

# Committee on the Jean F Watson Bequest

10am, Friday 30 November 2018

## Purchase of three photographs by Flannery O’Kafka

Item number	5.4
Report number	
Executive/routine	
Wards	
Council Commitments	<a href="#">46</a>

### Executive Summary

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Committee is asked to approve the purchase of three photographs by Flannery O’Kafka (b.1976) – the photographic diptych *School Shooting, Valentine’s Day, Ash Wednesday* and the single photograph *Waiting for Ransom to Turn*.

## Purchase of three photographs by Flannery O’Kafka

### 1. Recommendations

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- 1.1 It is recommended that the Committee approves the purchase of three photographs by Flannery O’Kafka (b.1976) – the photographic diptych *School Shooting, Valentine’s Day, Ash Wednesday* and the single photograph *Waiting for Ransom to Turn*.

### 2. Background

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- 2.1 The City Art Centre’s fine art collection traces the development of Scottish art from the 17<sup>th</sup> century until present day. Acquisitions of new work by emerging contemporary artists are an important part of ensuring that the collection continues to provide a comprehensive overview of Scottish art for future generations.
- 2.2 Earlier this year the City Art Centre mounted the exhibition *In Focus: Scottish Photography* (7 July 2018 – 12 May 2019), as a means of showcasing the photographic highlights of the fine art collection. In order to consolidate the long-term impact of this exhibition, and create a tangible legacy, it is proposed that new photographic works by contemporary artists should be considered for acquisition.

### 3. Main report

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- 3.1 The following three photographs by Flannery O’Kafka are presented to the Committee for consideration:

***School Shooting, Valentine’s Day, Ash Wednesday***

Photographic diptych, two pigment prints, 2018

94 x 64cm each (framed)

£866.00



***Waiting for Ransom to Turn***

Photographic pigment print, 2017

94 x 64cm (framed)

£434.00



- 3.2 Flannery O’Kafka was born in the USA in 1976. She moved to Scotland in 2002 with her husband and three children. Since then she has been based in Glasgow, where her two youngest children were born.
- 3.3 O’Kafka began studying Fine Art Photography at Glasgow School of Art in 2014. She graduated with a BA Honours in June 2018. Her photograph *You would be home now if you lived here* (part of the diptych *School Shooting, Valentine’s Day, Ash Wednesday*) featured as the main poster image for the 2018 Glasgow School of Art degree show. On the strength of her degree show work, she has also been selected for inclusion in the 2019 Royal Scottish Academy New Contemporaries Exhibition.

- 3.4 O’Kafka’s work revolves around the themes of motherhood, religion, belonging, comedy and suffering. The concept of family is central to her practice, and she draws inspiration from her own complex personal history and family narrative – photographing her birth family, adoptive family and five children. Although many of her photographs initially appear to depict arbitrary subjects, they are full of symbolic references. The imagery acts as a series of metaphors for emotional experiences and personal memories, linked by associations of place and time. The artist compares her approach to the construction of a “fractured family album”, which pieces together a narrative of parallel histories, both real and imagined.
- 3.5 All three photographs proposed for acquisition were displayed in the exhibition ‘Flannery O’Kafka: Thin Blood / Thick Water’ at Stills Centre for Photography in Edinburgh between 22 June and 1 July 2018. This exhibition derived partly from work produced during an artist’s residency at Dubois County Museum in Jasper, Indiana, USA. During this residency, which took place in early 2018, O’Kafka explored the history of her own conception and adoption, and the resulting body of work serves as a “visual emotional document” of this aspect of her life story.
- 3.6 The diptych *School Shooting, Valentine’s Day, Ash Wednesday* dates from 2018. It is made up of two photographs, individually titled *You would be home now if you lived here* and *GLA*. The former work was produced during her residency in Jasper, Indiana, and its title is a play on the street sign that welcomes visitors to the town - ‘If you lived here, you would be home now’. This was the place where the artist was conceived, although she never lived there, and it was not her ‘home’. As such, she perceived a sort of connection with the taxidermy animal specimens in the Dubois County Museum. These specimens had originated from other parts of the world, but had found their ‘home’ in the museum in Jasper. Meanwhile, the artist had originated in Jasper, but lived elsewhere during her life, finding her ‘home’ in Scotland. O’Kafka spent this residency travelling without her children, and in their absence, she appropriated the image of the white mountain lion specimen into the ‘family album’.
- 3.7 The second photograph in the diptych, *GLA*, was taken in an airport after O’Kafka had returned from a trip to Florida to meet her birth grandmother. The image depicts her young daughter seated in a photography booth, her identity obscured by a curtain. Her daughter is autistic, and the artist explains that she could have re-staged this composition many times over the years, as her daughter always wears the same coat and boots. The image relates to O’Kafka’s ongoing research into what she calls the “continued happenings” in a photograph. It also links to her overarching theme of “the carrying of veiled suffering in the family album”.

