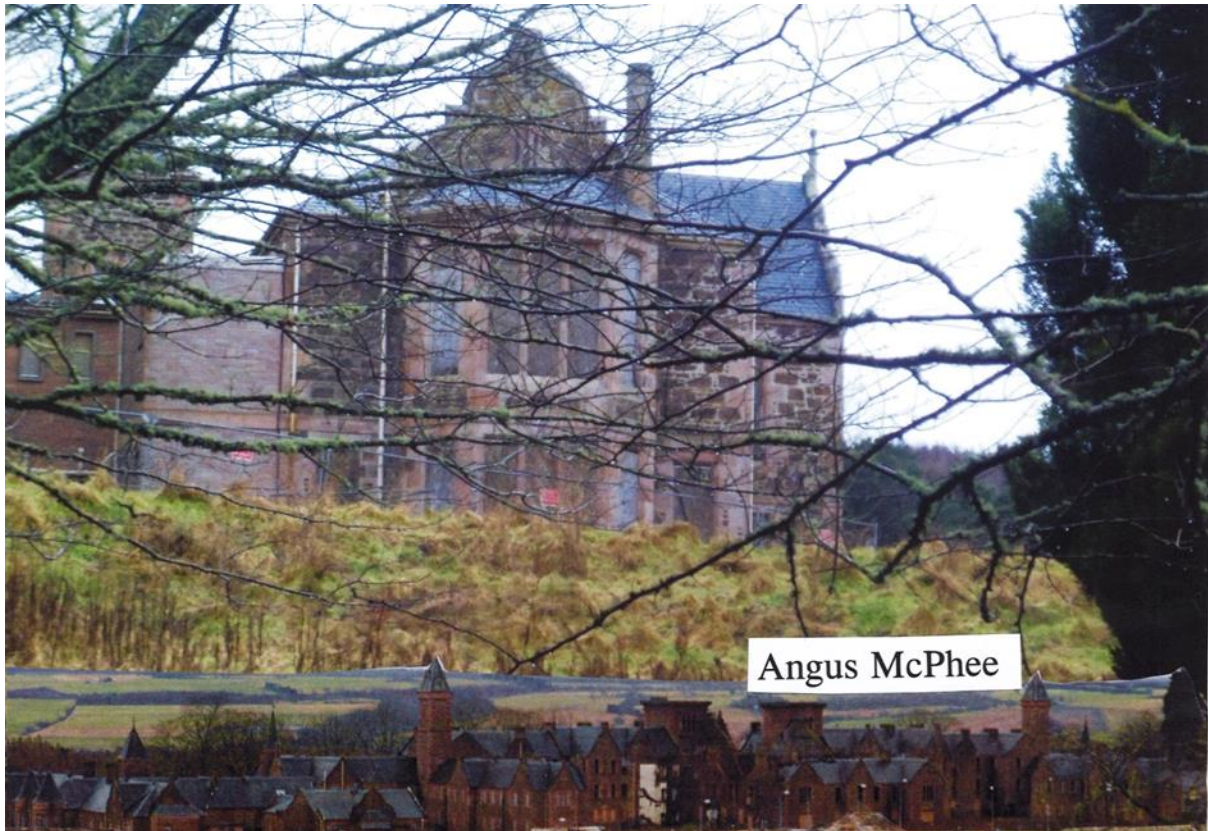


The bus creeps slowly through the darkness and I am worried that I will miss the stop. Luckily, a fellow traveller edges forward and I remember him asking for Pittenweem as he boarded the bus at Kirkcaldy so I follow his lead and step off the bus into the awaiting darkness. The silence of the place registers first. I have never visited Pittenweem outside of the summer months and the feeling of the place in early February appears different – quieter and stiller as if paused in time for a moment. I am here to experiment with Marylene Walker’s ‘mental photographs’ technique and as I walk through the village on that first night I catch sight of a fishing boat resting in the harbour. Under the streetlights the boat appears to have a blurred quality that strikes me as ghostly. I edge towards the glow to check the boat is real. No one else is around. The streets feel very empty – it feels as though there is no-one at home. I take a seat on the harbour wall and stare into the darkness where I know the sea must be. My mind flits back to the art I have seen throughout my research and the stories of the collection that have been uncovered. I think of Joyce and her strength of character and am inspired by her courage and determination to continue to salvage this art from oblivion. This trip to Pittenweem is the final port of call, my last site visit on the current project. I hear the

waves getting louder yet I feel not quite ready to leave (Field diary extract from a site visit to Pittenweem Feb 2016).



