

The master of fashion, portrait and landscape

Albert Watson covers all the bases, as does the City Art Centre with three great festival shows

ALBERT WATSON: FROZEN

★★★★★

TOULOUSE-LAUTREC

AND THE ART NOUVEAU POSTER

★★★★★

ANNE REDPATH

AND THE EDINBURGH SCHOOL

★★★★★

CITY ART CENTRE, EDINBURGH

PHOTOGRAPHER Albert Watson is a Scot. He is immensely successful worldwide, but he is hardly known at all in Scotland. For once, though, that is not our habitual niggardliness with appreciation of those who have gone out to success in some other land. His work is constantly visible, he is hectically productive, but he himself is remarkably invisible. He has done covers for all the major magazines – for *Vogue* in every edition, for *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Rolling Stone*, any you can think of with a glamorous name. He has worked for the in-house magazines of L'Oréal and Armani. He has done adverts and fashion shoots for Levi's, Max Factor, Lancôme and many other big fashion names. That iconic picture of Kate Moss crouching naked is his. So are Alfred Hitchcock with a strangled goose and Mick Jagger in a leopardskin mask. We know his work, it is all around us, but we do not know the man.

His schedule is astonishing. He has described a single working day that be-

Albert Watson poses with one of his iconic images, in which Mick Jagger morphs into a leopard

gins in Paris, continues in New York and ends in Los Angeles – and that is typical. He describes to me how he tries to set a little time aside each year so he can collect his images together for a publication or exhibition, or undertake work that is driven purely by his own remarkable visual curiosity. This exhibition is his first in Britain and, as he is based in New York and has only once held a one-man show there, this is quite a coup.

Watson was born in Edinburgh in 1942. After art school in Dundee he went to the Royal College in London where he studied film. As film-makers do, he drifted to Los Angeles. He took up stills photography to keep body and soul together and the rest is history.

The photographs here cover three decades and range through fashion, fetish and the famous; through landscape, still-life and surrealist images beyond categorising. Whether they are of iconic individuals, anonymous girls dressed in latex stockings, standing stones in Orkney, the people of Morocco, or the weird Nevada landscape

of neon and desert, what unites his pictures is the strength of impact that they each make individually. Nor is this just a function of scale, though they are very big. They reach from floor to ceiling in the City Art Centre and some are as wide as they are high. It is his vision realised that gives these images their impact. They always look simple. That is the gift of a great photographer, but it is fascinating to hear him describe how he reaches the image and that it seems rarely simple. No snapshots here. He points out to me how an over-life-sized picture of a naked girl reclining on a bed deliberately has a baffling complexity of focus. Achieved by combining a complex sequence of images, the result is disturbing. It reminds us just what is going on when we look at a naked girl.

With more technical brilliance, he has captured lightning against dark clouds above a wide landscape. It is full daylight. The clouds are dark because they have been laden with sand by the storm, he explains; then he adds that you cannot photograph lightning by day, and proudly describes the ingenuity he has used to do the impossible. These desert landscape are among the most remarkable pictures here. A neon sign stands against the sunset. On it, the single word "God" is set against a background of the stars and stripes.

The definition in these pictures is such, he says, that they could be scaled up to a cinema screen and details would become legible that we can hardly even see are there. Clearly he loves it all and we see that everywhere in his work. And, refreshingly, where an artist's ego is often as big as these wide landscapes, he talks all the time about "we" – his team – not simply "I" – the artist.

This major show is not all that the City Art Centre is offering for the Edinburgh Art Festival. There are repro-

duction posters by Mucha, Cheret and Toulouse-Lautrec in bedrooms round the world, but once again they are images so familiar we scarcely question who made them. The top two floors here are devoted to a comprehensive and richly informative exhibition of the explosion of poster art in 19th-century France, which created these first icons of truly popular art. It began with the invention of lithography. The individual prints cost so little they could be thrown away – pasted to walls to be ripped down in a day or two when the show they advertised was over.

The exhibition begins with black-and-white posters for Balzac by Gavarni in the 1840s. These have strong and immediate graphics, yet with the arrival of colour a new fluency and decorative brilliance took over. Lautrec was only one of a galaxy of artists who exploited the new medium. Bonnard is here, too. Others, like Cheret, specialised in poster art and the exhibition includes work from Belgium and Catalonia. The results range from Mucha's elegant posters for Job cigarette papers to the downright comic. A group of celebrities sitting down to tins of Jockey Club sardines by Henri-Gustave Jossot is not just hilarious, stylistically, it points down the century to the graphic economy that Walt Disney exploited so successfully.

And don't overlook the third show that the City Art Centre is offering. Anne Redpath and the Edinburgh School brings together a wonderful group of Redpath's own work, including old favourites and less familiar pictures, with work by Gillies, Maxwell, William Crozier and other of her Edinburgh contemporaries and friends.

● Exhibitions run until 22 October. From next Tuesday, Duncan Macmillan's visual art reviews will appear in our Edinburgh Festival magazine.