

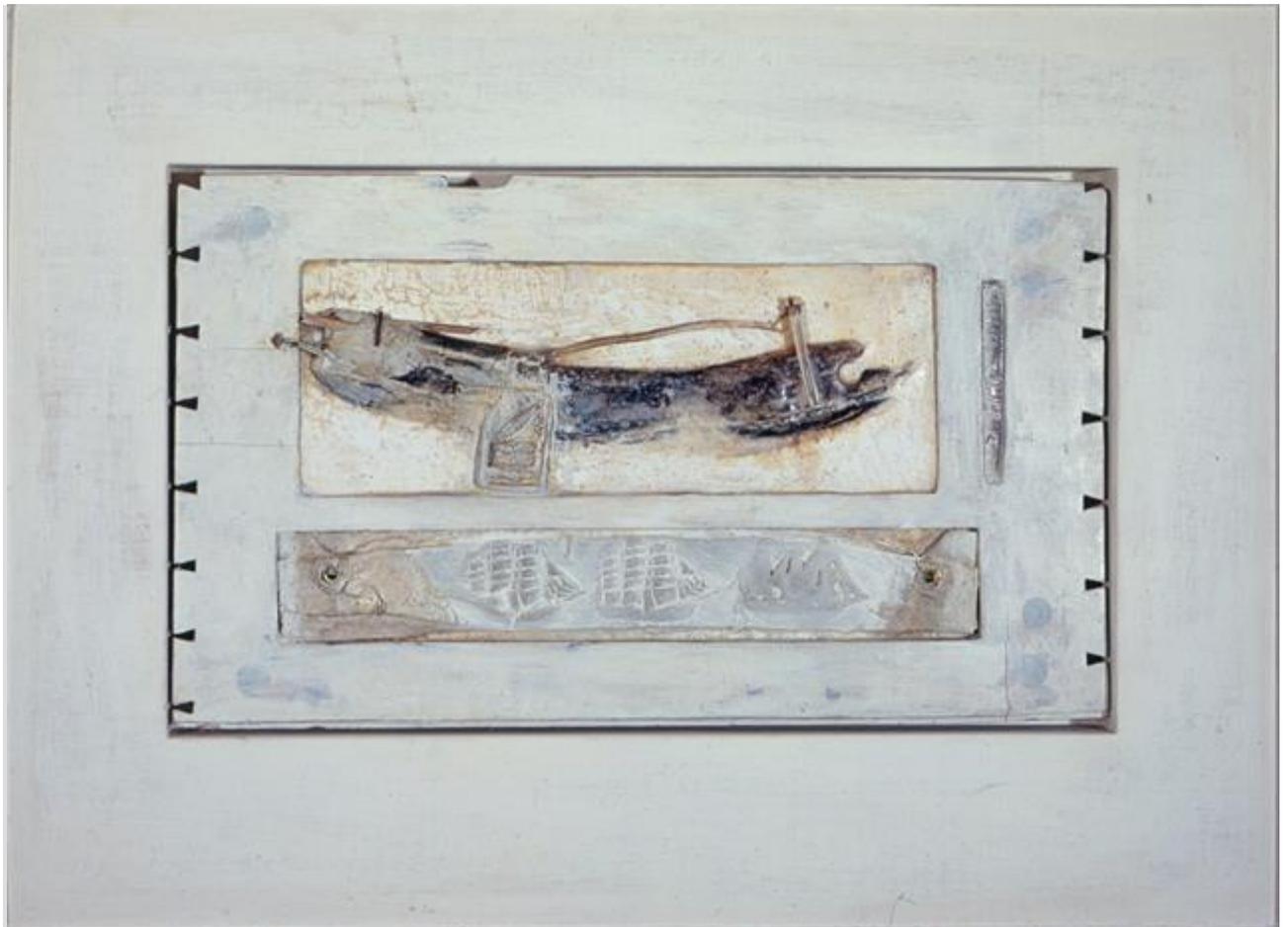
Will Maclean

Published 4 Jun 2011 in *Northings*, Highlands and Islands online Arts journal.

