

# Committee on the Jean F Watson Bequest

2.00pm, Thursday 2 February 2023

## Purchase of a group of works by Will Maclean

Executive/routine  
Wards  
Council Commitments

### 1. Recommendations

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- 1.1 It is recommended that the Committee:
- 1.1.1 approves the purchase of a group of works by Will Maclean (b.1941). The group comprises *Mariner's Museum / Taxonomy of Tides* (2014); *De Bestis Marins (For Simon Lewty)* (2014); and *Gaelic Text* (2015). The latter two works were produced collaboratively with English based artist Simon Lewty (1941-2021); and
  - 1.1.2 accepts the gift from the artist of *A Catechism of the Laws of Storms* (2015), a suite of 12 screenprints produced by Maclean in partnership with Scottish author and poet John Burnside.

**Paul Lawrence**

Executive Director of Place

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# Report

## Purchase of a group of works by Will Maclean

### 2. Executive Summary

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- 2.1 Committee is asked to approve the purchase of a group of works by Will Maclean (b.1941) and accept the gift of a suite of 12 screenprints produced by Maclean in partnership with Scottish author and poet John Burnside.

### 3. Background

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- 3.1 The City Art Centre's fine art collection traces the development of Scottish art from the 17<sup>th</sup> century until present day. Filling historical gaps in the collection is an important part of the acquisitions policy, ensuring that the collection provides a comprehensive overview of Scottish art for future generations.

### 4. Main report

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- 4.1 The following works by Will Maclean (b.1941) are presented to the Committee for consideration:

**Mariner's Museum / Taxonomy of Tides**

Mixed media construction with found objects, 2014.

123 x 108 x 9.5cm

**De Bestis Marins (For Simon Lewty)**

Mixed media and found objects, 2014.

52 x 52 x 5cm

**Gaelic Text**

Pencil and acrylic on paper, 2015.

44.5 x 32cm

Total cost of three works: £40,000 (includes a 32% museum discount)



*Mariner's Museum / Taxonomy of Tides, 2014*



*De Bestis Marins (For Simon Lewty), 2014*



Installation photograph of *A Catechism of the Laws of Storms*, 2015



Interior view of the Bell Pettigrew Museum, University of St Andrews

- 4.2 Will Maclean (b.1941) is one of the outstanding Scottish artists of his generation. He was born in Inverness, although his family originated from the west coast of Scotland. He was a midshipman with the Blue Funnel Line (1957–9) before attending Gray's School of Art in Aberdeen (1961–5) and then the British School at Rome (1966), as part of a year's study on a Scottish Education Department Travelling Scholarship.
- 4.3 After a period of school teaching in Fife, Maclean was appointed lecturer at the Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, University of Dundee, in 1981, going on to become Professor of Fine Art in 1994 and, in 2000–2006, Senior Research Fellow. He is now Emeritus Professor. Elected a Royal Scottish Academician in 1991, Maclean designed three memorial cairns on the Isle of Lewis and, as part of the team behind these, won the Scottish Natural Heritage Supreme Award in 1997.
- 4.4 In 1999 he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate by the University of St Andrews, winning the Scottish Arts Council 'Creative Scotland' award in the same year. The British Library and Tate's *Artists' Lives* oral history archive recorded a valuable interview with him in 2005, and the following year he was awarded an MBE for services to Education and the Arts. In 2008 Maclean was made Honorary Fellow of the University of the Highlands and Islands, and in 2009 was awarded an honorary degree of Doctor of Letters by the University of Aberdeen. The Royal Society of Edinburgh elected him a Fellow in 2010 (FRSE). He continues to live and work in Tayport, Fife, with his wife, the artist Marian Leven.
- 4.5 In 2022 The City Art Centre presented a major retrospective of Maclean's work, entitled '*Points of Departure*'. It was highly acclaimed, receiving a five-star review



from *The Scotsman* newspaper. It provided a fresh insight into his practice from a variety of perspectives. Maclean's work is anchored in the history, archaeology, and literature of the Scottish Highlands and the Highland people, as well as his family background and personal associations with the sea.

