

WILL MACLEAN Gleaned and Gathered



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ART FIRST

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‘Practitioners . . .
are wanderers, wayfarers, whose
skill lies in their ability to find the
grain of the world’s becoming and
to follow its course while bending
it to their evolving purpose.’

Tim Ingold, ‘The Textility of Making’, *Being Alive*.
Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description, 2011,
Routledge, Oxford, p.211

The three times of Will Maclean

On the 7th September 2014, whilst this text was in preparation, Canadian marine archaeologists made the significant discovery from the 1840s of one of Sir John Franklin's lost boats, either the HMS *Erebus* or HMS *Terror*, lying just eleven metres below the water in the Victoria Strait in the Arctic territory of Nunavut. The sonar image of the ghostly wooden hull on the seabed, sent around the world by the Canadian media, looked uncannily like a relief sculpture by Will Maclean, redolent as it was with narratives of seafaring, navigation, history, tragedy and archaeology. Thinking about it further, I believe the Franklin discovery encapsulates something even more fundamental in the art of Will Maclean that I wish to explore in this essay accompanying his remarkable new exhibition, *Gleaned and Gathered*. It is the sense that Maclean's art, like the wreck now discovered, reveals three very particular kinds of time that merge together in rich and complex ways—these are what I will call 'historic time', 'craft time' and 'mineral time'.

The First Time: Historic

The loss of Franklin's boats in 1845 resulted in the painful and extended death of 129 crew members, as they scattered over the ice sheet, and a 169 year search that is still not over. Yet another maritime tragedy is the prompt for one of Maclean's major pieces in this show, *A Candle for Lübeck* (2014). This tragedy was particularly poignant because it took place only one day

before the formal end of the Second World War, when the RAF bombed three prison ships lying in the Baltic port of Lübeck, near Hamburg, including the luxury liner *SS Cap Arcona*, which contained 5,000 people mainly held there from the concentration camps. Almost all lives were lost. Maclean's relief sculpture, his homage to the event, includes a candle found during the time when the artist visited Lübeck with friends, alongside a fighter airplane model from Prague and a toy metal boat from a Monopoly set. Historic time, and the sense that this work comes from a memorialising emotion felt strongly by the artist, dominates our reading of *A Candle for Lübeck* but in the chalky whiteness of the treatment and the bold, open layout of the composition, there is also a dancing emptiness that suggests that other responses, not so firmly tied to the moments of 1945, are also possible and welcome.

A second major piece is *Mariner's Museum/Taxonomy of Tides* (2014), quieter in mood and indebted to another type of 'historic time' that enthusiasts of Maclean's work will readily recognise—the time of the museum. We see a tableaux of five boxes, in double-page spread formats, each holding various assemblages of circular devices, model whales, hull profiles, branch-like curiosities and the like. Maclean draws here on formative years spent in the local museum in Inverness and later in places such as the Pettigrew Museum in St Andrews University—maritime life, archaeological finds and natural histories all drawn together in delicate taxonomies and ghostly tableaux, underlined by the sketchy pencil lettering and drawing that punctuates the work's surface, that have become something of the artist's trademark.

Mariner's Museum/Taxonomy of Tides, 2014, mixed media construction, 123 × 108 × 9.5 cm



The Second Time: Craft

What I call ‘craft time’, sitting as it does in between the historic and the mineral, is a key middle region for Maclean—naturally enough given that seafaring peoples are habitually familiar with the fluid territories between land and sea (and their concomitant associations with order and chaos, security and risk, home and work life). The artist’s formative occupation as a member of the merchant navy has clearly stayed with him in obvious and perhaps more subtle ways. One example of this is Maclean’s interest in a classic maritime book by Captain John MacNab, enticingly called *The Revised Catechism of the Law of Storms. For the use of sea officers* (1920 edition), and which has directly informed works in this exhibition such as *Navigator’s Box/Stormfinder* (2013) and *On the Law of Storms* (2014). Such handbooks seek to make a craft of storm navigation using set formulations to offer safe passage for ships caught in dangerous weather. The idea of storms observing laws captures the perfect strangeness of how a human code crafted to help to save lives at risk sits between environmental flows of the weather (mineral time) and the maritime industries (historic time). This kind of data-rich book can also be seen as another kind of crafted object that always features in Maclean’s art and which generously fills his own studio—the instruments and tools usually of nautical or hunting origin gleaned and gathered from around the world. Objects born from the utilities and exigencies of fishing, dwelling and living generally fill his world and provide a seemingly endless vocabulary for him to draw upon. There is always a sense of ‘at handness’ with the tools and instruments that feature in Maclean’s work such as *Thoughts of Time* (2013) and *Voyage of the*





