

Committee on the Jean F Watson Bequest

10.30am, Friday, 28 August 2020

Purchase of three unique digital prints by Rachel Maclean

Executive/routine
Wards
Council Commitments

1. Recommendations

- 1.1 It is recommended that the Committee approves the purchase of three digital prints by Rachel Maclean (b.1987).

Paul Lawrence

Executive Director of Place

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Report

Purchase of three unique digital prints by Rachel Maclean

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 Committee is asked to approve the purchase of three unique digital prints by Rachel Maclean (b.1987).

3. Background

- 3.1 The City Art Centre's fine art collection traces the development of Scottish art from the 17th 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 current and future generations.
- 3.2 Rachel Maclean is one of the most talked about and sought after contemporary Scottish artists. Born and trained in Edinburgh, she now has an international reputation. The city does not possess any examples of her work. We would be the first public collection to purchase works from her most recent series, *Native Animals*, which deals with the UK's forthcoming departure from the European Union.

4. Main report

- 4.1 The following digital prints by Rachel Maclean are presented to the Committee for consideration:

Disunion

Digital print, 2019

60.9 x 91.4cms

Edition of one

£9,775 (including 15% museum discount)

Green and Pleasant Land

Digital print, 2019

91.4 x 152.4cms

Edition of one

£13,600 (including 15% museum discount)

Apparition

Digital print, 2019

152.4 x 91.4cms

Edition of one

£13,600 (including 15% museum discount)



Disunion, 2019, digital print, 60.9 x 91.4cms.



Green and Pleasant land, 2019, digital print, 91.4 x 152.4cms



Apparition, 2019, digital print, 152.4 x 91.4cms

- 4.2 Rachel Maclean was born in Edinburgh and studied Drawing and Painting at Edinburgh College of Art from 2005 to 2009. Since then she has risen to become one of the most celebrated and sought after Scottish based artists. She received the Margaret Tait award at the Glasgow Film Festival in 2013 and was selected for the 2014 programme of exhibitions GENERATION: 25 years of Contemporary Art in Scotland. She works in many different media, and over the last 10 years she has shown her work in galleries, museums, film festivals and television throughout the world. Within the last two years alone she has had solo exhibitions in France, Australia, Greece, China, New Zealand, Israel, Germany and the USA. She currently lives and works in Glasgow.
- 4.3 In 2014 the Travelling Gallery, whose staff are based at the City Art Centre, gave Rachel the opportunity to present 'I HEART SCOTLAND', and she transformed the gallery into a colourful tableau where her satirical prints were displayed against the background of a huge, hand-painted, Union Jack. The gallery toured across Scotland, and her work proved particularly popular among the many schools the gallery visited. She featured again in 2018 when the Travelling Gallery celebrated their 40th anniversary with an exhibition at the City Art Centre.



Rachel installing *I Heart Scotland* in the Travelling Gallery, 2014

- 4.4 In 2017 Rachel was chosen to represent Scotland at the Venice Biennale where she presented a new film entitled *Spite Your Face*. At the same time disturbing and beguiling, the film offered a powerful critique of contemporary political rhetoric in which the concept of 'truth' is used and abused to advance personal, corporate or political influence. The presentation cemented Maclean's growing reputation as an artist.

