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The Bridge to Land Literacy: A Review of the Artist's Role in Understanding the Richness of the Gaelic Landscape

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Fine Art

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The bridge to Land Literacy: A review of the artist's role in understanding the richness of the Gaelic landscape

Ruth Gibson

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Abstract

The Scottish Gaelic language is richly descriptive with an inseparable tie to the landscape. Over the last 200 years, the language has almost faded to extinction, in my own family it died with my great grandparents when they were forced to move down to Glasgow from the west highlands. This dissertation examines the correlation between loss of understanding the language and disconnection from land culture in Scotland, and the role the artist plays in rekindling connection, and language revitalisation.

The increase in Community Heritage Arts Centres, such as the Inchree Barn Project, work directly with communities to inspire interest in local history via art and language. Similarly, the exhibition *A Fragile Correspondence* (2023) also engaged with communities to observe the correspondence between language and land and how this can give us the tools to save both for the future. This dissertation then looks at the film *Dùthchas (Home)* (2022) which combines archival footage with the voices of the inhabitants past and present of the isle of Berneray to discuss their connection to the language and how its loss has corresponded with a loss of community and connection to home on the island. The final example is an analysis of the contemporary exhibition *Gaelic Futurisms* (2025) which looks at the connection of younger generations to Gaelic in Glasgow and questioning how we can protect the language now for a better future.

We are at a pivotal point in history where we have a duty of care to protect this endangered language and the land from climate emergency. Artists could be the ones to inspire the change necessary.

With special thanks to Catrìona Nic IlleMhoire and Lucy Cooke, for sharing their time and experience with me for this research.

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Introduction

Gaelic is a language which has been spoken in Scotland for over 1500 years, gradually declining in use until today when less than 3% of the population has skills in the language (Scotland's Census, 2022). Recently, there has been a revaluation about the importance of the language and a greater appreciation of its role in understanding the landscape on a deeper level.

There is a prevailing belief that art is the key to bridging the gap between research and inciting change by the way they can evoke emotional connection with a subject through their artworks (Gauld, 2019). This dissertation explores the various ways in which artists engage with Scottish Gaelic to educate and inspire non-Gaelic speakers to learn the language and forge deeper connections with the land and cultural heritage. With a focus on exhibitions and works from the last five years, this research focuses on the current impact of art in this way. In doing so, this paper draws on research from both primary and secondary sources, including books and peer-reviewed research papers. Moreover, I attended a Gaelic author's talk and the Intangible Cultural Heritage Conference 2025 and spoke with professionals working in Gaelic conservation and the community arts sector. Through these experiences I gained first hand insights into the work done by researchers and creatives within Scottish communities. This dissertation supports and assists in underpinning my studio practice through furthering my understanding of the ways in which artists can work with land and language to inspire interest in the Gaelic language, Scottish cultural heritage, and connection to land.

Research objectives

This research aims to explore the role the artist plays in inciting engagement with the Gaelic language to better understand and protect the Gaelic landscape. By examining the role of community art centres, two key exhibitions which explore language and land relationships, and a film which merges historic footage with today's Gaelic voices to discuss the impact of change, this study pursues the idea that art is the key to connecting people with land and language.

Structure

Chapter one explores the Gaelic language, culture, and land connections; laying the foundations for what the connections are between land in language in Scotland and giving

reasons why it is important to revitalise the Gaelic language and what that can mean for Scottish cultural and environmental regeneration.

In chapter two, I introduce heritage organisations and the work they are doing for Gaelic arts and traditions in Scotland. Next, I analyse the effectiveness and longevity of community arts centres for community, education, arts and protection of Gaelic culture in Scotland. I also seek to examine the ways in which they work with the land and how they can encourage the communities to work with the concept of the Gaelic landscape to better understand their surroundings and the history of it.

Chapter three introduces the concept of the Gaelic word dùthchas. Here I explore the depth of connection to land, ancestry, and culture within Gaelic culture, and what it means to explore these concepts in the contemporary setting. This chapter analyses the Gaelic section of the 2023 exhibition *A Fragile Correspondence*, examining the way the artists worked collaboratively with the community forest of Abriachan and allowed the language and land connection to be interwoven into the artworks. The chapter then looks at the film Dùthchas (Home) (2022), a film which explores the way in which the island of Berneray has changed over the years of the living population of the island. Archival footage is paired with the islanders past and present talking about the changes the island has seen and the challenges the natives have faced in an ever-evolving world, and what that has meant for the language and culture of Gaelic on Berneray.

Finally in chapter four, the exhibition, *Gaelic Futurisms* (2025), is examined as an example of the influence of Gaelic on artists and demonstration of the way in which art can be used as a tool by artists to deepen their connection with the language, and vice versa. Further, this exhibition is a showcase of the influence of Gaelic outside of the highlands and islands, and the revitalisation efforts taking place in cities like Glasgow to protect and regenerate the language there.

The Gaelic Language in Scotland

Gaelic is a language first introduced to Scotland by Irish Gaels around 500 AD, when they migrated across the Irish sea (Lamb, 2025, p. 1). Despite a prevailing belief that it only existed in the Highland regions, if we look to the landscape, there is toponymical evidence that it was spoken throughout the whole of the country (Lamb, 2025, p. 2). The Gaelic language spoken in Scotland declined considerably over the course of approximately 250 years (Lamb, 2025, p.7) until we are now at a point where only 2.5% of people over the age of 3 have what is described as “some skills” in Gaelic (Scotland's Census, 2022). Whilst this is a rise since 2011 (Scotland's Census, 2022) it is still a significantly small percentage of the population and is described in the Atlas of the Worlds Languages in Danger as being “definitely endangered” (UNESCO, 2010, p.150).

Gaelic’s decline is attributed to varying factors, but it is argued that the displacement of communities between the 18th and 19th centuries from rural and highland regions had a great impact (Lamb, 2025, p.7). This displacement grew from a time of great change in the Highlands, one example being land use. The landlords of rural Scotland were seeking to improve the economic value of their land and thus the people were encouraged or sometimes forced to leave to make way for sheep and migrate to the cities or abroad to survive (Innes, 1993). In the cities, Gaelic was seen largely as an inferior language to English, leading it to be actively discouraged, especially in lowland regions of Scotland (Macnab, 2022). This stigma has carried on well into the living generations who can recall the treatment they themselves faced in their youth when they would speak Gaelic or be unable to speak English (*Dùthchas (Home)*, 2022).

