

OWNERS OF THE SOIL

WILL MACLEAN

SHAUN FRASER

EDINBURGH

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29 JULY - 28 AUGUST 2021

GERARD CARRUTHERS WRITES: Clearance. Colonialism. Empire. Emigration. Exile. Diaspora. Settler. Oppressor. Victim. Each word conveys huge experiences. Each is also a headline for the various judgements we make on the Scottish historical account. As prejudices change with time, we interpret and re-interpret. Once, there was a narrative of downtrodden highlanders, exiled to the Americas, who nevertheless carried across the Atlantic the seeds of civilisation, enlightening terra incognita. Thomas Campbell (1777-1844) expressed such an idea in his long poem, *Gertrude of Wyoming*, marvelling at how the one-time victim became a symbol of freedom:

Who taught those sires of empire yet to be,
To plant the tree of life, to plant fair Freedom's tree!

The moral currency of our own time repudiates the notion that the white man brought civilisation to non-European continents. But we can still hear echoes of British supremacy in the idea of Westminster as the mother of parliaments, or our zealous promotion of conflicting human rights. The Scottish experience pulses through our confused judgementalism. Fleeing Jacobites were our indigenous persecuted tribespeople, or they were tenants betrayed for sheep, or they were slavers in the Caribbean, or they were battalions of fighting Jocks, conquering "new" lands. Truths and stereotypes go hand-in-hand. What do we really know of individual human beings in these situations? If we did know, we would no doubt condemn some and sympathise with others. But we are often more in love with collective stories, made via group symbols: the big account.

When we judge the past, we presume to understand it, often with all too much certainty. We dethrone the previously respected, we rehabilitate the once-despised, we find out the real bad guys. Our histories can never be settled. But artistic reprisal may be more self-examining, challenging the senses, including that centre of combined senses, the mind. Instances of creative settling can become creatively unsettling: for instance, Shaun Fraser meditating on the colonial reiteration of Scottish places in Canada, which had prior first nation Mi'kmaq names, and practicing his own "redrawn territories" in response, asking his own unsettling questions, refusing simplicity.





The grace notes and fragments of incidents essayed in Will Maclean's art are symptomatic of broken diasporic experience. In such circumstances, human identity has to be recuperated and remade, but not made whole again. Were we ever whole? Aesthetically, we may be better attuned to the uneven, the impure and the broken. In Scottish terms, we might think of the New Zealand novelist Keri Hulme (b.1947), of Maori and Orcadian ancestry, mixing Celtic and Maori mythic elements in her work. Or less harmoniously, the essayist Hugh MacLennan (1907-70), highlighting the acrimony of indigenous groups in Canada. When are we "at home" or "in exile" or merely free-booting? Thinking about diaspora through artistic expression, we find difficult truths and shifting realities.

Whatever the moral conflicts of the Scottish diasporic experience, one thing may be claimed quite neutrally: that it involves transformation. In his "Elegy for Angus Macdonald of Cnoclinn", one of the great poets of Scottish descent, the Australian Les Murray (1938-2019) sums up how the "savages" became the "settlers" and the displaced became the displacers.

Exile's a rampart, sometimes, to the past,
a distiller of spirit from bruised grains;
this is the meaning of the New World.

Is the "rampart" of exile an offensive or defensive condition? Whisky and human spirit are distilled out of the hard old world. This seems to make poetic sense, but Murray's tongue is always eloquently reaching for his cheek. The "New World", that western-centric concept, is spun so that it relates to art and experience. What is solid about our knowledge of our ancestry, of ourselves? Not very much. We play with received ideas, with symbols, but if we wish to challenge our own place we need to reach for new perspectives, not be bound by the past, nor to settle it.

As Les Murray did, Shaun Fraser and Will Maclean draw aesthetic capital from the experience of diaspora, revealing a painfully converting currency.

Gerard Carruthers

Francis Hutcheson Professor of Scottish Literature, University of Glasgow

Left: Will Maclean RSA, Grace Notes, 2020

signed; titled and inscribed 'Kenneth Maclean' on artist's label verso; collage and acrylic . 6 ½ x 5 ½ inches

WILL MACLEAN This group of work is based on the narratives of six native Gaelic speakers who were born in the late 19th and early 20th centuries on the shores of Loch Broom in the village Polbain, Coigach, Ross-shire.