Will Maclean: Collected Works 1970 -2010, The Fleming Collection, London, until 4 June 2011; Lead and Line, Art First, London, until 18 June 2011

WILL Maclean's major retrospective at The Fleming Collection is an overwhelming experience, bringing together pivotal works from private and public collections including the Aberdeen Art Gallery, Fitzwilliam Museum, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, McManus Galleries Dundee and the Inverness Museum and Art Gallery.

As a representation of the artist's visual thought and creative process over the last forty years it is both uniquely of its place and universal in impact. Maclean has progressively created a visual language so beautifully distilled that it expands the viewer's imagination, conception and understanding of our place between land and sea, past and present. It is an absolute pleasure to witness this evolution in the display of box construction works, sculpture, drawings, sketchbooks and archival material previously unseen together. The artist's exploration of "the histories and mythologies of those who live and work by the sea" displays integrity of craft, depth of knowledge and remarkable continuity, qualities that continue to define his multi-layered work.



'North West Passage/Arctic Route' by Will Maclean (1994)

The evolution of the artist's unique iconography displayed in *Collected Works 1970- 2010* is beautifully complimented by *Lead and Line*, an exhibition of Maclean's latest works inspired by recent journeys to St Kilda, Iceland and the Faroes, showing concurrently at Art First. The progression between these two shows is a triumph, the latest work representing another significant milestone in the artist's mature practice with the "balance between the story and the making" honed to perfection. Purity of visual language borne out of a lifetime's experience and exemplified in works such as 'A Short History of South Rona', 'Transom Echo' or 'Schematic Skate' introduce a new level of integration between history, symbol, mythology, science and folklore within the artist's work.

Maclean's methodology, particularly in relation to box construction utilising assemblage and found objects, presents a repository of collective memory, recreated as a living, breathing human mark. The qualities that the artist describes in relation to Sorely Maclean's hugely influential work *Hallaig* as "a blue print, a visual essay encompassing aspects of tradition, narrative, surrealism and the vernacular" could equally be applied to his own work. Immediately powerful, challengingly intricate and globally resonant, Maclean's visual narrative is fluid and indigenous in nature, representing an ongoing process of cultural re-evaluation of Scottish and Highland Art in an international context.