It can be argued that the most effective way to promote language regeneration is through the school system. One example of the success of this is the thriving Welsh language after a period of decline, wherein it has been found that young people’s access to Welsh language education increased their feelings of belonging to Wales and a distinct feeling of Welshness (Nikolas *et al.*, 2005). This demonstrates the importance of an active education in language from a young age to increase familiarity and confidence in speakers. The push for schools to promote the education of these languages stems from the country’s government, wherein there is a focus on language protection. In Wales, there was a push within the government for a Welsh Language Act in 1993 which put Welsh on an equal footing with English, which in turn made Welsh a compulsory school subject to the age of 16 (Nikolas *et al.*, 2005).

In Scotland there was the 2005 Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act, which stipulated that every 5 years a Gaelic Language Plan would be implemented and reviewed advising policy makers on matters relating to Gaelic language and culture and Gaelic Education (Scottish Parliament, 2005)[i]. Thanks, in part, to this movement and the government-backed incentives to promote the language, there has been a growth in resources for the public to learn the language. These include the free-to-learn online resources of SpeakGaelic, partially funded by the Scottish Government (Speak Gaelic, 2022) and an increase in Gaelic–only schools not just in the Highland and Island regions but in lowland cities also (Mackenzie and Cheyne, 2024). There is evidence that there has been a positive impact of the Act in Scotland, particularly in the under-30s demographic who believe that Gaelic should be compulsory in schools and those who did not have access to this education are seeking ways to learn in adulthood (Scholes, 2022). Studies have shown that the desire to learn and preserve Gaelic, along with the views that Gaelic is important to Scotland's cultural heritage is highest amongst this age group compared with that of older generations (Scholes, 2022). With these statistics in mind, we can see that there is hope for Gaelic amongst the younger generations, particularly with the increase in school education extending out of the Highlands (Mackenzie and Cheyne, 2024).

The Gaelic Landscape

Despite the evidence of placenames throughout Scotland, it is the Highland landscape which is often referred to as the Gaelic landscape (Murray, 2019). This title is in consideration of its history of being populated by Gaels and the breadth of Gaelic toponymy they have left in the region (Maclean, 2025). Understanding the landscape through language is crucial for us to gain a greater understanding of its past and how we can protect it for the future.

Gaelic placenames give us an insight into what once was on the landscape but is now no longer[ii] (Maclean, 2025). Understanding what was once there gives us a greater understanding of how to begin restoring what was lost. In learning the past of a place, we can work with the landscape to reestablish habitats that are perhaps now absent, and in time, plants and animals can once again flourish as they once did (Maclean, 2023).

A main factor in a perpetual state of disconnect from the land stems from when a society becomes cut off from their native language. When the language is lost, so too is the historical way of connecting with that landscape due to a lack of context for place names and uses (Lees, 2025). An example of this is in the hamlet of Tullybelton. The roots of this name come from the Gaelic *Tulaich Bhealltainn* – 'Beltane Hill' which tells the story of the usage of the place (West, 2025). Beltane being a spring festival of Celtic origin, there was the Beltane tradition of passing cattle between two large bonfires to bless and protect the cattle in the sacred smoke (West, 2025). The Beltane fires no longer burn upon the hill at Tullybelton, and the anglicised name has taken with it the knowledge of the Gaelic roots and traditions. In conversation with Catrìona Nic IlleMhoire (2025) of Historic Environment Scotland, she explained that people are more likely to want to learn and engage with conservation efforts when it is a subject relating to their local area and showing them how the land was used or viewed in the past. It is here where artists can be the catalyst for public engagement through creative and community collaborative works.

Heritage and Community Arts Centres

Despite the evidence pointing to school education as being the most effective means of revitalising language, there is still the problem of inciting interest in learning in those who are either beyond education, or without classroom access to Gaelic. It is here where community art centres play a fundamental role in cultural preservation. Munro Gauld (2019) described art as "a powerful vehicle for understanding our place within the Gaelic landscape. It helps the story to come alive and actually touch people emotionally, rather than only at a cerebral level.". Gauld explains that artists tap into the emotional hearts of people where dry facts and figures cannot. Encouraging artists to work with Gaelic alongside such organisations as Intangible Cultural Heritage Scotland (ICH) and with community arts and heritage centres can help to rouse interest and learning of the language. Not only this, but artists can help to keep traditional artforms alive and bring them to a wider audience to promote knowledge of them (ICH Scotland, 2023).

Scottish Heritage Arts Organisations

In 2023 on the 23rd of December, the UK Government announced that it would consent to the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, this was officially ratified on the 7th of June 2024 (ICH Scotland, 2023). This announcement came 20 years after the conception of the Convention, during which the British government claimed that any benefits of endorsing ICH would not compensate for the expense (Nic Craith, 2023). ICH encompasses a variety of forms which are central to the lives and identities of a culture. It includes cultural festivals, traditional skills, arts, and crafts, the understanding and interaction of people in their natural environment and their beliefs (ICH Scotland, 2023). The purpose of protecting this heritage is to provide and promote a sense of identity in communities and a sense of respect for the cultures in others (ICH Scotland, 2023).

Traditional Arts-Culture Scotland (TRACS) works as an accredited advisory organisation of ICHS due to its expansive knowledge and networks within Scottish traditional arts (TRACS Scotland, 2023). There is a common misconception of tradition that it no longer serves a place in the modern world, TRACS, however, describes tradition as the transfer of belief and custom between generation, not fixed, but adapting to the changes of time (TRACS Scotland, 2023). Allowing tradition to be pliable and adapt to the changes the passing of time brings is important as it allows people to maintain this sense of identity and culture that ICHS describes, whilst

also being fit for our modern world. It can help communities to understand the people who came before them where they live as well as ancestry on a personal level.