I approach the building from the back clutching a sample of the brightly coloured paintings by Mrs McGilp that I have carried with me for reference. Her work is mesmerising – bunnies with bright blue eyes, sweeping mountains, trees of all shapes, and colourful flowers compulsively appear in her pictures. However, one painting held in the archive is different from the rest and immediately catches the eye. A painting of a house with a castle-like structure fills half of the crumpled page and a range of dancing people populate the other side of the page. As I walk along to the front of Seabank House, once home to Mrs McGilp, the bright blue door catches my roving eye. I wonder about the rooms inside. The archive holds pictures of rooms acting in the dual role of dwelling spaces and miniature art galleries. I wonder what the world looks like from the outside-in. The houses along Dee Street are a variety of shapes and colours and a castle-like building just falls into view from the back windows of the building (Extract from field diary recounting a site visit to Aberdeen Jan 2016).



The remains of Craig Dunain Mental Hospital provide an important point of reflection during this project. In many ways this hospital lies at the centre of the Art Extraordinary project, its webs of influence stretching out to the other sites of the collection's creation. The heart of the collection belongs to the story of long-term patient at Craig Dunain, Angus McPhee. Told beautifully in Roger Hutchinson's book *The Silent Weaver* (2011) and movingly by Joyce herself, Angus's story encapsulates the core themes of the Art Extraordinary journey. Angus, the creator of extraordinary grass weavings – jackets, coats, hats, boots and an array of objects patiently carved into existence in the hospital grounds. The 'discovery' of Angus's work by Joyce and the desire to preserve, show and celebrate the man and his talents highlights the humane approach to mental health that this collection emanates (Extract of field diary recounting a site visit to Craig Dunain Jan 2016).