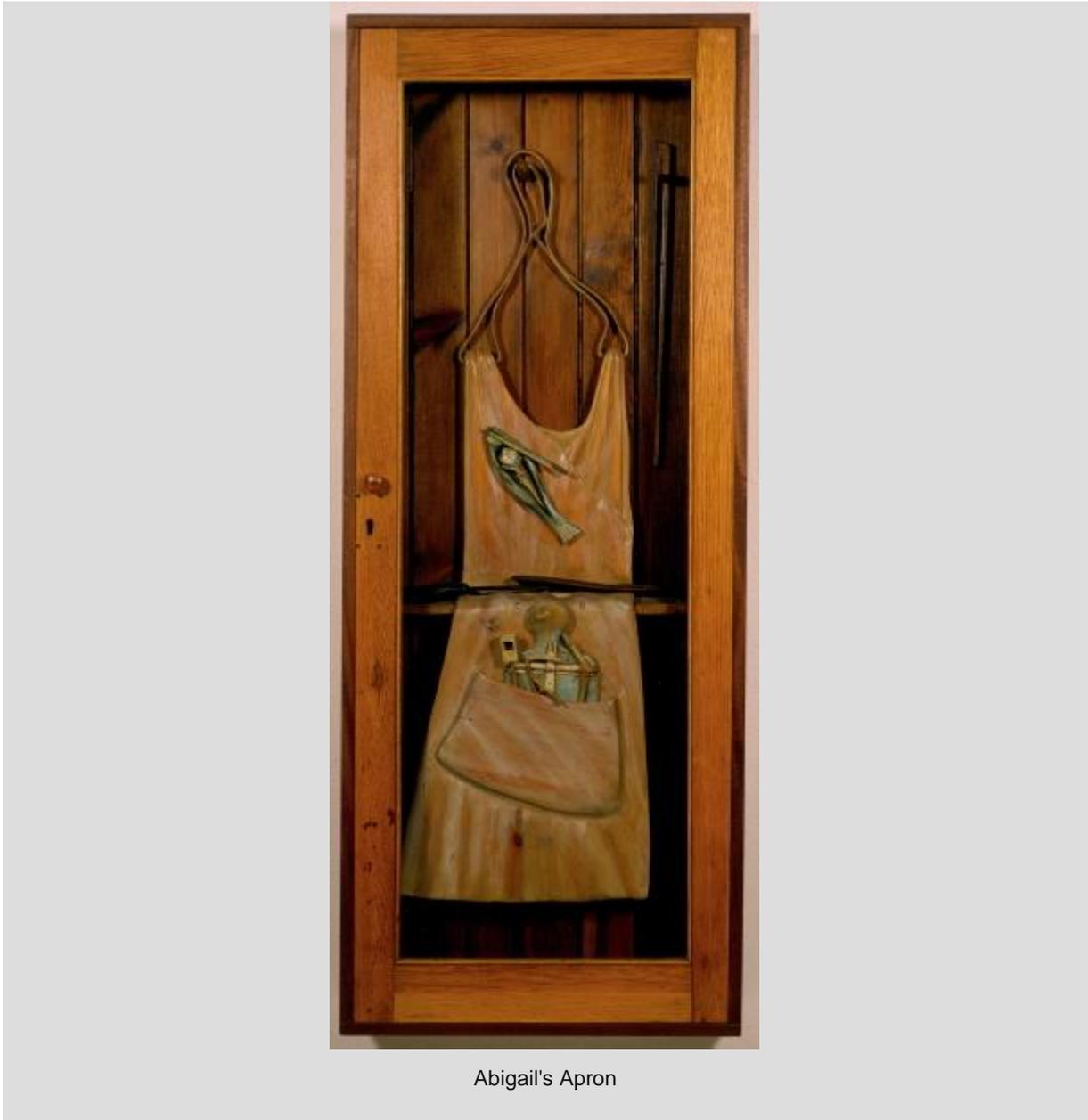
The visual poetry of Joseph Cornell's found objects, evocative of dreams, memories and ideas in juxtaposition, and Fred Stiven's boxed reliefs, with their use of natural materials, inform Maclean's use of mixed media construction; however, there is grounded intent in the presentation and arrangement of objects which distinguishes his work, presenting the possibility of recognition and reconnection, rather than imaginative association or nostalgia.



Symbols of Survival 1976

Part of the Collected Works retrospective, 'Bard McIntyre's Box' (1984, Mixed Media, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art) utilises found materials to present an altar-like composition in steely blue and burnt umber, characteristically layered frame within frame. Inspired by the poem 'The Ship of Women' from the 16th Century Book of the Dean of Lismore, Maclean visually unearths three female figures like ancient deities; bare nails, seal's teeth and bone articulated against the dark psychologically interior space of the box construction. Like witches or furies they are primitive and archetypal in their evocation of feminine power, raw and enigmatic.

Beneath the boat and imaginary waterline, dark fish surface in resin as if part of an archaeological excavation. The figures themselves are of an intimate, talisman-like scale; however, their presence is monumental, seemingly commanding the elements, echoing Scottish folklore and Highland myth. The texture of hide provides a physical and metaphorical ground for the figures to emerge and the crafting of the image, in materials which feel as though they are blackened with survival over centuries, contributes to the feeling of a narrative held deep within, being cast into the light by the hand of the artist. Although the poetic inspiration for this work comes from a specific cultural context and can be read in terms of dynamics of language, religion and masculinity, it can also be read visually in terms of global human culture.



Abigail's Apron

One of the most beautiful of the Collected Works, 'Abigail's Apron' (1980, Private Collection, London, painted wood, bone and metal), is more personal in its origins; a portrait of the artist's aunt Abigail MacKenzie, lovingly crafted and constructed in a way that echoes the paintings of Magritte in the arrangement of artefacts of association. The painterly aspect of the work softens the functional nature of the objects displayed, with warm earthy tones of wood grain together with the cool green of oxidation over time, giving the work a memorial quality.

'Abigail's Apron' is evocative of childhood memory and of a fishing and crofting way of life in Highland communities, itself becoming a distant collective memory. As an individual portrait it is a fascinating work, precious memory contained within a locked glass cabinet conveying not just the resilient presence of an individual life but that of an entire culture. The human figure of the apron, resting on the shelf is finely rendered, the pegs, joins and folds of fabric together with tools from the croft and kitchen beautifully arranged and sculpted.