Further Analysis of Heritage and Community Arts Centres

Across the Highlands and Western Isles community hubs for the arts, creativity, and heritage have been established in recent years. One of the oldest and most prominent centres is An Lanntair, established in 1985 on the Isle of Lewis with an aim to create a space where art, artists and Hebridean culture could be promoted to the world (*Our History - An Lanntair*, 2023). An Lanntair was established at a time when there had been little support for the visual arts and music of Gaelic, and there was a prevailing stereotype of the Western Isles as being little more than sheep herders with no arts or culture (Mackenzie, 2006). Understanding it's beginning amidst this challenging time for the Gaelic arts demonstrates how impressive the achievement of the centre truly is when one considers how long it has been established and the impact it has had on neighbouring islands. Following on the success of An Lanntair came Taigh Chearsabhagh in North Uist established in 1993 with the same aims of heritage preservation and a focus on promoting visual arts (*Taigh Chearsabhagh Museum & Arts Centre*, 2025). With the inception of these centres being prior to the 2005 Gaelic Language Act, there was a political undercurrent of resistance to them as they focussed on promoting the unfavourable language and associated culture (Mackenzie, 2006). An Lanntair was seen to be a radical and controversial hub at its opening due to the belittling the islands faced by mainlanders, and with the normalisation of Gaelic at the time still being a controversial topic (Laing, 2025). However controversial they might have been in the beginning, the real lasting effect of these cultural centres is evident in the impact they have had on the communities in which they are situated. A resident and artist of Loch nam Madaidh where Taigh Chearsabhagh is situated said of the centre that it had 'instilled a sense of pride and activity [and] drawn people together and created a more connected community.... [It] is viewed with great pride throughout North Uist' (Pearson, 2002, as quoted by Mackenzie, 2006). Similarly, An Lanntair's impact extends beyond the reach of its local community and is seen as an inspiration in the Outer Hebrides for arts and culture. This is thanks to its 40-year legacy of promotion for arts and culture not just for the rest of the world to come and witness the work of the Hebridean artists, but for the islanders themselves to have access to world-renown performances and exhibitions imported to the centre (Laing, 2025).

The Inchree Barn Project

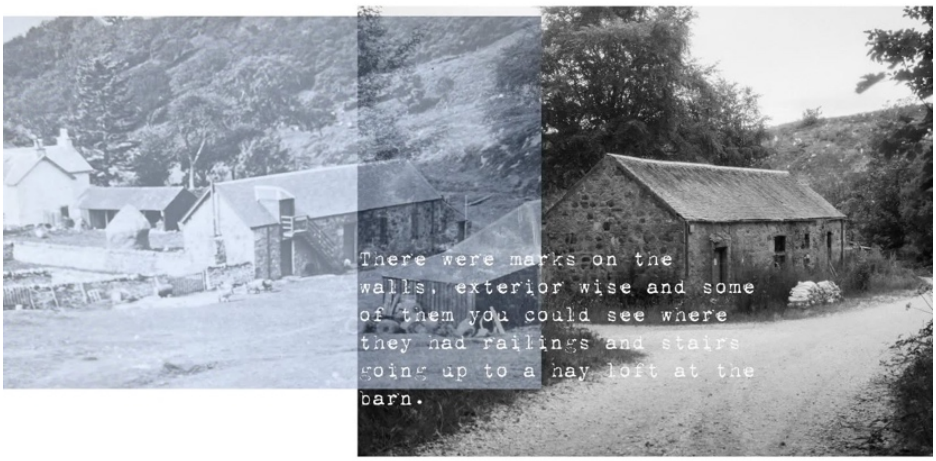


Figure 1: Inchree Barn Project 'Living Archive' (2025) Digital Collage (Berardelli, Barendrecht and Inchree Barn Project, 2025)

After the successes of centres such as An Lanntair and Taigh Chearsabhagh, places elsewhere have sought to set up their own community arts centre to promote their community's heritage and arts. Research undertaken by the ICH Scotland after a year of work in safeguarding cultural heritage found that one key factor in the loss of cultural connection and community was the lack of spaces for people to get together (Hewitt, 2025). In the Nether Lochaber area, Inchree Barn Project Officer Lucy Cooke (2025) community currently lacks a community-owned place where the people can gather to learn about their area and engage with it and each other. David Lees (2025) explained that to get people to form a community and engage in what is now deemed 'living heritage,' people care most about having somewhere to eat, drink, and rest. Creating community spaces are essential ways of getting people to come together to share stories, knowledge and creativity, as well as being places where artists can have space to work to share this information in an evocative way.

Problems arise, however, in the early days of establishing such centres, particularly in areas where there has hitherto never been such a site. Cooke (2025) discussed the problems associated with starting up new community hubs. It is common for highlanders to have to work multiple jobs to make ends meet. When projects such as the Inchree Barn project are in their early stages, they rely almost solely on volunteers to aid in all aspects of the start-up (Cooke, 2025). Cooke (2025) described the issues which occur from volunteer fatigue and the lack of

time and energy which often arises from working multiple jobs. Much of the road infrastructure of the Highland region is made up from single-track roads and a distinct lack of dual carriageway which makes commutes long and often delayed by slow-moving farm traffic and tourists. This coupled with work commutes means that many people are unable to commit much of their time to the projects, slowing progress and creating extra barriers (Cooke, 2025). It was discussed at the 2025 ICH Scotland Conference that many projects struggle to get recognition, funding, or event clearance from councils and governing bodies, due to the barriers of 21-stage funding applications, and the issue of not being taken seriously by said governing bodies (Hewitt, 2025). These authorities have come to be known as gatekeepers, and it is they who must be persuaded to begin the laboursome application processes for funding, as well as to invest and promote Gaelic artists in events (Blanche, 2025). These barriers are known as red-tape (Hewitt, 2025) and are a key reason for many heritage or cultural enterprises not receiving the amount of public knowledge, recognition, or government backing that they are entitled to, given the important work for Scottish cultural protection which they deserve (Blanche, 2025)

