

Catalogue essay to accompany the exhibition by **Sigune Hamann** for the return of the Lindisfarne Gospels to Durham. Exhibition at the **Durham DLI**, June 2013. Gill Hedley is an independent curator, writer and consultant on contemporary visual arts.



inside the long gallery at the DLI

For seven years and over 1000 miles in the 9th century, the monks of Lindisfarne carried the body of Cuthbert and the Gospels from their holy island to a site above the Wear. The journey had been a flight from Viking raiders towards safety and Durham Cathedral was built on the site of the first sanctuary constructed to protect the saint's body and the precious books.

Durham Cathedral became an important centre for pilgrimage. Once, the word pilgrimage had a simpler meaning than today's definition of a journey to a religious place, first referring to those who wander over fields and then to those who come from far afield: foreigners. The word journey simply meant the distance travelled in one day.

In Sigune Hamann's work there are references throughout to journeys of all kinds: to those who come together because of shared ideals; to tourism and how we look at sights when we travel; to the need for movement, alone or together, which is a human instinct; to the shared gestures we make as we arrive and depart.

On a technical level, she has also looked at the way in which the scribe may have made the illuminated decorations to the Lindisfarne Gospels. It is possible that a candle light was held behind the translucent vellum (animal skin). The links between illuminated manuscripts and contemporary photography – light boxes which frame and hold transparencies or the way in which films are seen on hand held digital viewers – became a source of interest.

In Hamann's film-strips she uses a photographic camera like a movie camera, exposing a whole roll of 35mm film in a continuous rewinding movement while moving (walking or turning) herself.

Although the images are static, they contain traces of movement – of the film, of the camera, the person holding it and everything moving within the optical field. The visitor, too, walks past, stops, speeds up and activates the image. There is a high level of abstraction but the images remind us of all the visual elements of a busy street scene that we absorb daily without seeing in detail.

*Whitehall, London, 2010*, is a 56 metre long film strip taken during a political demonstration and in its elongated capture of time recalls Oriental scrolls where the viewer becomes a traveller, moving past in space and time.

*Assmanshausen*, 2007, shows us groups of tourists on a cruise down the Rhine as they record the scene on their cameras, possibly to watch and relive later with others. But perhaps the act of recording the scene is enough and the immediate experience of looking is lost. In *Heimlich*, 2007, scenery is reflected in the river, blurred and transformed by the moving surface of the water. The images are then inverted and our interpretation of what we see is put into question. Both series were made when Hamann, German-born but who works and lives in London was on an artist's residency in Germany in her native land but now a tourist herself. Assmanshausen is a place on the Rhine; "heimlich" is a German word that contains the meaning of the safety of home but also means covert and secret. Coincidentally, the name Sigune comes from the legend of Parsifal who is met three times by his cousin Sigune at crucial stages in his quest to find the Holy Grail. To mark the return journey of the Lindisfarne Gospels to Durham in 2013, Hamann has made two new series of works. In her researches, Hamann became intrigued by the names of the men associated with making and preserving the gospels: Ethelwald, Eadfrith, Billfrith and others. She also came across a stone in the National Museum of Scotland which is inscribed using the same 'half-unicia' lettering, a combination of lower and upper case letters, as the Lindisfarne Gospels. It bears the words **I(N) NOMINE**, an abbreviation of the Latin phrase meaning *In The Name Of* and normally completed with the words God or the Father or The Lord. But the words have also been appropriated within the phrase Not in Our Name, a slogan now associated with the war against terrorism and other protests. Hamann has produced a series of stones each small enough to hold in the hand as a comfort, talisman or reminder.



The second new work is a series of portraits taken on streets in Japan and London to be displayed in public sites throughout Durham, marking the route between the Lindisfarne Gospels exhibition and *In The Name Of* at the DLI Durham. Faces glimpsed in a crowd far away become visitors in another city and are markers along the stages of a journey, to and from. The repeated phrase "In The Name Of" on each poster questions our motivation.

The first and last work that we see in the exhibition is a photograph from Hamann's large and continuing series *Wave*. A child rather shyly waves to us using the first gesture she was ever taught. A hand raised in stillness can be a blessing, a call to halt or a military salute but a waving hand usually means "hello, here I am, there you are, I can see you now, goodbye; I can see you still ..."

© Gill Hedley. Article June 2013.