

Committee on the Jean F Watson Bequest

10.00am, Friday, 17 December 2021

Purchase of a photographic portfolio by Norman McBeath

Executive/routine
Wards
Council Commitments

1. Recommendations

- 1.1 It is recommended that the Committee approves the purchase of the photographic portfolio *Perdendosi* (2021) by Norman McBeath (b.1952).

Paul Lawrence

Executive Director - Place

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Report

Purchase of a photographic portfolio by Norman McBeath

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 Committee is asked to approve the purchase of the photographic portfolio *Perdendosi* (2021) by Norman McBeath (b.1952).

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 contemporary artists are an important means of ensuring that the collection continues to provide a comprehensive overview of Scottish art for future generations.

4. Main report

- 4.1 The following photographic portfolio by Norman McBeath is presented to the Committee for consideration:

Perdendosi

Portfolio of 12 black and white photographs (archival digital prints)

Accompanied by reflective text *Twelve Leaves* by Edmund de Waal

Limited edition boxed set (edition of 25)

2021

42 x 29.7cm

Signed by Norman McBeath and Edmund de Waal

£3,000 (including 14% museum discount)

Selection of images of *Perdendosi* portfolio:

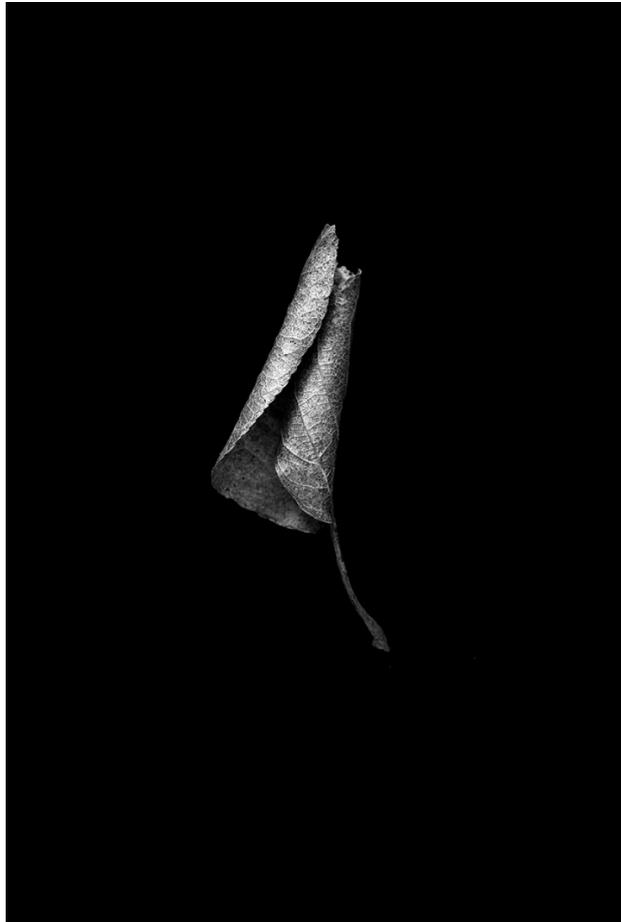




Perdendosi II



Perdendosi IX



Perdendosi XII

- 4.2 Norman McBeath was born in Troon, Ayrshire in 1952. During the late 1970s he studied for a BSc Honours degree in psychology at the University of Stirling, before travelling to Egypt, South Sudan and Saudi Arabia where he taught English as a foreign language. Upon McBeath's return to the UK, seven years later, he began working as a professional photographer. He is now an eminent figure in the fields of both photography and printmaking, specialising as a printmaker in photogravure. McBeath lives and works in Edinburgh.
- 4.3 McBeath initially came to prominence as a portrait photographer. In this capacity, he has photographed a range of well-known figures, focusing particularly on artists, writers and poets. Previous sitters have included Elizabeth Blackadder, Alan Davie, Alison Watt, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Alasdair Gray, Seamus Heaney, Kathleen Jamie and Don Paterson. His portraits are contemplative, thoughtful images that explore the individuality of each subject.
- 4.4 In more recent years, McBeath's photographic practice has expanded to include images of the natural world and built environments. In these artworks, he continues to follow an approach based on a deep sense of perception and attention to detail. According to the artist, much of his work is concerned with "the richness of experience that can be gained by focusing on what is normally unseen in our everyday surroundings. My work explores juxtapositions, focusing on the magic chance of discovery".
- 4.5 In early 2020 McBeath began working on a new series of photographs portraying winter leaves. Many of these photographs were taken in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the UK experienced its first period of national 'lockdown'. On daily walks around his local area, the artist would collect dried-out leaves and bring them back to his studio to examine. He was most interested in leaves nearing the end of their transformational cycle, those that had lost their pigmentation and become almost like parchment. McBeath observed that these leaves adopted extraordinary shapes as they decayed, suggesting their own unique identities and characters. He selected and photographed the leaves that possessed the most interesting forms and expressive qualities.