The Inchree Barn Project released an open call for an artist in residence during the spring of 2025. The brief for this call was titled *Brìgh: Stories in Stone, Explore – Gather – Celebrate* (NLCA and Cooke, 2025). They asked that the artist help to discover the history of the barn itself as well as a focus on the Gaelic Roots of the area, the agricultural past and exploration of the landscape (NLCA and Cooke, 2025). Nether Lochaber has all but lost Gaelic in the past two centuries (Cooke, 2025), which has brought with it not only a loss in the local dialect[iii] but also in deeper understanding of the way previous communities would have lived. The artist's role in uncovering the area's past will make the Barn a place of learning and reconnection with the language, and perhaps the dialectal roots of the area (NLCA and Cooke, 2025. They also hope to understand the way the previous generations lived in the area alongside the land, uncovering forgotten histories of a region which went largely undocumented through most of history (Cooke, 2025). The artist who has taken on the role is Ali Berardelli, an artist based in Lochaber who is bringing to the project a great deal of local knowledge and experience in community-arts (Berardelli, 2025a). Berardelli has been developing a 'living archive' project during her residency of archival images and interviews (figure 1). Much of her work includes engaging with local school groups and families to connect with the landscape of the region (Inchree Barn Project, 2025). The folklore of the region from historic artifacts has also been a point of interest for her work, such as the Ballachulish Goddess (figure 2), a five-foot-high

Figure 2: Ballachulish Goddess (2025); Cyanotype Print with botanicals (Berardelli, 2025b)

figure carved from alder wood, which was discovered in 1880 in the Ballachulish Moss bog, nearby Nether Lochaber (Inchree Barn Project, 2025). In producing her own work, Berardelli then can involve the local resident families, often out in the woodlands and beaches, to garner excitement and interest in the history and folk beliefs of the region, creating new perspectives through which to view the landscape, and a new sense of respect for it (Inchree Barn Project, 2025).

Dùthchas

Much of Gaelic refers to the land as a living, breathing thing. For example, when reminiscing on her time at the shieling as a child, textile artist Alice Starmore (2021) described how the last woman to leave it to head home lamented that the land would feel lonesome without the rest of the families. Similarly, there is the way in which ownership is described in Gaelic. Generally, Gaelic possessive nouns translate as being 'at us' or 'on us,' for example, *tha tuathanas agam* translates more literally to 'a farm is at me.' This is quite different to the phrasing in English where it would be said that 'I own a farm' which insinuates domination. Whilst it is a possessive expression, the literal meaning is of the farm being with you, not dominion over the farm as is generally expressed in the English language (Hutchinson, 2025). Acknowledging this gives us an insight into perceived ownership in Gaelic, suggesting that communal ownership rather than independent was of greater value in Gaelic culture (Brannigan, 2019).

There is a word in Gaelic which perfectly summarises the depth of the connection between the Gaelic people and the land and provides an insight into their ideology of the world around them (Dziadowic, 2022). That word is *dùthchas*. *Dùthchas* was described by Alice Starmore (2021) as

> "You belong to the land, and the land belongs to you. There is no distinction… Everything you know, that's around you… is all interlinked and interdependent. It's all about ancestry as well and knowing where you've come from and that you are a continuation of all that."

Words like Dùthchas have been reclaimed in recent years by those seeking to reestablish highland communities and work with restoring the land. Community Land Scotland adopted the concept of *dùthchas* to encourage people to "rewild and repeople" in an article in 2024 (Raeburn and Cumming, 2024). They describe the issues of land ownership and Scotland's environmental degradation as being intertwined, and that by understanding the way in which the ancestral people lived with and viewed the land, it can aid in addressing both critical issues. The article states that a meagre 3% of rural land is community owned (Raeburn and Cumming, 2024) a figure backed up by the organisation Who Owns Scotland which has discovered through its research into land ownership in Scotland that 50% of rural land is privately owned by individuals or organisations in Scotland (Wightman, 2025). In an article for the Guardian, Wightman demonstrated that across Europe, Scotland has the most unequal distribution of land ownership (Wightman, 2024). Dissecting the figures of who owns and controls the land in

Scotland is crucial in making plans for its future and discussing ways in which its environment can be protected.

A Fragile Correspondence

Figure 3: A Fragile Correspondence; Loch Ness Abriachan Forest Section Installation in Docks Canteiri Cucchini, Venice (Sambo and Scotland + Venice, 2023) Architecture Fringe, -ism magazine, and /other (2023)

For the 2023 International Architecture Exhibition for the Venice Biennale, *A Fragile Correspondence* was exhibited, highlighting the close connection between language and culture and the landscapes of Scotland. Following the Biennale, the exhibition went on to open at the V&A, Dundee where it ran throughout the winter months of 2024 to the spring of 2025. The exhibition sought to explore the question of how re-establishing dialogue with the land through understanding native languages such as Scots and Gaelic could give answers to address the challenges of the climate crisis (*A Fragile Correspondence - About*, 2023). The Exhibition looked at three key areas in Scotland, The Abriachan Community Forest in the Highlands, Ravenscraig Steelworks in the Lowlands, and the Island of Orkney. This analysis will focus on

the Abriachan Forest section of the exhibition, as this was the Gaelic language portion, as shown in figure 3.

Figure 4: A Fragile Correspondence; Loch Ness Abriachan Forest Section 'Extract' and 'Cothromachadh' Word Labels (2023) in Dundee V&A; (Architecture Fringe, -ism magazine, and /other, 2025)

In the short film which served as trailer for the exhibition there are various interviews of those who participated in the works on display. One of which is with a Gaelic speaker who describes that we can understand the knowledge of a native people about their land simply through the language of the place itself (Venice, 2023). Further, they explain that this can demonstrate how they perceived their environment and the knowledge for how to live with it which is something we need today (Venice, 2023). Through exploring the insights native languages give us of the landscape, the project suggests that we are at a tipping point in history. We have a duty to understand what has been lost, and how we regenerate for the future by looking to the past to adopt better stewardship practices for the future. Gaelic placenames and words for the environment connect us with the people who came before us and allow us to discover the ways that they related to the landscape, and how they thought of it. It gives us a chance of an alternative perspective of the world and our place in it (Brannigan, 2019). There is the danger that, as the numbers of native Gaelic speakers dwindle, the depth of understanding of these

connections will vanish with them, therefore making it of vital importance that there is a push to learn the language now, whilst we still have access to these native speakers (MacRitchie, 2019)

