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Radical Statements in Print: The Artwork of Will Maclean at The Castle Gallery

Amongst Will Maclean's artworks in the exhibition planned to coincide with the twenty-year anniversary of The Castle Gallery in Inverness are three screen-prints from *Daniell Revisited* (1994). Maclean has altered and adapted the original hand-coloured aquatints by English artist William Daniell by inserting collaged elements of the J.W. Nicol painting *Lochaber No More* (1883) into two of the images. At the heart of his 2019 Turner Prize winning installation, amid the blacked-out screens and papier mâché worker-migrant figures, Oscar Murillo positioned the same painting, *Lochaber No More*. Murillo said that the painting was vital to his purposes because it made a connection to past migrations in the UK's history to show that notions of social movement are not 'other' or exotic but, instead, have roots in this country itself. Maclean's commitment to the political role of the artist was apparent in his early work, especially in relation to the question of forced migration. Whilst the issue of mass migration, the notions of disinherited peoples, Britain's role in the Slave Trade, the re-examination of history in popular movements like *Black Lives Matter* are now subjects of global concern, Maclean was questioning the history that had been handed down through establishment channels when he made *Daniell Revisited* back in the 1990s and this radical, interrogative impulse continues to inform his oeuvre. We see it, most recently, in The Lewis Land Struggle pieces: *Balallan Cairn*, *Aignish Cairn*, *Gress Cairn* and *An Sùileachan* (1994 – 2013), the latter designed in collaboration with Marian Leven.

The artworks of Maclean do not instantly yield up their meanings. We might read this as incoherence, but to be totally coherent they would simply reproduce what we can see. According to philosopher Ortega Y Gasset, 'The world, the Universe, is not given to the human being as a whole: only the circumstance with its uncountable contents is given'¹. Maclean's work deals with the concealed but it is not because he is interested in obscurity – quite the opposite – he is investigating reality. Reality, however, is something which is oftentimes concealed: it can only be 'unconcealed' by art. He deals in absences: the absence of a people, a culture, a language, a community, a way of being; and it is to this absence that his work serves at once as lament and homage. All of his work bears witness to a sense of loss.

When we examine the prints in the Castle Gallery Collection – eight from the suite of etchings *A Night of Islands* (1991), twelve screen-prints from *A Catechism of the Laws of Storms* (2014) and three screen-prints from *Daniell Revisited* – we are drawn to attempt to characterise the visual language which links these very different pieces. There is a strong sense of what has become known as the intertextual – that is, that the meaning of one signifier or image is clarified in its relation to another signifier. Maclean takes the Daniell print *Pier at Tanera Loch Broom* from its original publication, *Voyage Round the Coast of Britain* (1814), and makes alterations to it. The assertoric claims of Daniell's original idyll of man and nature in tranquil harmony are de-stabilised by reinstating the 'voices' of the disinherited Highlanders of Wester Ross.

The pieces from *A Night of Islands* reveal another aspect of Maclean's intertextual exploration, but here with the added intensity of the poetic image. The artist pays tribute to the elements that make up the Highland Gaelic culture that he is directly descended from:

the language, the poems, the stories, the beliefs, and the values which have all but disappeared. *The Kings's Fish – Iasg an Rìgh* – is inspired by the traditional story collected by John Francis Campbell of Islay about a fishing competition between The King of Lochlann and Fionn. The central zinc plate is split in two by a line of acid to emphasise the division between the Nordic and the Celtic cultures. Fresh seaweed is impressed on the outer steel plate to reference the seaward setting of the tale². The story itself is symbolic but Maclean does not simply illustrate it: instead, he creates a wholly original visual metaphor by condensing elements of the narrative within a contemporary idiom. *Strathnaver* is inspired by Derick Thomson's poem which describes the eviction of an old woman from her home at the time of the Sutherland Clearances. Whilst the various elements correspond to the poem, Maclean emphasises the apex of the burning rafters of the cottage thereby transforming the image into a cross between a funeral pyre and an altarpiece. The wicker basket and sheep's horns symbolise the substitution of sheep for people and the verbal elements of the poem become intensified in the dramatic fusion with the visual.

Maclean spoke in interview about the collaboration with John Burnside which resulted in the publication *A Catechism of the Laws of Storms*: 'I came across some dis-bound copies of the Pictorial World of 1883/4 and at the same time I was interested in the theory of the *Laws of Storms* – how to navigate a sailing ship in a tropical storm. I found two books – *The Sailor's Horn Book* and *The Revised Catechism of the Laws of Storms*, made some collages with Ernst and Doré to guide me . . . I gave them titles and then gave them to John who wrote the astonishing poems for them. Only one did not work for me so I changed the image to work with the poem'³. In these collage pieces, Maclean has developed an extraordinary visual language with Surrealist reverberations where images taken from the world of maritime exploration literature are combined and juxtaposed. There are intertextual echoes of the early collages of Max Ernst and Joseph Cornell, but Maclean's relationship with the sea makes these pieces utterly distinctive. A sense of the terrors associated with the sea, particularly in the era of sail and early voyages of exploration, permeates the entire suite of collages. This sense of unpredictable menace is emphasised by identifying the various methods that were used to predict or prophecy approaching storms. Alongside this menace, there is something else, something of what we might call 'malevolence' or 'sinister purpose'. Burnside's warning of the need to watch the sea 'for signs of Predation' in his *Vision of the Hydromancer* is especially chilling⁴. The traditional belief that 'the dead are with us still' is communicated throughout the sequence and makes for one of the strongest links between Maclean's images and Burnside's poems⁵. The distinctive frisson of these pieces is due largely to the effect of the 'uncanny' achieved by the doll-like stiffness of the figures and the emphatic rhythmical life of the sea which does appear to 'prowl' about the world of the living and the dead.

The sinister associations of the sea are at the forefront of one of Maclean's most recent commissions in 2019 (again a collaborative installation with Leven and, also, with Arthur Watson). The bronze wreath sculpture located at Stornoway Harbour marks the centenary of the catastrophic foundering of the *Iolaire HMY* in January 1919 when 201 men lost their lives within metres of the shore. Along with the land artworks on the island, this piece is only the latest illustration of the way that Maclean has continued with remarkable consistency and commitment to engage with the culture of the Highland Gaelic community. If we refer back to *As an Fhearann* (1986), the unforgettable An Lanntair/Third Eye Centre

Exhibition marking the centenary of the Crofting Act, Alexander Moffat wrote, '[p]erhaps the most meaningful and sustained body of work on the theme of Highland life, both past and present, by an artist living and working today is by Will Maclean'⁶. We can now confidently remove the word 'perhaps' from that statement.

**Lindsay Blair,
December 2020.**

¹ <https://www.ettorredabel.com/OrtegayGasset/english/Introduction-Ortega.htm>

² Maclean, W. in 'The Melding of Art and Literature: A Night of Islands', *Will Maclean: Cardinal Points* (North Dakota, 2001), 31.

³ Maclean, W. Interview with Blair, L. 2015.

⁴ Burnside, J. and Maclean, W. *A Catechism of the Laws of Storms* (London, 2014), 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶ Moffat, A. 'Beyond the Highland Landscape', Maclean, M. and Carrell, C (eds), *As an Fhearann / From the Land* (Edinburgh, 1986), 68.