The reliquary nature of the work as a whole in progressive layers, from cabinet, to portrait apron, emblematic brooch and pocket, create a sacred image of the familiar and everyday.

This work is elegiac, evocative of loss and remembrance; however, the manner in which it is constructed, the care and crafting of the work and handling of materials, is transcendent, employing generations of traditional skills and knowledge to make the artist's own culture powerfully visible to a contemporary audience. 'Abigail's Apron' is a deeply personal and interior work in relation to the portrait genre; however, it is also a statement of a living tradition that has resonance both within and beyond itself.

Among the Collected Works are some superb documentary examples of Maclean's cross disciplinary and collaborative work with poets, including Angus Martin, Ian Stephen, Valerie Gillies and John Burnside; photographs of sculptural and land-based works such as 'A' Chrannghail' on the Isle of Skye and the Land Raiders Memorial cairns on the Isle of Lewis, 'Adam's Clan', representative of the artist's magnificent series of etchings 'Night of the Islands', inspired by Gaelic poetry and sketchbooks containing daily observations and experimental work. Among these a wonderfully assured but elusive self portrait drawn fluidly in bold, black strokes, the artist's distinctive features seen in semi profile, one eye visible, the other obscured.



Adams Clan 1991, etching from a Night of Islands

The importance of drawing as “a research tool” in Maclean's practice can be seen in the display of drawings from The Ring Net series, part of a body of 400 works created by the artist in the early seventies as a study of the declining Scottish ring net fishing industry. Maclean's studies of herring are defined by his immediate drawn response to the subject, characterised by intricate marks in ink and watercolour rendered with all the fineness

and precision of a drypoint etching. A single watery line along the dorsal fin conveys the density, weight and structural curve of dead flesh with absolute economy and consummate skill.

The artist exhibits an almost scientific and exploratory degree of observation and sensitivity in these drawings, and this quality can also be seen in in later three dimensional works such as 'Leviathan Elogy' (1982, Painted whalebone and found objects, Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums Collections) which combine museum like display with creative reinterpretation of the subject.



Leviathan Elogy

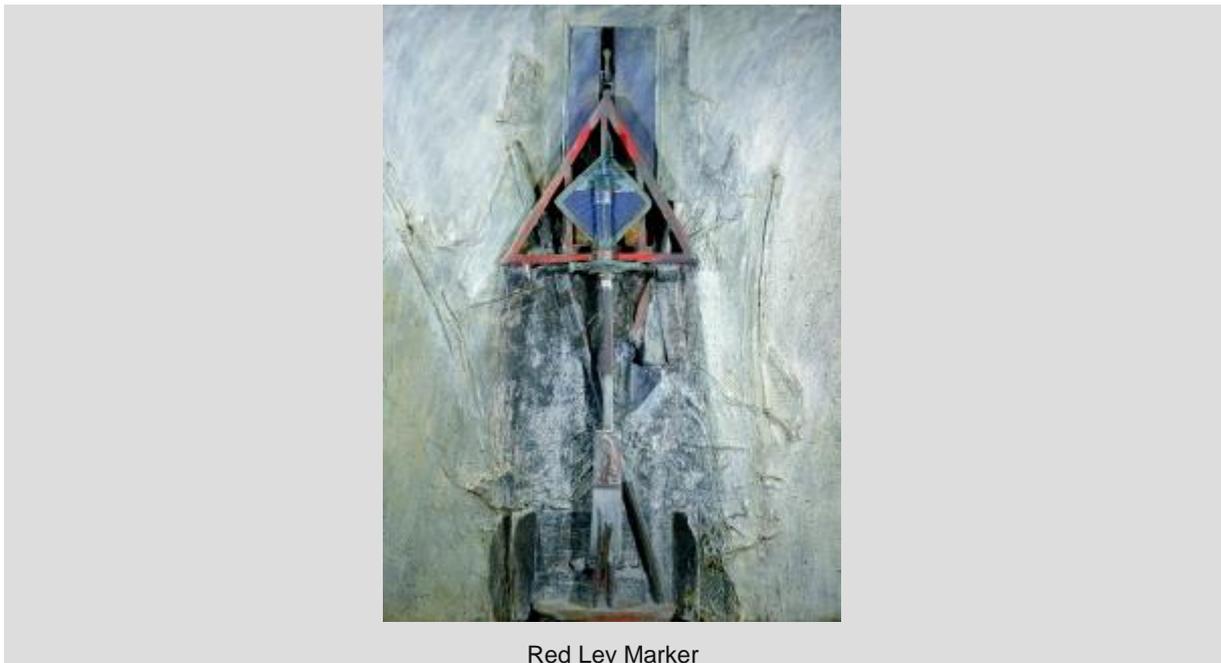
Here the artist combines sculptural forms and artefacts presented in the manner of a natural history exhibit, the labelling of sculptural forms with single letters in the top panel defying orthodox narrative or absolute classification. The human relationship with the natural world is revealed in terms of its complexity; the artist utilising a variety of materials; bone, thread, nails, wood and circuitry assembled in a complex dialogue of indigenous rites of human reverence and instruments of industrial scale slaughter. The human element is ever present in absence, represented by cultural artefacts of artistic construction.

