

Millions of years ago in the “deep heart’s core” of the earth these rocks were forming. Volcanoes erupted high into the atmosphere and intruded underground becoming rivers of magma: as they cooled they solidified into a root like intrusion of basaltic sills and dykes. Dolerite columns similar to those of the Giants Causeway and Staffa, rise sheer out of the sea to a height of over four hundred feet. Although the word Shiant derives from a Gaelic word meaning ‘enchanted’ these can be inhospitable islands even on the calmest of summer days.

Jill Mc Manners began working on this series of paintings in 2006/7 after first visiting the islands some years earlier, having been inspired to do so by Adam Nicolson’s book “Sea Room: An island Life”. She and her family have a home on a small island in the Sound of Harris, an island of sandy beaches, machair, low rocky outcrops and shallow but racing tides and currents. By contrast, the majestic scale, imposing physical presence and terrifying impact of the Shiant Isles has never diminished even after many visits. As the artist says ‘I don’t love the Shiant; I didn’t then and I don’t now. They are frightening like the sea, very wild’: Richard Cork refers to them in his introductory essay for the catalogue as ‘this alarming yet irresistible location’

In a previous chapter of her life McManners had spent ten years in a fine art bronze foundry working with many prominent sculptors. The volcanic atmosphere of the furnaces and pouring metal were always exciting days in the foundry, something which she could recall in the atmosphere of the rock and the cliffs, the crusty layers of lichen, moss, coralline dulse, barnacles, weed and slime.

The titles of the paintings are architectural, are quotes from books and poems, or are lines from rock songs. The islands are on the edge of the British Isles, they are defined by the life that exists on these edges, the weather and the sea that erodes them, the taught skyline viewed from below and the edges of your emotions that are assaulted by being there.

She likes to paint from the view point of being on a boat to get the atmosphere of the cliffs, the sea and the tide: to get as close to the cliffs as possible, to smell the blood iron of the rocks and feel the overpowering scale and sense of confrontation.

The paintings take a few months to do. There is nothing sketch like or immediate about them as you might associate with a watercolour. They are constructed by first making a drawing, tracings and templates. The colour is laid down in a series of washes, some opaque, and some transparent, granulating or staining giving living layers of life to the rock. The flickering qualities of the watercolour help to bring the rock to life and enforce its relative instability. The daunting presence of the cliff face is never far away- one shares the artist’s trepidation when visiting and photographing the islands in a small boat. The results are spectacular, large scale watercolours on heavy Italian handmade paper: as Richard Cork writes ‘her handling of watercolour, both meticulous and free, gives the sombre cliffs an equally remarkable vivacity’.

The Flowers of Basalt are Giclee prints made on 100% cotton Somerset Enhanced Velvet paper. Using her extensive record of trips to the islands she has digitally created these images. They are named after ‘flowers of sulphur’ a condensation of the sulphurous vapours deposited at the edges of volcanoes. McManners is a keen gardener and has an extensive knowledge of flowers, their colours and shapes which she has drawn on to create this series of prints.