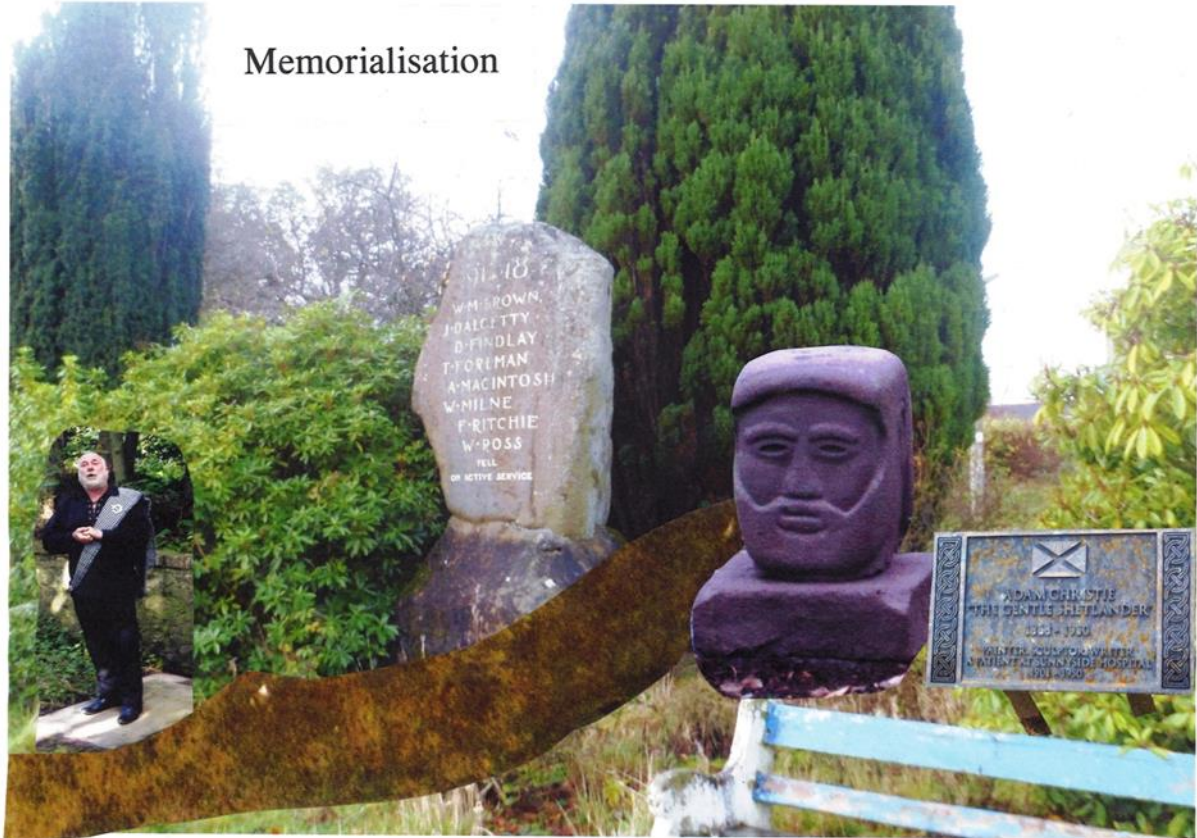
Royal Cornhill Hospital



Ross Clinic

After a day at the Aberdeen University Archives reading stories from the old asylum I take a walk to visit the site. It is after five o'clock and darkness is starting to creep in but the lights from the bulldozers illuminate the wreckage of the Royal Cornhill Hospital. I peer through the metal fence and my eye is drawn to the remains of past asylum life – doors and walls that held the outer world at bay now lie broken in a pile of mounting rubble. My interest in the hospital rests with the Ross Clinic and Joyce's work there with a range of troubled individuals. Behind the building site is an operating institution full of life and community. I spend time watching the building fall until my bones grow cold. I am reminded again why this work is important (Extract from field diary recounting a site visit to Aberdeen Jan 2016).

## Memorialisation



Dave Ramsay stops the car as we prepare to walk around the abandoned site of the Old Montrose Lunatic Asylum. Dave's wise words direct my eyes to different buildings and sites of interest to me in my quest to research the asylum worlds of Adam Christie. We walk around the grounds of the old asylum and we stop for a moment at the remains of the main building. We take a moment to reflect on Adam's first sight of the enormous building. Dave notes that Adam, coming from Shetland, would have never seen buildings so tall. We wonder if he was frightened. We hope that he found sanctuary (Extract from field diary recounting a site visit to Montrose Nov 2015).

Dave's passion and drive for celebrating Adam's work is truly inspirational and I believe that it speaks to a wider sense in which the Art Extraordinary collection can move people in many ways. Dave's quest to mark Adam's life and work is poignantly memorialised in stone in Sleepyhillock Cemetery. Standing in the cemetery grounds I am struck by how beautiful the place remains in light of all its surrounding sadness. I smile as the wonderful head sculpture created in homage to Adam by talented artist Brian Wylie is revealed to the public for the first time. The plaque unveiled in 2014 finally marked Adam's burial site 64 years after his death in the institution but the sculpture adds a further dimension of memorialisation – a marker to remember the man and his extraordinary talent (Extract from field diary recounting memories of the Unveiling of Adam Christie Sculpture event Jan 2016).





It is my final day in Pittenweem on the project and I carefully retrace my steps from my very first visit in 2014. As I negotiate the narrow streets winding upwards towards my exit I look back at this important place. The people that I have encountered on this journey feel so familiar and yet for some, I don't even know their real names. Marylene discusses the ways in which she continuously tries to negotiate the scary surfaces of the world that surround her through her art making. This common thread weaves its way through the collection and I am touched by the ability of people to find route-ways through the most difficult of times. As I gaze into the landscape for the last time I feel the artists' presence and I know that I will carry them and this place with me as I continue upon my travels (Extract from field diary of a site visit to Pittenweem Feb 2016).<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> None of the materials used in the collages have been sourced from the collection at GMRC but the collection can be accessed with permission through staff at Glasgow Life.

<sup>2</sup> These site visits were full of encounters with people and I am very grateful to everyone I met along the way. Special thanks to Dave and Jodie for their company and kindness and thanks to everyone who contributed to the project – giving time, ideas, materials for the collages and direction – I will always be extremely grateful.