- 3.8 These two images, *You would be home now if you lived here* and *GLA*, were first exhibited together as a diptych on 14 February 2018, as part of the work in progress exhibition 'And Also With You'. The day was Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day, and it also coincided with a major school shooting in America. The title of the diptych *School Shooting, Valentine's Day, Ash Wednesday* combines these simultaneous events, placing its creation within a specific chronological framework. The juxtaposition of these two images also references the artist's earlier series *I would kill for you: a study in maternal ferocity* (2012-2014), which explores the possibility of threat to her youngest children within a context of safety and protection.
- 3.9 The third photograph proposed for acquisition, *Waiting for Ransom to Turn*, dates from 2017. This image was taken at a swimming pool in Indiana, using a pocket camera and pound shop film. Following the conventions of traditional holiday snapshots, the film was developed some weeks later once the artist had returned home. The photograph presents a young man diving into a swimming pool, turning in mid-air before entering the water. At the time of printing the image, O'Kafka was awaiting the imminent birth of her first grandson. The baby was in a breach position, and had to turn for a safe delivery. The artist perceived an association between this episode and the pose adopted by the diving man, and appropriated the photograph into her concept of the 'family album'.
- 3.10 O'Kafka is widely recognised as an emerging talent in the field of fine art photography. In the last two years she has participated in a number of group exhibitions, presenting her work at venues such as Glasgow Women's Library; The Pipe Factory, Glasgow; Art Park, House for an Art Lover, Glasgow; 12 Star Gallery, London; and Carlsberg Byens Gallery in Copenhagen. In addition to her solo exhibition at Stills Centre for Photography in summer 2018, she also staged the one-person show 'You Would Be Home Now If You Lived Here' during her residency at Dubois County Museum in Indiana.
- 3.11 The three photographs under consideration are strong examples of O'Kafka's work that illustrate the main themes and tenets of her current practice. The City Art Centre does not yet own any examples of work by this artist, and it is felt that acquiring pieces at this early stage in her career would be a good opportunity. The three photographs would be a significant addition to the City Art Centre's holdings of contemporary photography, and their acquisition would help to signal our continued support of emerging artists in Scotland. The photographs are being offered directly by the artist for sale to the City Art Centre.

## 4. Measures of success

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- 4.1 Completed purchase of three photographs by Flannery O'Kafka (b.1976) – the photographic diptych *School Shooting, Valentine's Day, Ash Wednesday* and the single photograph *Waiting for Ransom to Turn*.

## 5. Financial impact

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- 5.1 The cost of the photographic diptych *School Shooting, Valentine's Day, Ash Wednesday* is £866.00. The cost of the single photograph *Waiting for Ransom to Turn* is £434.00.
- 5.2 Funds for these purchases will come from the Jean F Watson Bequest, and it is intended that an application for grant aid will be submitted to the National Fund for Acquisitions.

## 6. Risk, policy, compliance and governance impact

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- 6.1 Not applicable.

## 7. Equalities impact

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- 7.1 Not applicable.

## 8. Sustainability impact

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- 8.1 Not applicable.

## 9. Consultation and engagement

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- 9.1 Not applicable.

## 10. Background reading/external references

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- 10.1 Flannery O'Kafka website: <https://www.flanneryokafka.com/>
- 10.2 Stills Centre for Photography website: <http://www.stills.org/exhibition/past/flannery-o%E2%80%99kafka-thin-blood-thick-water>
- 10.3 Glasgow School of Art film on Flannery O'Kafka's Degree Show: <https://vimeo.com/289244057>

### **Paul Lawrence**

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# 11. Appendices

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None.