- 4.6 Although this body of work was not a direct response to the COVID-19 pandemic, these events had a profound impact on how McBeath saw the leaves and developed the series. The emerging public health crisis left the artist feeling shocked and frightened, trying to come to terms with the situation while negotiating a 'new normal'. Like many people, he was prompted to consider his immediate experiences and environment. As he later explained: "It was a time for me of heightened awareness and increased sensitivity towards my surroundings, particularly the natural world. Familiar subjects of study became freighted with new associations and symbolism."
- 4.7 The photographs in the series compel the viewer to slow down and look more closely; to examine everyday forms anew and recognise their significance. Each image concentrates on a single leaf, suspended against an intensely dark background. Some leaves are curled tightly upon themselves, while others appear

as if caught in an act of expansive movement. Each one is depicted in exquisite detail, with an array of textures and rich tonal variations. The leaves are all shown on the cusp of disintegration, the final stage in their life cycle, a state that inspired the title of the series, *Perdendosi*, a musical term for gradually dying away.

- 4.8 In the limited edition portfolio, the twelve photographs that make up *Perdendosi* are accompanied by a reflective text by the artist and writer Edmund de Waal (b.1964). McBeath has collaborated with many writers and poets over the years, inviting them to engage with and respond to his photography. Previous collaborative projects have involved literary figures such as Jeanette Winterson, A.L. Kennedy, Paul Muldoon and Robert Crawford. Edmund de Waal is probably best known for his family memoir *The Hare with Amber Eyes* (2010). For *Perdendosi*, de Waal composed *Twelve Leaves*, a piece of writing that offers a series of personal reflections and associations inspired by the imagery.
- 4.9 Through McBeath's photographic images and de Waal's written accompaniment, the viewer is encouraged to develop their own interpretation of *Perdendosi*. The work is deliberately ambiguous, leaving space for the viewer's individual ideas and responses. As McBeath remarks: "I am fascinated by traces of behaviour and events: both what might be about to happen and what we can imagine has already taken place." Each leaf has its own sense of agency and narrative.
- 4.10 McBeath has exhibited widely over the course of his career, both nationally and internationally. His works are held in major public collections, including the National Galleries of Scotland, the National Portrait Gallery, the British Library, Harvard University and the National Portrait Gallery of Australia.
- 4.11 Over the last few years, the City Art Centre has been working to develop its holdings of contemporary Scottish photography. Recent acquisitions have included artworks by David Eustace, Robin Gillanders and Flannery o'kafka. Norman McBeath is not yet represented within the collection. It is felt that the purchase of *Perdendosi* would be an excellent opportunity to acquire an outstanding piece of work by the artist. The portfolio not only demonstrates the poetic craftsmanship that underpins all of McBeath's work, but also offers a thought-provoking creative response to current global events. *Perdendosi* is being offered directly by the artist for sale to the City Art Centre.

5. Next Steps

- 5.1 If the acquisition of the portfolio is approved, it is intended that an application for grant aid will be submitted to the National Fund for Acquisitions.

6. Financial impact

- 6.1 The portfolio is being offered for sale at a price of £3,000, which includes a museum discount of 14%. Funds for this purchase would come from the Jean F. Watson

Bequest, and it is intended that an application for grant aid would be submitted to the National Fund for Acquisitions.

7. Stakeholder/Community Impact

7.1 Not Applicable.

8. Background reading/external references

8.1 Norman McBeath's website: <https://www.normanmcbeath.com>

8.2 Article by Alice Strang on *Perdendosi*: <https://alicestrang.co.uk/norman-mcbeaths-perdendosi-series/>

9. Appendices

9.1 None.