- 4.5 Often saturated with alluring colour, Maclean's works suck the viewer into a world which promises them much but then repels with unsettling themes and narratives. Until recently, she has been the only actor in her films and prints, exploring issues of identity, class and gender. We can see many references in her work, but most significantly from children's literature, pop culture and film.
- 4.6 The three digital paintings under consideration are part of a larger series of works, entitled *Native Animals*, which Maclean produced for her first solo exhibition in New York at Arsenal Contemporary, in 2019. The exhibition was due to travel to Germany in March this year, but the showing there was cancelled due to the current pandemic. At the moment, they are in storage in Arsenal Contemporary's warehouse in Montreal.
- 4.7 The exhibition was described in the following way by the gallery in its promotional literature: "*Native Animals* cloaks itself in traditional narratives and images of British identity to discuss the contemporary political climate. The characters..... recall the stories on which British children are raised, such as *The Wind in the Willows*, and an idyllic agrarian lifestyle put forward by landscape painters such as Gainsborough and Constable"
- 4.8 The overall narrative of *Native Animals* concerns 'Brexit', the UK's forthcoming exit from the European Union. Each character in the story, from a porcine union-jack doting politician to a phone-addicted white cat, stand as archetypes in the debate. In *Disunion*, amorphous figures clad in the colours of the British Union Jack and French tricolour fight over a large, blood-stained flag, seemingly ignorant and uncaring of the bloodied bodies that lie strewn across the foreground and the small inflatable boat (a reference to the many migrants seeking to cross the English Channel) from which they have been thrown.
- 4.9 *Apparition* is just as disturbing. A gargantuan figure bedecked with a union-jack top hat and coat rises from a bonfire like a grotesque genie. Draped in a sash that reads 'Hop off home' and surrounded by mysterious eyes that emerge from the darkness, his message is clear. The little mouse-like figures around the fire seem entranced by him and what he offers.
- 4.10 Compositionally, *Green and Pleasant Land* is divided into two very different halves. On the right, two patriotically dressed figures (a squirrel and a fox in a setting which echoes Gainsborough's famous double portrait *Mr and Mrs Andrews*) gaze at a painting being worked on. It shows a fertile, green hillside, hedges and a sturdy oak tree. The bushes nearby them and even the sky above seem in complete harmony with this idyll they have created. So captivated are they, the fox and squirrel appear blind to the reality beyond, where the artist has depicted a minefield bounded by barbed wire, blood-soaked corpses and three figures hanging from a burnt-out tree. Maclean has created a world which combines *Alice in Wonderland* with an apocalyptic horror movie.

- 4.11 The City Art Centre does not currently own any works by Maclean. She is represented in major public collections throughout the United Kingdom and internationally, including The British Council, The Arts Council Collection, the Government Art Collection, Scottish National Galleries, National Gallery of Australia in Canberra and Kunsthalle zu Keil in Germany. These works could not be more appropriate to the current situation as the UK moves towards exiting from the European Union at the end of 2020.
- 4.12 The three prints were chosen in collaboration with the artist to reflect different aspects of the overall *Native Animals* narrative. The prints are being offered by Arsenal Contemporary on behalf of Rachel Maclean. They are fine art pigment prints, drymounted and then framed using non-reflective glass. They have been made in an edition of one, although the artist has made an artist's print (A/P) for her personal archive and for touring purposes.

5. Next Steps

- 5.1 If the acquisition of these artworks is approved, it is intended that an application for grant aid will be submitted to the National Fund for Acquisitions, and to the Friends of the City Art Centre and Museums. Consideration will also be given to an application to The Art Fund.

6. Financial impact

- 6.1 The costs are as follows:
- 6.1.1 The three digital prints are being offered for sale at a total price of £36,975. This includes a museum discount of 15%. Funds for this purchase 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, and to the Friends of the City Art Centre and Museums. Consideration will also be given to an application to The Art Fund.
- 6.1.2 An estimate has been obtained from a specialist art handling company for transporting the works from Montreal to Edinburgh. The price is 3,819.56 Canadian Dollars (£2,251.86 based on exchange rates on 2 July 2020).

7. Stakeholder/Community Impact

- 7.1 Not Applicable.

8. Background reading/external references

- 8.1 Rachel Maclean's web site: <http://www.rachelmaclean.com/>.
- 8.2 Interview with the artist: <https://vimeo.com/217730442>.
- 8.3 Short feature on the Tate website: <https://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/rachel-maclean-art-now>.
- 8.4 Interview about her most recent work, including *Native Animals*: <https://vimeo.com/392442377>.

9. Appendices

- 9.1 None.