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exhibition

The new Lindisfarne Castle — it's a wrap

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Anya Gallaccio has arranged more than 50 coloured blankets around the rooms of Lindisfarne Castle, below

Anya Gallaccio, shod in luminous yellow sandals, is picking her way through the shadows, along a narrow, winding staircase. "The house is a bit batty," she shouts over her shoulder, "all medieval and Arts-and-Crafty."

The artist is leading me through Lindisfarne Castle on Holy Island, Northumberland. Built as a gun emplacement by Henry VIII to deter invaders from the north, it owes its grandeur to Sir Edwin Lutyens, who enlarged and converted it into a luxury holiday home from 1903.

Now, as a two-year, £3.3 million renovation project draws to an end, Gallaccio, 54, has been handed an extraordinary opportunity. With most of the furniture still in storage, she has been asked to develop an inspiring artwork that compels visitors to think again about the character of the castle.

Paisley-born, educated at Goldsmiths in London and resident in California, Gallaccio has won world renown over the past three decades for grandiose works based on natural materials. One of the earliest, a 32-tonne block of ice, was deployed in a London waterworks in 1995; more recently, she filled a room at Jupiter Artland near Edinburgh with 10,000 red roses and let them rot!

Her work reflects her demeanour — cheerful, funny, optimistic — although she concedes that this project has proved "very challenging".

She has, she says, been conscious of the building all her life. Aged five, she moved with her parents to London and often travelled north by train for holidays in Brechin, where her grandparents had an ice-cream parlour.

Lindisfarne Castle is one of the great landmarks on the journey and often caught her eye. The island is famous as one of Britain's earliest and most important Christian sites, a place of pilgrimage. Yet the castle tells a different story.

It saw some action during the 1715 Jacobite rebellion, but over the centuries it has been largely idle as a military base. The important structural work came at the turn of the 20th century, when Edward Hudson, the founder of *Country Life* magazine, bought it and employed the young Lutyens to create his faux castle, now a National Trust property.

Gallaccio's response is to arrange more than 50 coloured blankets around the castle, as if to protect the building. Using only vegetable dyes — blues, yellows, reds — her work is entitled *Dreamed about the flowers that hide from the light*. It draws inspiration from the castle's small walled garden, designed by the horticulturalist Gertrude Jekyll and finished at about the same time as the house.

"Jekyll, I think, came to gardening from a painting and colour point of view rather than as a plants person," Gallaccio says. "She uses colour for contrast. I thought about the relationship between the garden and the house and the idea of bringing the outside world inside."

Her first ideas — wrapping the exterior in blankets or spreading them over the floors to create a "colour field" — were stymied by scaffolding and trip hazards.

The idea coming to fruition for this weekend's opening involves combining all the blankets with ten three-sided oak frames, positioned in seven rooms and designed by Gallaccio to mimic the crenellations of a castle.

By now, we have reached a tiny bedroom, where one of these frames is positioned with blankets strewn over. Here, the Edwardian architectural details delight Gallaccio, particularly four small studs high on the wall marking the position of fake beams.

"Look at the way Lutyens has made a play on the idea of a beam," she enthuses. "Lots of things about the house are like a game. He plays with the scale, it goes big and little."

If the point is to emphasise these details, however, she acknowledges that the piece may require revision. The frame makes it a tight squeeze in the room; the light levels are low; the colours on the blankets are dull.

"My ideas are conceptually very strong," Gallaccio says. "It's whether they are visually making sense yet. I need to pull something together." She laughs uproariously. "I keep making traps for myself, don't I? I should keep my mouth shut."

In a downstairs kitchen, a few batches of tulips and ranunculus have been piled up, suggesting that colourful additions are imminent.

These flowers "will dry like paper", Gallaccio says; she might add some purple mascara, some branches of blossom and foxgloves.

She still hasn't decided. "What's the worst that can happen?" she says. "If they [the visitors] don't get it, they'll look at the castle!"

On the landing beyond, another frame has been installed and covered in yellow blankets, dyed with weld or dyers broom. Gallaccio scuttles behind the structure. Look, she says, it's like a four-poster bed, or the kind of castle a child might make, to play a game.

"I always thought it would be more fun to be a princess than a king, there's much less responsibility," Gallaccio says. "And who didn't want to play in a castle?"

Anya Gallaccio, *Dreamed about the flowers that hide from the light*, Lindisfarne Castle, from tomorrow



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