'Atlantic Messengers' (1998, Mixed media, Art First/ The Artist) is yet another highlight of the exhibition, three exquisite sculptures inspired by the St Kilda mail boats and their buoys, set adrift to the mainland. Black plinth bases tapered gently upward enshrine three individual arrangements of sculptural objects. The figurative presence of each sculpture, Fulmarus, Hirta and Sula Sgeir, are created in a series of egg forms suspended and framed within the outer structure. Each contain found objects of remembrance including feathers, medicinal oil, a puffin skull and lyrics from a St Kilda waulking song.

The triangular arrangement of resin eggs suggests the female figure and the entire work is strangely reminiscent of three graces composed in a triptych, with a subtle drawn line of what looks like baleen bisecting the central piece in cruciform. The physical conditions of St Kilda were also a means of penitence, endurance and redemption, and this suggestion of faith expands due to the arrangement of sculpted objects. They feel totemic, richly fertile and absolutely grounded, and again Maclean offers not simply a memorial to a culture long past, but a clear and resounding visual statement of living creation in his command of form and composition, founded on a deep understanding of the poetics of visual language.

'Blue Men of the Minch' (1995, Painted construction, private collection, London), an intensely intriguing and lyrical work, depicts the contour of a human form above the waterline, the prow of the boat bisecting the figure, while beneath the symbolic vessel a shadowy mass of bodies, human, fish and ray, emerge from the painted surface in low relief. The sculptural modelling of the figures is contrasted with the linear weightlessness of the whole figure, suspended in an oceanic rhythm of brushwork in grey and white. It is an image with factual, poetic and symbolic origins; drawing upon the history of the Viking slave trade, emigration during the Highland Clearances and supernatural elements derived from Highland folklore. It is also an impeccably balanced semi abstract composition which suggests rather than illustrates narrative in the mind's eye.

'Composition from High Latitudes' (2007, Mixed media construction, Art First) takes this abstraction further and represents a stylistic bridge to the *Lead & Line* show in its distillation of the artist's visual language. Bands of latitude are repositories for artefacts, excavations on an expansive frozen ground of gesso. Green oxidation shows through the icy surface, suggestive of the human mark upon the landscape suspended beneath ever shifting Artic seas. The emergence of pigment and drawn marks over the passage of time are evocative of human scale and history in the face of nature whilst the three strata containing fish, crescent moon, boats, hooks and a human eye are reminiscent of Inuit carvings, sunk into the panel like repositories of human memory.



Red Ley Marker

In many of Maclean's mixed media panel works there is a deliberate window-like treatment of the surface, openings within the construction which conceal or reveal that which resides beneath the surface. 'Red Ley Marker' (1989 Mixed media on board, The Fleming-Wyfold Art Foundation) is another example where the middle of the panel is torn asunder revealing a dark recess and a hook protruding between closed shutters, suggesting that the way is actually unknown to us. Assemblage technique is used poetically in the arrangement of fragmented tools which resemble a crucifixion, the encrusted net and waxy surface textures seemingly formed by forces of nature, weathered by an almighty storm.

