

Waterlines: Marian Leven and Will Maclean

The Sir Duncan Rice Library Gallery, University of Aberdeen, until 14 April 2013

SITUATED in the plaza of the Sir Duncan Rice Library, University of Aberdeen, a magnificent newly commissioned sculpture by artists Marian Leven and Will Maclean draws its inspiration from ancient standing stones in the landscape and the graceful precision of naval architecture.

Waterlines is an inspired visual statement; a significant cultural marker reflecting the continuity of visual traditions and rich maritime history of the region. It is also a celebration of the collaborative work of two of Scotland's most respected artists.



Artists Marian Leven and Will Maclean

Multidisciplinary lines of enquiry; aesthetic, archaeological, historical, scientific and architectural are displayed in the exhibition, bringing together contemporary Visual Art; sketchbooks, paintings and box constructions by Leven and Maclean with objects drawn from Aberdeen University museums, collections and archives. The result is a wonderfully fluid dialogue between the *Waterlines* sculpture, the exhibition and the inner architecture or aspiration of the library as “a luminous landmark for the community”.

Within the library building The Sir Duncan Rice Library Gallery and expansive ground floor entrance hall provide an on-going opportunity to showcase works from the university museums' collections and for creative

collaborative exchange between different disciplines or ways of seeing. The *Waterlines* sculpture and exhibition powerfully illustrate the ways that contemporary art can inspire deeper examination and rediscovery of our history and ourselves.

Peter Davidson's poetic response to the sculpture as "a lasting presence", "seamark and landmark, anchor, metaphor" is extremely apt. The presence of this sculptural diptych, two monumental forms punctuated by a beautifully defined negative space through which the library tower beyond can be viewed, is almost figurative. The *Waterlines* sculpture integrates traditions of seeing; the human eye and mind perceiving the Northern landscape as land, people and memory and it is fascinating to see the evolution of its design in the visual practice of Leven and Maclean together with original source material in the exhibition.



Waterlines sculpture and library (photo by Kate Sutherland)

Sculpted from Kilkenny blue limestone, *Waterlines* responds to rain, wind and sunlight with an entire spectrum of tonality and mark; from bleached white grey in frozen winter sun to deep blue, stained by rivets of rain. Its elegant curvature contrasts and compliments the linear asymmetrical designs of the library's glass facade. The choice of Kilkenny stone echoes beautifully the subtle qualities of Marian Leven's paintings which in their textural, tactile rendering capture the nuances and intricacy of Northern light.

This shifting perception and human vulnerability is sensed and felt in the paint handling, beautifully balanced by expansive, abstract form. *Summer Memory II* (Watercolour 2011) is a fine example, harnessing the natural fluidity of the medium with formal compositional/design elements. The pigment feels residual, applied in layers like misty rain and naturally random patterns of mark, while the dominant form to the left is defined by a singular edged

stroke of paint. Characteristic of Leven's work there is ambiguity between seemingly organic marks emerging from the ground of greenish grey and the deliberation of staccato brush marks of vibrant orange.

In larger scale paintings this quality is distilled and transformed from an intimate frame of reference; the fleeting and ephemeral quality of human memory /perception to the timeless and monumental presence of nature. *Northern Light* (Acrylic On Canvas 2011) is a prime example, the division of the canvas providing both compositional structure in terms of the crafting of the image and a dominant feeling of the sky as both an emotive physical presence and an idea within the work. The delicate, almost plaster-like surface and palette of subtle variations white on white create a contemplative space; a mindscape in direct response to the landscape.

The sense of movement in this work is achieved with incised, drawn and textural marks and minute tonal shifts. An adjacent work *Meltwater* (Acrylic On Canvas 2011) explores this idea further in textural layers; from the speckled sand-like texture at the top of the composition to the horizontal white bar division of the canvas and stained movement of water with drawn charcoal marks beneath. Each shifting strata has its own texture and rhythm; a microcosm of minutely observed change of matter and consciousness. This awareness of the picture plane in abstraction, skilful handling of the artist's chosen materials and the ever present expressive human mark, define Leven's visual language and inform her sculptural collaboration with Maclean.



Will Maclean - The King's Fish (University of Aberdeen Museums Collections)

John Stuart's *Sculpture Stones of Scotland* (1856), including an illustration of The Maiden Stone (Chapel of Garioch), is juxtaposed with Leven's sketchbooks in the exhibition, providing insight into the design process and inspiration behind *Waterlines*. The spatially divided stone fragments as formal elements of design, like the diptych arrangement of the dogfish in Will Maclean's large scale etching of *Traditional Story: The King's Fish*, are part of a shifting frame of visual perception. Part of the *Night of Islands* series inspired by Gaelic poetry and prose, *The King's Fish* contains many visual frames of reference in its delineation and its internal narrative. This indigenous understanding of visual traditions or language linked to the natural environment is central to the work of both Maclean and Leven in its reverence and insight. It is also part of a wider movement of cultural reappraisal acknowledging a continuum of visual traditions in the North of Scotland from ancient standing stones to the present day.