The Abriachan Forest was the first buy-out by a community of a forest of its kind in Scotland, taking place in 1998 (MacFadyen, 2023). The exhibition included sound works of the natural sounds of the forest coupled with interviews of members of the community from young children to adults, talking about their connection to the place and what having the forest be for the community has given them (Scotland + Venice, Architecture Fringe and ism, 2023). The exhibition largely was a celebration of the languages which showcase the historic connection and deep understanding of the land and environment of Scotland by its people. It sought to pick out specific words and their meanings to showcase this, with an interactive screen at the end of the exhibition in a learning space where viewers could sit and learn about these meanings (Scotland + Venice, Architecture Fringe and ism, 2023). Whilst the celebration of culture and language is indisputably important, especially with Gaelic facing extinction, care must be taken with handling this knowledge and understanding the historical reasons these words are, to use the titles suggestion, fragile. Knowledge and language must be understood within their historical context or else there lies a risk of extraction and commodification of culture, which does little to address the problems of destructive capitalism this exhibition seeks to examine (MacFadyen, 2023).

***Dùthchas (Home)* 2022**

In 2022, the film *Dùthchas (Home)* by Andy MacKinnon and Kirsty MacDonald was premiered at the Berneray Community Hall prior to screenings in a tour around the country (Macnab,2022). The film features 8mm footage shot by Cheshire couple, Ann and Bill Scott, who would visit the island every summer in the 1960s and 1970s, interspersed with interviews from Berneray natives discussing their stories of life on the island and their Gaelic roots (*Dùthchas (Home)* 2022). The Scott's footage proved a remarkable documentation of the people of the island and the way they lived, with distinct faces captured on film, in some clips, waving at the Scott's as they departed the island at the end of their stay, fading off into the distance (*Dùthchas (Home)*, 2022). Filmmakers MacKinnon and MacDonald were struck by how important the footage was and recognised that it could be made into a feature length film which would be a valuable insight into the story of Hebridean Island life and were supported by BBC Alba and Screen Scotland alongside Hopscotch Films to bring this film to life (Macnab, 2022).

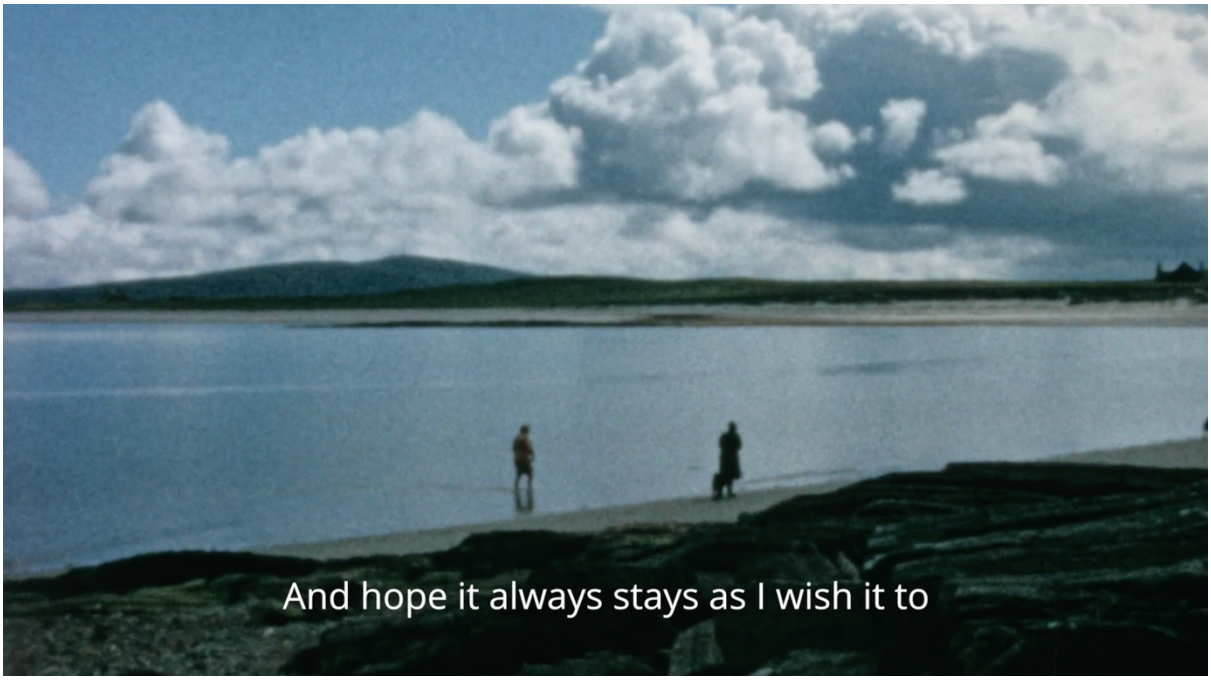


Figure 5: Film Still; Berneray Song Lyrics (Dùthchas (Home), 00:01:55)

Figure 6: Film Still; Berneray Song Lyrics (Dùthchas (Home), 00:03:32)

The film is tinged with nostalgia thanks to the coupling of the old footage, including poignant scenes of the islander's waving goodbye to the Scott's as they sailed away, with Gaelic song of longing for home and the hopes that home will always stay the same (Macnab, 2022). Despite that, the film is a commentary on the real lives of the Hebridean people and how their culture has been impacted over the years by the changes in society and the decline of Gaelic. The Hebrides are often seen as a tranquil escape for holiday makers of sparsely populated islands and white sand beaches (Silver, 2022). This film is a reminder of the communities and generations of people who lived and struggled on these islands, forced to move for work to sustain themselves and the disconnect that brought. The filmmakers reflected on the nostalgic feel of the film and disagree that it could be seen as romanticising the lives of the islanders (Macnab, 2022). They stated that, "there is still a sense of regret and grieving for the culture and the language that has been lost to such a large extent" yet despite this, they and those interviewed recognise the inevitability of change (Mackinnon and MacDonald as quoted in Macnab, 2022).