- 4.6 Perhaps best known for his wall constructions, Maclean is equally at home in sculpture, drawing, printmaking, video and installation. Combining exquisitely hand-made pieces with found or (on occasions) mass produced objects, his work balances between simplicity and complexity and invites the viewer to contemplate the timeless themes he explores. Maclean is both a consummate craftsman - combining a deep understanding of his materials – and a poet, for his work is infused with the memories, stories and experiences of the ancient Celtic saints, the intrepid explorers, and the fishermen and women of the Gaelic tradition.
- 4.7 The major work *Mariner's Museum/ Taxonomy of Tides* was first presented in Maclean's 2014 exhibition, *Gleaned & Gathered* at Art First in London. The exhibition title came from a letter Will received from the celebrated Irish poet Seamus Heaney in which he speaks of his appreciation of Maclean's work. Heaney's untimely death is a loss to the world, but particularly to Maclean who was hoping for further collaborations.
- 4.8 The piece was inspired by Will's many visits to the University of St Andrews Bell Pettigrew Museum (illustration above). The Museum was opened in 1912 and still houses a vast collection of specimens and instruments. It has been a teaching museum since Edwardian times, and students, staff and visitors can still visit to observe the artefacts. Traditionally displayed with large cases packed full of objects, it was the perfect environment for an artist who himself is an avid collector.
- 4.9 In the same exhibition Will showed *De Bestis Marins (for Simon Lewty)* which included the sole of a shoe and the lower cluster of beach things, sent to him years earlier by the artist Simon Lewty from his childhood beach in Swanage. Lewty and Maclean were kindred spirits, collaborating for over a decade, and both finding inspiration in language, history, memory, exploration, and the sea.
- 4.10 *Gaelic Text* (2015) was made by Lewty for their shared exhibition covering another decade of co-exhibiting at Art First (Charting a Decade II, 2006-2016) Lewty had seen a printed folding card from Maclean's Stornoway exhibition *Veering Westerley* in 2015 in which the essay by Finlay Macleod was printed in Gaelic only. This provided the basis for Simon's drawing.
- 4.11 The *Catechism of the Laws of Storms* also 2015 was first published as a book with the John Burnside poems beside a set of Maclean's collage works. Maclean then went ahead to make a screenprint edition of the same collages, enlarged and with a golden tint, with the poems printed on the right. With a central fold, each print reads as a page of a book. The collaboration was unusual in that Maclean produced the collages first before sending them to Burnside and inviting him to compose poems inspired by the images. This suite, with an estimated value of £4,000, is being offered as a gift by the artist.

- 4.12 The City Art Centre currently holds a very early construction by Maclean entitled *Dark Shore Box* (1978) gifted to the City from the Scottish Arts Council in 1998, as well as a suite of etchings '*A Night of Islands*' from 1992. As a result of the recent exhibition, we have also been gifted an important early work entitled *Alignment Frame Paradox* (1982) from a private collector. The acquisition of this group of works would substantially increase our holdings of this important artist and better represent his long and distinguished career. Maclean himself considers *Mariner's Museum* as one of his finest recent works.
- 4.13 The works are being offered for sale by the artist through his London dealer Art First. We have been able to negotiate a substantial museum discount, partly in recognition of the tribute paid to Maclean last year by the gallery.

## 5. Next Steps

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

## 6. Financial impact

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- 6.1 The group of works are being offered for sale at a price of £40,000, which includes a museum discount of 32%. 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

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- 7.1 Not Applicable.

## 8. Background reading/external references

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- 8.1 Art First website: [https://www.artfirst.co.uk/will\\_maclean/biography.html](https://www.artfirst.co.uk/will_maclean/biography.html)
- 8.2 *Exhibition review*: <https://www.scotsman.com/arts-and-culture/art/art-reviews-will-maclean-james-morrison-national-treasure-3738285>
- 8.3 Exhibition publication: <https://sansomandcompany.co.uk/product/will-maclean-points-of-departure/>

## 9. Appendices

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- 9.1 None.