On entering the *Lead and Line* exhibition of the artist's most recent works, 'A Short History of Rona' (2010) is immediately striking in its monumentality and in Maclean's extraordinary crafting of the composition. Like the finest work by Anselm Kiefer it inspires a visceral and contemplative reaction in the viewer, evocative of human history and ritual. The delicate tracery and weight of marble define the outer surfaces with the central panel grounded in lead, the inner receptacle containing a fish tailed figure with ceremonial stones beneath, ancient in their origin. In the lower horizontal panel a series of five leaden eggs polished as if touched ceremonially by generations of human hands are hybridised with found natural and man-made materials: barnacles embedded copper wire and bone. The fusion of these elements is utterly seamless with a delicacy and precious vulnerability that is timelessly human. 'A Short History of Rona' brings together a lifetime's understanding of pictorial elements and poetic language in a single work.

It is gratifying to see a superb series of the artist's drawings occupying a single wall and given appropriate space for contemplation. 'Phantoms of The Shore' (2011) is particularly fine; bird and female figure, stone and egg, seen in parallel on the shore, while a crowd and distant boat suggest departure and emigration. The variety of mark within the pencil drawing from pure linear contour to intricate concentrations of hatching surrounding the boat, leads the eye into the composition encouraging the viewer to contemplate relationships within the scene between humankind and nature, history and myth.

'Minister with Mask' (2011) is an epic drawing in mixed media; a darkened shadowy head with eyes scratched white to the paper, neck and chest simultaneously defined and obliterated by white pigment. The beak of a screaming gull aligned with the curvature of the robe and fastened at the chest like a shroud is violent in its elegance and fills the mind with sound. The vigour and stillness of the image is incredibly powerful and the viewer is acutely aware of a human hand being present in the composition, both physically and metaphorically, in the immediacy of drawn marks.

'Transom Echo' (2011) is a fascinating work, a cross section of a boat in aged wood and zinc sunk into the frame with Gaelic text visible in the upper strata. Encrusted metal and wood grain, white carapaces and bone like relics create a beautifully subtle interplay of textures and mark. It is a work in which it is hard to tell where the hand of the artist stops and nature begins. In the lower section a mouth of rotted wood with fish tails emanating from it as if fully submerged is reminiscent of Italian sculpture, of placing the hand into the dark realm of judgement and consequence. Weathered and whitewashed the delicately graded palette and assemblage of found objects create a truly multidimensional sculptural work.

'Schematic Skate' (2010) distils the artist's visual language to an extraordinary degree, creating what feels like a single drawn mark sunk into the panel in three dimensions. A combination of organic and man made forms; of science, engineering and symbol displayed on a pure white ground, the composition recalls 'Red Ley Marker' in its fusion of elements but pares them down to an essential statement in the manner of a Haiku poem. The presence of a backbone within the work is incredibly apt and reflects the integrity of the artist's work over forty decades.

That a work such as 'Window Visitation North Uist' (1980) on loan to the retrospective from the Inverness Museum and Art Gallery is not on display as part of a permanent exhibition of Highland Artists in Inverness is an outrage. Sandy Moffat in his interview with the artist as part of the *Collected Works 1970-2010* catalogue rightly acknowledges that "there is a great deal of work to be done in Scotland in terms of properly recognising and promoting our great artists – unfortunately we have inherited a legacy of shameful neglect, especially with regard to artists of the Highlands".

Although it is a great shame that these significant showcases of Will Maclean's work will not be seen in Scotland in their present form, the quality and consistency of work currently on show is inspiration in itself. Both the retrospective and *Lead and Line* demonstrate that pride in a strong, coherent visual tradition within the Scottish Highlands and Islands as a vital part of global Art History is entirely justified.

The reinvestment of power and meaning in visual expression is essentially a question of language, a language of verbal and visual images that within the Bardic tradition leads us back to the essential purpose of creativity as a source of illumination, transformation and renewal. Will Maclean's extraordinary work exemplifies the fundamental need for cultural re-evaluation as part of a living tradition and the fundamental role of the artist in altering perception. The clarity of his latest works and the depth of enquiry in terms of technique and subject over the last forty years are a joy to behold, an acknowledgement of loss but also of hope.

© Georgina Coburn, 2011