Discussion about Gaelic is a large focal point of the film, with interviewees young and old, with and without Gaelic, reflecting on the disintegration of the richness of native Gaelic, and the desire to save it. The policy of Gaelic-first in Hebridean schools is discussed, and whilst it

is viewed largely as a good thing (as some of the older interviewees reflect on a time when the children had no Gaelic at all) there is a thread of concern amongst them that school education is not enough to save the language. Catriona NicAonghais questioned the effectiveness of this policy,

> "it's not without problem and it's not without huge challenge because it's too thin. If we only have Gaelic in school, does it then give us enough to feel that we are Gaels? For our children to feel that they are Gaels? Or is it just a language that they learned in the classroom?" (*Dùthchas (Home)*, 2022).

Further to this, Dòmhnall MacGilleEathain described that "kids learn Gaelic in school, and they have Gaelic. They read and write it very well, better than me, but they will never be as fluent in speaking as us. We had nothing else. And that is a loss." (*Dùthchas (Home)*, 2022). These insights are invaluable in the question around Gaelic language revitalisation in Scotland. Whilst Gaelic education in schools is essential, to keep the associated culture and connection of a land alive there is more work that must be done. Films such as *Dùthchas (Home)* are part of this network of ways to preserve the language providing not only a window to the past with archival footage, but also this discussion from older generations and new about what it means to have Gaelic and truly feeling connected to language and place. Younger native speaker, Linda Nicleòid summarised this well saying,

> "Although I had Gaelic as a mother tongue, I'm still learning every day. My parents are still learning, we'll all be learning forever. We won't have the same Gaelic our forebears had, but we must try to remember these words and placenames, or they will be forgotten, sadly." (*Dùthchas (Home)*, 2022).

The emotional pain associated with the loss of this language is made plain through the voices of those interviewed for the film, with the interviewees not only speaking from second-hand experience of their parents losing the language, but of themselves and discussion as to why this occurred. The society was still deeply patriarchal in the time of the footage, which afforded island women very little opportunities outside of marrying a crofter or fisherman (Macnab, 2022). It is discussed that women had little to no choice in leaving the island, despite many not wishing to (*Dùthchas (Home)*, 2022). These departures often lead to natives never returning to the island, leaving fewer people with that ancestral connection to the place, and fewer Gaelic

Figure 7: Film Still (Dùthchas (Home), 00:47:27)

tongues on the island (*Dùthchas (Home)*, 2022). This loss is part of the story of the loss of the language more broadly. Those who were left saw a time of great and rapid change as technology advanced on the islands, doing away with the old ceilidh traditions of coming together as a community to talk, sing and share, creating isolation in front of television screens behind closed doors (*Dùthchas (Home)*, 2022).

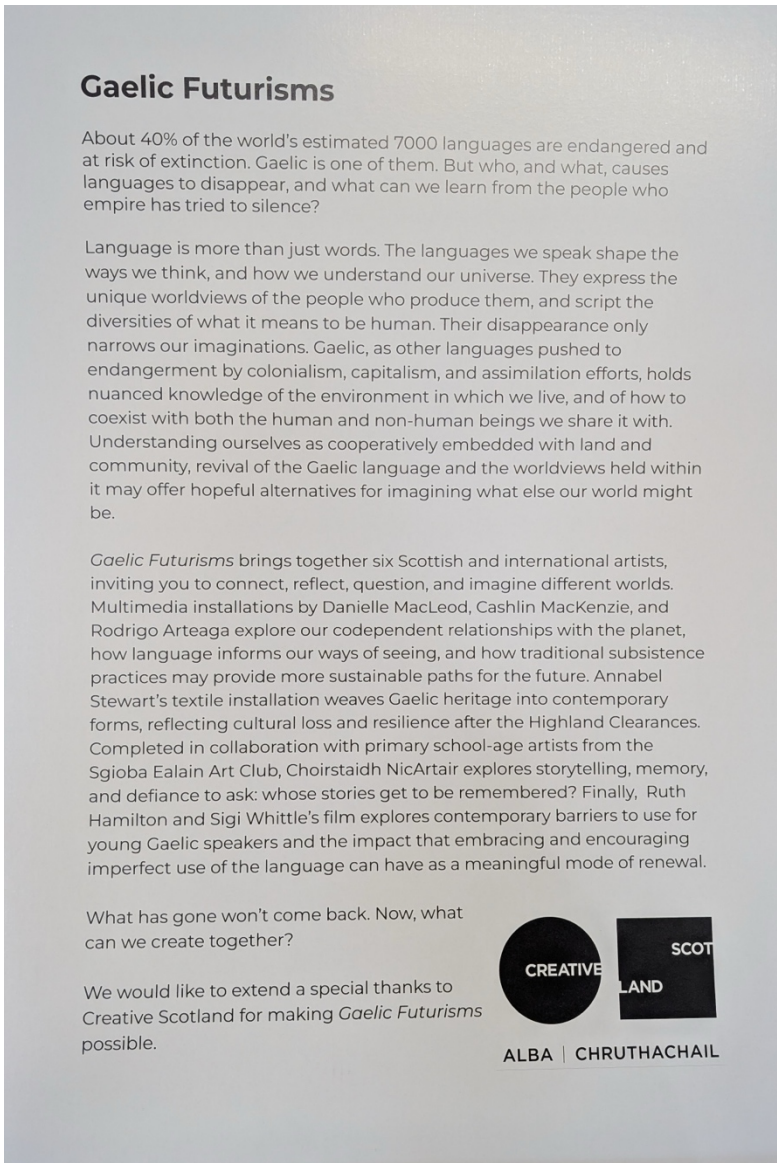
Despite the prevailing sense of loss within the film, and a desire to see ways of life return to that sweeter, simpler time of community, there is a feeling of pride and positivity about those interviewed. The film is a celebration of the way the island has coped with change, and of optimism for the future of Gaelic. Despite the described fears of the loss of the richness of the language, there is joy to be found that it is spoken and encouraged at all. As summarised by Coinneach MacGilleEathain,

> "It's very good to hear people who never had Gaelic speaking Gaelic but sometimes it's a bit hard to listen to it. The Gaelic is there right enough, but there is no richness. Now, which would I prefer – Gaelic without the richness or no Gaelic? Well, I'd prefer Gaelic." (*Dùthchas (Home)*, 2022).

