

Committee on the Jean F Watson Bequest

2pm, Friday, 29 April 2016

Purchase of a painting by Alison Watt

Item number	5.3
Report number	
Executive/routine	
Wards	All

Executive summary

Committee is asked to approve the purchase of the 2014 oil painting *Moon* by Alison Watt (born 1965).

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Purchase of a painting by Alison Watt

Recommendations

- 1.1 It is recommended that the Committee approves the purchase of the painting *Moon* by Alison Watt.

Background

- 2.1 The City Art Centre's fine art collection traces the development of Scottish art from the 17th century to the present day. Acquisitions of new work by contemporary artists are an important part of ensuring that the collection continues to provide a comprehensive overview of Scottish art for future generations.

Main report

- 3.1 The following painting by Alison Watt is presented to the Committee for consideration:

Moon

Oil on canvas, 2014
122 x 122cm (unframed)
£38,000



- 3.2 Alison Watt was born in Greenock in 1965. She trained at Glasgow School of Art between 1983 and 1987, and subsequently remained there for a further year as a postgraduate student. It was at this early stage that she first came to public attention, when she won the National Portrait Gallery's prestigious annual Portrait Award in 1987.
- 3.3 In the early years of her career Watt focused on the human form, painting both portraits and female nudes. However, her artistic practice reached a significant turning point in 1997, when she staged the exhibition *Fold* at the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh. Here depictions of fabric and drapery began to take a more prominent role in her figure compositions. These paintings suggested the influence of the 19th century French artist Ingres, while simultaneously experimenting with a more abstract style. In 2000 Watt exhibited a series of 12 large-scale works at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art which were based entirely on fabric forms. Since then her work has continued to develop in this direction, creating increasingly abstract compositions that suggest human presence in a subtle and intriguing way.
- 3.4 Between 2006 and 2008 Watt undertook a residency as Associate Artist at the National Gallery in London, a project which concluded in her 2008 solo exhibition *Phantom*. She was awarded an OBE in the same year. In 2014 a major retrospective display of her work was held at Perth Museum and Art Gallery as part of the nationwide programme *GENERATION: 25 Years of Contemporary Art in Scotland*.
- 3.5 Watt continues to exhibit her work widely. Her paintings are held in major public collections across the UK and internationally, including the National Galleries of Scotland, the National Portrait Gallery, the British Council Collection, Glasgow Museums, the Scottish Parliament Art Collection and the Uffizi Gallery. The artist has also recently collaborated with Dovecot Studios and Scottish Opera to produce a tapestry entitled *Butterfly*, which was installed in Glasgow's Theatre Royal in 2015.
- 3.6 *Moon* was painted in 2014. Like many of Watt's mature works, it presents a swathe of folded and twisted fabric, de-contextualised from the narrative of everyday usage. The presence of the human body is not explicitly stated, but is instead evoked through the contours of the material. This approach gives the painting a sense of movement and warmth, while still exploring the concept of absence. Although the painting is exquisitely detailed, the artist is less concerned with achieving a realistic representation of her subject than conveying emotions and thoughts.
- 3.7 In recent years poetry has become an increasingly important source of inspiration for Watt. The poet Don Paterson published a response to her series

Phantom in 2008, and in 2011 the pair collaborated to produce the exhibition *Hiding in Full View* at the Ingleby Gallery in Edinburgh. *Moon* is one of several new works partially inspired by the writings of the 20th century Scottish poet Norman MacCaig. As Watt commented in an interview with the *Herald* in June 2014: “There are shapes within the paintings I’m making now that I’m not exactly sure where they’re coming from, [...] Before, I was more directly referencing Old Master paintings but it could be that the poetry I’m reading is having an effect on the painting.” MacCaig’s focus on the small, often overlooked, details of nature and their relationship to our wider understanding of the world is of particular interest to the artist. *Moon* relates specifically to MacCaig’s 1974 poem *Praise of a Thorn Bush*, which describes a transformation by moonlight: “at night you trap stars, and the moon / fills you with distances”.

- 3.8 The City Art Centre has been awaiting an opportunity to acquire a painting by Watt for some years. Over the last decade the National Collecting Scheme for Scotland has enabled the acquisition of artworks by several leading contemporary Scottish artists, including Nathan Coley, Christine Borland and Toby Paterson. However, Watt is not yet represented in the collection. The current opportunity to purchase *Moon* is a rare chance to acquire an outstanding example of this acclaimed artist’s work.
- 3.9 *Moon* is being offered for sale to the City Art Centre by the Ingleby Gallery in Edinburgh, which represents Alison Watt. The artist has stated that she is keen for the painting to be acquired by a public collection. Accordingly, the Ingleby Gallery has reserved the painting for consideration by the Jean F Watson Committee.

Measures of success

- 4.1 Completed purchase of *Moon* by Alison Watt.

Financial impact

- 5.1 The total cost of the painting is £38,000. Funds for this purchase will come from the Jean F. Watson Bequest, and it is intended that applications for grant aid will be submitted to the Art Fund, the National Fund for Acquisitions, and the Friends of the City Art Centre and Museums.

Risk, policy, compliance and governance impact

- 6.1 Not applicable.

Equalities impact

7.1 Not applicable.

Sustainability impact

8.1 Not applicable.

Consultation and engagement

9.1 Not applicable.

Background reading/external references

Alison Watt, exhibition catalogue, Ingleby Gallery, 2004

Alison Watt: Phantom, exhibition catalogue, National Gallery, 2008

Hiding in Full View: Alison Watt & Don Paterson, exhibition catalogue, Ingleby Gallery, 2011

Didcock, Barry: [‘Back in the Fold’, *The Herald*, 1 June 2014](#)

Ingleby Gallery [website](#)

Paul Lawrence

Executive Director of Place

Contact: Helen Scott, Curator (Fine Art)

E-mail: helen.scott@edinburgh.gov.uk | Tel: 0131 529 3575

Links

Coalition pledges

P31 Maintain our City's reputation as the cultural capital of the world by continuing to support and invest in our cultural infrastructure

Council outcomes

CO20 Culture, sport and major events – Edinburgh continues to be a leading cultural city where culture and sport play a central part in the lives and futures of citizens

Single Outcome Agreement

Appendices