They were from three large families of Macleans, MacLeods, and Campbells. It was accepted that they would have to leave their homes to find a living away from the Highlands either to travel south in the UK or overseas. Mary Ross and Alexander Campbell settled in New Zealand, Rhoda Maclean in Australia, Alexander Maclean and Kenneth Maclean in North America and Murdo Macleod in South Africa.

Scottish historian John Smith, commenting on the Education Act (Scotland) 1872 stated, “Emigration, whether voluntary or enforced was strongly encouraged by education and the losses caused in this way very often of the youngest and the best were irreplaceable and are nowadays simply incalculable.”

Duncan Mackenzie, a Crofter of Coigach, is quoted in the 1883 Napier Commission, a public inquiry into the condition of crofters in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland: “Now I am an old man and I have no family - they have taken wings and flown away they were not of such a kind as would remain in this place”.

Will Maclean
Emeritus Professor of Fine Art, University of Dundee



Upper right: Will Maclean RSA, *Album of Rowans*, 2020
 signed; titled and inscribed 'Mary Ross' on artist's label verso; collage and acrylic . 6 ½ x 5 ½ inches

Lower right: Will Maclean RSA, *Letters from Kimberley*, 2020
 signed and titled on artist's label verso; found objects and mixed media on board . 14 ½ x 18 ¼ x 2 inches



Above: Will Maclean RSA, *Incident at Mazuma (2)*, 2020
signed, titled and dated 2020; inscribed 'For Alexander Maclean' on artist's label verso; pencil . 22 x 29 ½ inches

Upper right: Will Maclean RSA, *Incident at Mazuma*, 2020,
signed; titled and inscribed 'Alexander Maclean' on artist's label verso; collage and acrylic . 6 ½ x 5 ½ inches

Lower right: Will Maclean RSA, *The Tailor of Tonopah*, 2020,
signed; signed and titled on artist's label verso; found objects and mixed media on board . 14 ½ x 18 ¼ x 2 inches

SHAUN FRASER My work comments upon notions of identity and connections with place. Growing up in the north of Scotland, landscape, and in particular big landscapes, have always been bound closely to my notion of self. By incorporating peat and other organic matter the work holds an innate link to the locality which it draws upon and evokes that sense of place.

Works in this most recent undertaking are diverse and utilise a variety of processes but bound up in all of this is landscape and people – their physical and emotional interplay. When asked to consider aspects of diaspora my thoughts settled quickly upon maritime Canada and the region's strong historic bond with the Scottish Highlands. I spent an period of time in eastern Canada in 2013 when I was taking part in an artist residency on Cape Breton island.

One of the most profound influences of Scottish settlement I found in maritime Canada was the dominance of place names which mirror those found in Scotland; Uigg, Iona, New Perth, Argyle Shore, Inverness, Stornoway etc. These are often locations, territories, terrains which already possessed First Nation Mi'kmaq titles.

Ties which continue to endure across the North Atlantic, make me question the attachment to place and to ask, to whom do these places belong?

Upper right: Shaun Fraser, *Redrawn Terrain: New Argyle, Prince Edward Island*, 2020 signed, titled and dated '20; pressed monoprint with ink and soil . 11 ½ x 16 ½ inches

Lower right: Shaun Fraser, *Redrawn Terrain: New Perth, Prince Edward Island*, 2020 signed, titled and dated '20; pressed monoprint with ink and soil . 11 ½ x 16 ½ inches

Overleaf: Shaun Fraser, *Ach An Cuan: The Atlantic Series (Part 2)*, 2017 cast glass with metal oxide and soil . 33 ½ x 31 ½ x 14 inches







WILL MACLEAN

Will Maclean's art spans drawing, sculpture and collage with an emphasis on boxed constructions. He attended Gray's School of Art, Aberdeen (1961-65) and then the British School in Rome in 1966. He has exhibited widely since 1967 and is an Emeritus Professor at the University of Dundee, having begun teaching at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design in 1981. He was elected as an Academician of the Royal Scottish Academy in 1991, and awarded an MBE for services to Education and the Arts in 2005. His work is in public collections through Britain and North America.

SHAUN FRASER

Shaun Fraser is a sculptor and visual artist based in the Scottish Highlands. A graduate of the Royal College of Art (2015-2017) and Edinburgh College of Art (2008-2012) specialising in ceramics and glass, he has been featured in exhibitions internationally and has received awards, grants and residencies in recognition of his work.

View the exhibition online at thefineartsociety.com

For sale enquiries, please contact the gallery at:
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Left: Shaun Fraser, *Mòine* series, 2017; cast glass with peat . various dimensions

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