Revealing that which is hidden and prompting rediscovery of original visual sources, Leven's contemplation of ancient standing stones in a series of line drawings takes on a luminous quality, with the shaded background defining form. This presence through white space illumination evokes the inherent mystery of the stones and a spirit of enquiry in exploring their potential meanings. The display of the Fairy Green Stone, a Class I Pictish Symbol Stone, found in Perthshire in 1948 and now part of the University museums' collections, is a cultural marker of knowledge and understanding in its making and design.



Maclean & Leven's Waterlines (photo by Kate Sutherland)

It is also an object representing rituals and meanings that for all our technological advances and "civilization" remain unknown to us. Like Einstein's statement that "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all art and science" Leven's drawings highlight the human need for creative

enquiry. The artist's practice, the *Waterlines* sculpture and the inner architecture of the library building, are all potential meeting points for human aspiration, discovery and knowledge.

The inclusion of a ship's model, a gift from Marian Leven to Will Maclean, references their personal and creative partnership; the vertical inversion of line and form in this small scale wooden model providing the initial spark of inspiration for a permanent sculpture of two equal and complimentary halves. The fusion of ancient markers in the landscape with the sheer elegance of naval architecture can be seen in the incised marks on the *Waterlines* sculpture, reinterpreting the draughtsman's lines for the *Thermopylae*, one of the fastest clipper ships constructed in 1868 by Walter Hood & Co, Aberdeen. This blurring of lines between disciplines; functional engineering with the aesthetic in drawing and draughtsmanship, together with the implication of directional lines of navigation, create a fascinating dynamic or imaginative trajectory in the work and in the curatorial scope of the exhibition.



Thermopylae (Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums Collection)

The poetics of visual language in Will Maclean's work with its use of found objects and multi-layered box construction, informed by family maritime history, seafaring stories and poetry is exemplified by *Fear-bata The*

Boatman (Found objects, construction on board 2012). A weathered boat fragment belonging to the artist's Grandfather takes the form of a cross section of hull, reimagined as the figurative form of an angel or totem inlaid beneath the picture plane. A tracery of drawn marks on the predominantly white ground casts the totemic object beneath the waterline of our collective unconscious. The interplay of shadows cast by the three dimensional construction of the central figurehead heightens the sense of an object spiritually unearthed. It is a powerful work in its conception, transcending personal associations and ancestry to connect with the universal archetype of the boat. *Fear-bata The Boatman* is a statement of creative resilience and a potent investigation of the crafting of images in its evolutionary use of box construction.

Voyage of the James Caird I, Elephant Island (Mixed Media on Board 2011) is similarly a journey of heightened perception with the suggestion of a monumental arctic landscape of opaque and finely textured tonality, shifting like the ocean under sheets of ice. The curvature of drawn marks and their trajectory feel like a descent beneath the surface of the picture plane; a cut away revealing leaden contours of land and nailed wooden fragments. With the clarity of a draughtsman and the tactile physicality of a sculptor Maclean creates a multi-layered work of poignancy and grace. This frozen vision references a monumental voyage undertaken by Shackleton in a small open boat between Elephant Island and South Georgia. *Voyage of the James Caird I, Elephant Island* is an expansive mindscape of visual association, a testament to human endurance and a superbly balanced abstract composition.

It is inspiring to see the work of Marian Leven and Will Maclean represented permanently on site at the University of Aberdeen and in this temporary exhibition, acknowledging contemporary art and visual literacy as an important means of re-examining and illuminating cultural histories. It is equally encouraging to see vision in the fabric of an institutional building; incorporating spaces for research, learning, conservation and imaginative contemplation from which all knowledge ultimately stems. In many ways the architecture designed by schmidt hammer lassen embodies this creative engagement with public space. Striking asymmetrical designs together with the ever changing Northern climate animate the 760 glass panel façade of this striking contemporary building. Inside, the spiralling oblong atrium illuminates seven floors of study and collection space, with the lower ground floor beneath the building housing the Special Collections Centre. Significantly the centre contains learning, reading and seminar rooms for conferences, research, and outreach work, the university collections of books, manuscripts, photographs and archives dating back as far as the 3rd century BC and the Glucksman Conservation Centre specialising in the preservation of works on paper.

The design of the building as a meeting place and site of discovery for students, academics and the wider community is reflected in the *Waterlines* exhibition, providing different points of entry to contemporary visual art and in the scope of its accompanying programme of talks and events. Representation from different disciplines including Social Anthropology, Contemporary Visual Art practice and Archaeology together with creative events for adults and children working with box constructions, collage, sculpture, boat craft, stories and Pictish symbols will continue throughout March and April. Marian Leven and Will Maclean's *Waterlines* is an exciting new marker in the Northern cultural landscape, signifying The Sir Duncan Rice Library, Gallery and Special Collections Centre as an emerging site of creative thinking and learning.

*Public Talks & Events Accompanying the Waterlines Exhibition. Free Entry, Booking advised Contact:
scc.events@abdn.ac.uk*

*As By Line Upon the Ocean Go with Professor Timothy Ingold, Chair in Social Anthropology, Thursday 14th
March 6-7 pm*

Thinking Visually with artists Will Maclean and Marian Leven, Sat 16th March 2-3pm

Standing Stones and Circles, Thursday 21st March with Dr Elizabeth Curtis 6-7pm

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