There is a lot of work still to be done on revitalising the Gaelic language, but it seems that in small ways Scotland is on the right track, and films such as Dùthchas (Home) give us insights

into the conversation around its protection, and how best we can keep moving forward. Dùthchas (Home) was latterly broadcasted by BBC Alba and is periodically available on BBC iPlayer. This support by such a large broadcasting company brings this film to the small home screens, which increased the chance of reach to more people, especially those who may not have the same access to art centres or feel they have a place in the art gallery, to watch, learn, and reflect on the story and themes of the film.

Gaelic Futurisms



Gaelic Futurisms

About 40% of the world's estimated 7000 languages are endangered and at risk of extinction. Gaelic is one of them. But who, and what, causes languages to disappear, and what can we learn from the people who empire has tried to silence?

Language is more than just words. The languages we speak shape the ways we think, and how we understand our universe. They express the unique worldviews of the people who produce them, and script the diversities of what it means to be human. Their disappearance only narrows our imaginations. Gaelic, as other languages pushed to endangerment by colonialism, capitalism, and assimilation efforts, holds nuanced knowledge of the environment in which we live, and of how to coexist with both the human and non-human beings we share it with. Understanding ourselves as cooperatively embedded with land and community, revival of the Gaelic language and the worldviews held within it may offer hopeful alternatives for imagining what else our world might be.

Gaelic Futurisms brings together six Scottish and international artists, inviting you to connect, reflect, question, and imagine different worlds. Multimedia installations by Danielle MacLeod, Cashlin MacKenzie, and Rodrigo Arteaga explore our codependent relationships with the planet, how language informs our ways of seeing, and how traditional subsistence practices may provide more sustainable paths for the future. Annabel Stewart's textile installation weaves Gaelic heritage into contemporary forms, reflecting cultural loss and resilience after the Highland Clearances. Completed in collaboration with primary school-age artists from the Sgioba Ealain Art Club, Choirstaidh NicArtair explores storytelling, memory, and defiance to ask: whose stories get to be remembered? Finally, Ruth Hamilton and Sigi Whittle's film explores contemporary barriers to use for young Gaelic speakers and the impact that embracing and encouraging imperfect use of the language can have as a meaningful mode of renewal.

What has gone won't come back. Now, what can we create together?

We would like to extend a special thanks to Creative Scotland for making *Gaelic Futurisms* possible.

CREATIVE SCOTLAND

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Figure 8: Gaelic Futurisms (2025) Exhibition Label (Strange Field, 2025)

The tagline for the 2025 *Gaelic Futurisms* exhibition was this "What has gone won't come back. Now, what can we create together?" (Strange Field, 2025). The exhibition was a multi-disciplinary event showcasing the work of six artists responding to the endangerment of Gaelic and the consequent loss of knowledge and cultural heritage. The exhibition invited the viewer to reflect on what we have lost and question what we can change for the future and where Gaelic's place is in that (Stewart *et al.*, 2025). The question alone asking what we can create together shows that there is a need for creatives in the space of Gaelic revitalisation. Further to

this, the exhibition provided context for the ways in which art can be a tool for creatives and artists to deepen their connection with the language, and vice versa, where the language gave them a richer vocabulary with which to explore their connection to the natural world through their art practice.

An example of one of the artists who explored this personal connection between art and language was Danielle Macleod. In their artist statements, the artists wrote of their own connection to Gaelic, ranging from avid learners to native speakers. Danielle MacLeod wrote in her statement of *Sealladh nan gaidheal* (2025) "[my] relationship with Gaelic is deepened through working with the landscape, reaching beneath linguistics to the interconnected systems that make up the *gaidhealtach*d" (MacLeod, 2025). MacLeod creates wearable sculptures from plants and natural materials, often to represent figures of Highland and Hebridean folklore, but also to represent the inseparable connection of the people with the land in Scotland, which she then photographs.

Another of the artists, Choirstaidh NicArtair collaborated with the Sgioba Ealain Art Club to create various screen print works and one large multimedia print on cotton titled *Fhàs Ùr* (2025) (Figure 9) which invited the viewer to participate by adding cards tied with screen to the print to share their personal history and connection to Gaelic (Sgioba Ealain Art Club and Choirstaidh NicArtair, 2004). Sgioba Ealain is a space run by NicArtair for children with Gaelic to learn about art through the lens of Gaelic in Glasgow (NicArtair, 2025). The club is entirely run in Gaelic to fully create a full language immersion whilst art sessions are on, encouraging language use and fluency amongst the children while they create (NicArtair, 2025). The inclusion of the collaborative works of the children of Sgioba Ealain in this exhibition allowed the voices of Gaelic's future to speak about their stories, connection to Gaelic and creates a conversation around the stories we are entrusted with to write and protect of those who came before us. It was a showcase of the hope for Gaelic as discussed earlier in this dissertation – that the future of Gaelic is in young people's hands and they are more than willing to commit to that effort.

