

Mary Mary

Jeffrey, Moira; Scotland on Sunday, December 2011

THE artist Nick Evans greets me in his workplace at Glasgow Sculpture Studios in the city's west end. On the walls of his studio he has pinned some photocopies of Gauguin's ceramics from a textbook.

Next to them hangs an improvised ceramic face: a kind of cheerful modern version of a tribal mask. Opposite is what looks like a tangle of photocopied limbs.

I must pick my way round some wood-ply floor tiles, which Evans has screen-printed with "primitivist" figures and patterns symbolising creation and destruction, based not only on textbooks about Oceanic art, but work of the 20th-century Italian design group Memphis. And in the corners of the room are large plaster forms, reminiscent of body parts, which lean or teeter on rough-hewn wooden stools.

The 35-year-old is preparing for a significant new show. As a recipient of the inaugural Artist's Fellowship at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, he will have a room of his own in the gallery's forthcoming Sculpture Show, a major rehang of the entire gallery that opens on Saturday and will focus on sculpture both historic and contemporary.

The fellowship, a joint project between the gallery and Creative Scotland, offered Evans financial support and access to the national collections. "It was brilliant to have access to objects and expertise," he says. "Ordinarily you don't use the collections this way, the opportunity I had was to just go and find out."

Evans, who grew up on the borders of Somerset and Devon and studied at Glasgow School of Art, will be in eminent company in a show that ranges from the art of Degas and Picasso to contemporary figures like Simon Starling or Jim Lambie.

That sculpture has a reinvigorated importance for contemporary artists is not in question. Last week, of course, it was another Glasgow-based sculptor, Martin Boyce, who won the Turner Prize. His fellow Scottish nominee was the sculptor Karla Black. Both of these artists have work in the new exhibition.

"Since my early teens I wanted to be an artist," Evans explains. "I made all these abstract expressionist paintings using bed sheets, stretching them myself in my bedroom. I was making a ridiculous mess; my parents must have been very tolerant."

Mary Mary

But it was a particular childhood experience that may have drawn him to sculpture.

He was born in Zambia: "My parents were there just after independence. They went out on a British government scheme to manage the transition from colony to independence, and they were teaching teachers, but I have no memories of it."

The house he grew up in was full of artefacts. There was a Makishi costume, a full-sized raffia outfit, which has taught Evans a lifelong lesson about the power of objects.

Makishi is a masquerade which takes place as part of the initiation of boys into adulthood when they are about 14 years old. "When the boys come back to the village after initiation there is a huge masquerade with all these different kinds of characters," Evans explains. "There are terrifying anti-social characters, helpful ones and clowns.

"I was terrified of this figure, it sat in the stairwell and if I woke up in the night, and wanted to go down the stairs to see my parents, I was too frightened to go past it. I used to sit at the top of the stairs crying, but I was never able to articulate my fear. I could never say I was frightened of what we called Mr Makishi Man. I think I knew that it was complex, that it might be a bit offensive to my parents to criticise what was their thing."

These days Evans is interested in the scholarship and history of the encounter between cultures, what is often called exoticism, the way that artists like Gauguin came across Oceanic art or Picasso's encounter with African art.

These artists are often criticised for their simplistic attitude to other cultures, but for Evans that sense of experiencing extreme difference gets to the heart of colonialism and cultural diversity. And he believes that debates between artists on the subject, that go back to the 19th century, still have vital things to say on the subject.

At the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, he had expected to be interested in important holdings of Eduardo Paolozzi's art or its surrealist collections, but found that the question of diversity raised its head once more.

Mary Mary

"The things I thought I would be interested in were maybe too close to what I already do," he says. Instead he says he was captivated by the Scottish artist Will Maclean's important documentation of ring-net fishing in the west of Scotland in 1973.

"As art it's totally unlike what I do, but it's really interesting," says Evans. "It's about loss and the necessity of hanging on to cultural diversity. What Will Maclean was doing on a local scale was looking at the loss of the herring fishery, a kind of remnant of the hunter gatherer way of life in Europe."

Maclean's own family had been long associated with this now obsolete form of fishing. "You have to know how to find the fish," says Evans. "The fishermen didn't have fish finders and radar; it was to do with listening, smelling, visual information, the weather. It goes back to the dawn of human evolution but when Will was studying this it was at the very moment of its demise."

Dealing with the past is tricky. I ask Evans if there's a risk that his art is a kind of nostalgia, for a simpler age where we thought that objects or artists might have some kind of magical power.

"I don't think it's nostalgic, because I think it actually exists, it's there in the studio with me. It's a test when I'm making the work. I wouldn't maybe use the word power, but that feeling, that's whether I know it works or not. It's not nostalgic it's the bottom line. It's the fact of the matter." v

The Sculpture Show, 1900-2012 is at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh, from Saturday until 24 June, 2012