Figure 9 (Above): Installation of Fhàs Ùr; Digital print on velvet, organza, crocheted yarn and wool, embroidery thread, and screen printing on cotton (2025) in Strange Field (NicArtair, 2025)

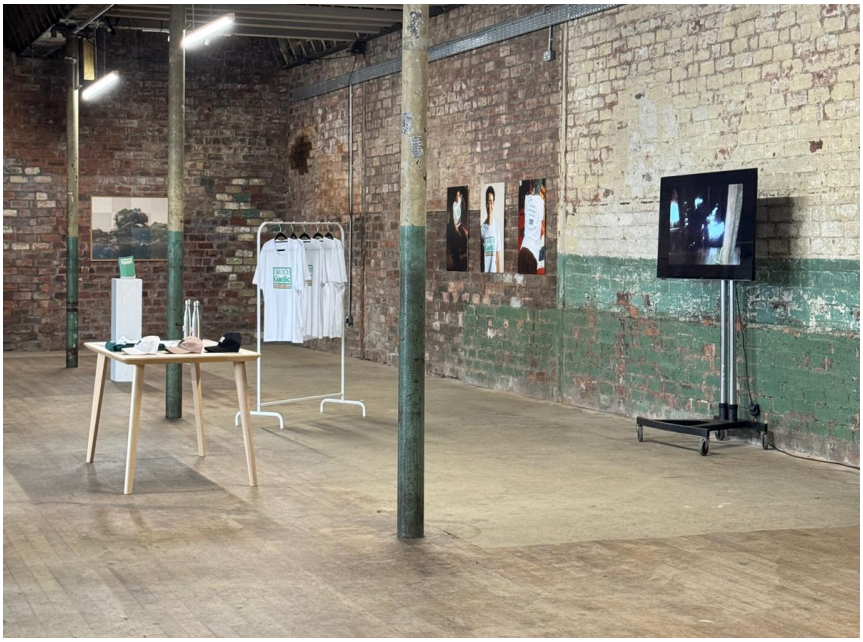

Figure 10: Installation of Droch Ghàidhlig (2025) in Strange Field (Hamilton and Whittle, 2025)

One of the artworks *Droch Ghàidhlig* (Hamilton and Whittle, 2025) addresses a similar question of the richness of Gaelic which was discussed by the native speakers from Dùthchas (Home) (*Dùthchas (Home)*,2022). The title of the work translates to 'bad Gaelic' which arose from the conversations from artists Ruth Hamilton and Sigi Whittle's feelings of shame for not being good enough at Gaelic (Hamilton and Whittle, 2025). The work included printed textiles which accompanied a film, with conversations in Gaelic around learning the language and encouraging inclusivity even when the spoken language is flawed. In the description of the work, it is written that they want the work to be an invitation to engage with the language no matter the level of fluency though it must be noted that the film included no subtitles or translations. Whether this was a choice to focus solely on the language, it must be argued that this perpetuates the very lack of inclusivity the artists are supposedly trying to fight against. Glasgow's population of Gaelic speakers is still remarkably small, despite the increase in Gaelic education in the city it would therefore be reasonable to assume that most of the visitors to this exhibition would have little to no Gaelic – something which was evident from the feedback books where the audience were asked to make a note of their relationship to Gaelic and much of the feedback was that they had little.

The exhibition served to create a discussion around the future of Gaelic and the responsibility we have now to protect and revitalise it. The demonstration of the Glaswegian young people working to learn the language, coupled with the evidence that art is an essential tool in deepening the connection the individual has with the language is proof of the importance of the artist in Gaelic revitalisation and bridging the gap to better understanding our land and culture.

Conclusion

This dissertation has explored the role of the artist in the revitalisation of Scottish Gaelic. Further, it has sought to understand why this revitalisation is important with regards to land stewardship, cultural heritage, and our duty towards a better-connected future.

Community arts centres create a third space for communities to connect with each other and share stories and think creatively to engage with their local area and language. Artists in-residence work to engage directly with the community to educate and inspire connection with local areas, whilst furthering essential local research on language and land use. This need for artists and creative community is also seen in two contemporary art exhibitions, *A Fragile Correspondence* (2023) and *Gaelic Futurisms* (2025). These exhibitions question what we can learn from Gaelic and the story of deep connection with land and ways of living, examining how these stories can aid us in protecting our environment in the face of climate emergency. *Dùthchas (home)* (2022) looks at the loss Gaelic from the living generations and asks should be protected. It's showings across the country through local cinema, community spaces and into the home by BBC Alba, giving a greater reach to those far removed from the art gallery. All work examined in this research serve to give proof of the importance of artists in the Scottish Gaelic revitalisation efforts. Drawing from history, art is a tool which can be used to connect people, both to the lessons history and language can teach us, but also to each other and the sense of self cultural connection can bring. Artists must strive to be inclusive and bridge the gap with translations and an openness to the levels of learning for all as even the most basic of Gaelic knowledge deserves to be nurtured and celebrated in the journey to language regeneration.

This research offers some original contributions to this area of study, nevertheless there is more which should be considered when discussing the role of the artist in connecting land and language in Scotland. Notably, the works of *An Leabhar Mòr* (Maclean and Dorgan, 2002) and *A Window to the West* (Macdonald *et al.*, 1974) are missing from this discussion, two undisputably crucial works which brought together many artists and writers to celebrate Gaelic land-language culture in contemporary Scotland. The extensiveness of these two works would demand more space than is available here to give due justice.

It is of crucial importance to learn the language to fully appreciate the depth of the meanings behind the names, and thus gain the insight into the past and future potential of our environment, as Ruairidh Macilleathain (2007, p. 4) states, "it is important that this generation

of Scots takes seriously its responsibility for the care and conservation of Gaelic, just as it takes seriously its responsibility for the conservation of its land and waters." Art and artists reach beyond the facts and figures and the dry linguistic learning to touch the emotional hearts of people, reminding them of why Gaelic is important and what it means to feel connected to one's homeland and one's culture.

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Appendices

[i] It must be noted that as of the 30th of November 2025, the Scottish Languages Act of 2025 has modified The Gaelic Language Act to give Gaelic "official status within Scotland" alongside the Scots language (Scottish Parliament, 2025). This official status and protection of the language by the Scottish Parliament gives power to the people to demand Gaelic Schools be established in their area throughout Scotland and includes aims to increase the availability of qualifications which can be learned in Gaelic (BBC News, 2025).

[ii] Through my own experience of learning the language, I was able to discern the true meaning behind the once incomprehensible Gaelic names. Examples of these being, *Beinn Ìme* 'Butter Mountain,' *Coire a' Mhadaidh* 'Corrie of the Wolf,' and *Allt a' Chait* 'Burn of the Cat'.

[iii] Interestingly, this accent has been seen still in use within the Gaelic-speaking region of Mabou, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia (Dunbar, 2024).