Navigator's Box/Stormfinder, 2013, found objects wood & bone, 13 x 38 x 64 cm

James Caird / South Georgia (2012). These objects in their original forms saved lives, found pathways, made homes, held stories—as tools for thought and for communication. Hunting weapons (arrows, knives, spears) sit alongside navigation instruments (sextants, compasses)—repurposed into images, new family groups enfolded against each other within his sculptures, removed from their past and their uses. Maclean’s maritime heritage and early experiences mean he is likely far more attuned than many artists, and their predominantly urbanised audiences, to the specific qualities of tools, resting as they do on efficiency, sharpness, strength and construction, certainly not on aesthetics. Whilst Scottish and Highland artefacts are many in Maclean’s work, the fact is that his work has deep resonances with maritime cultures distributed in time and place all across the globe, from coastal America to the Philippines and Australasia. Craft skills upon which lives depended are not geographically specific, after all.

The Third Time: Mineral

I believe the third sense of time I have named, that of mineral time, is the most exciting new reading of Maclean. I use the word ‘mineral’ with its suitable echoes of the maritime, although ‘material’ or ‘matter’ would do just as well. Appreciating this mineral time is certainly encouraged by the joy of a studio visit to the artist where there are numerous kinds of boxes, tins, powders, fragments, fabrics, liquids, bottles and tubes, all of which are intrinsic to creating the sensuous and encrusted surfaces of his work. Certainly many of these materials have powerful ecological and ethical dimensions to them—one cannot look at whale bone or wood

Voyage of the James Caird/South Georgia, 2012, mixed media construction, 67 × 52 × 9 cm



without at least sensing the environmental freight they carry with them. The sheer materiality of his practice, and the stories embedded there, is beautifully encapsulated by the story of 'ambergris' as one of the minerals referenced within his art. This is the heavily sought after and traded substance that derives from the agglutinated and indigestible squid beaks that are deposited in the stomachs of whales as they feed in the great oceans. After being periodically excreted into the sea, the ambergris is gathered by coastal peoples, such as those who live around New Zealand, and sold on at an enormous price to the perfume manufacturers who, in their synthetic heavens, have never found as good a medium for holding and mixing scents. If ambergris is an extreme version of this journey of transformation from the ocean biosphere to the coastal gleaner to the apogee of luxurious commodification, it is nevertheless only one of many that can be seen in Maclean's work, as similar histories lie within whale bone, carved wood, wax and hammered metals. Many like these come directly from the earth or the sea though some are more industrial, such as the epoxy resin used to remodel car bodies that the artist uses to create casts of precious objects for insertion into his work. To my mind the operative terms are something like 'sedimentation' or 'crystallisation', evoking the way that fine sands, ice, pebbles and vegetation are held in river flows, moving around in suspended motion and contingency. Maybe this is the reason why the sculptural relief format works so well for Maclean, as it allows objects to float in a space where gravity has only a light hold and thus offers the sensation of flotsam cascading through water. (How appropriate that his magnificent Dundee Contemporary Art

A Candle for Lubeck 1 & 2, 2014

two part sculptural construction, mixed media & found objects, 123 x 123 x 8 cm and 83 x 45 x 23 cm





show of 2002 was entitled *Driftworks*.) In his often whited-out relief space, fragmented materials and objects not dissimilar to Franklin's tragic debris lie caught in icy suspension. As the images of Franklin's newly discovered boat indicate, all of this world is after all cast in mineral and, as we have known since the Greeks, moves through rocks, animal, vegetable and objects themselves, belying their seemingly fixed state.

Closing Time

Maclean is not alone as an artist in his passion for colliding such 'times' as I've described, and similar concerns can be seen on a global scale, both in the current international scene and in the arts and crafts of the past. Many of the contemporary artists with which Maclean feels kinship are not Scottish, such as Susan Hiller, Jimmie Durham and Christian Boltanski; their concerns are with the structures of memory, death and ritual and the ways they have devised to shape their stories, though different from Maclean's, are inspirational and reassuring to him because they have found the right stories and the right way to tell them. I believe that if we also pay due attention to the materiality to be found in *Gleaned and Gathered* we can see that Will Maclean also has found the right histories for him, the right crafted way to tell them and with a mineral, fluid logic worthy of a true seafarer.

Andrew Patrizio

Professor of Scottish Visual Culture
at Edinburgh College of Art

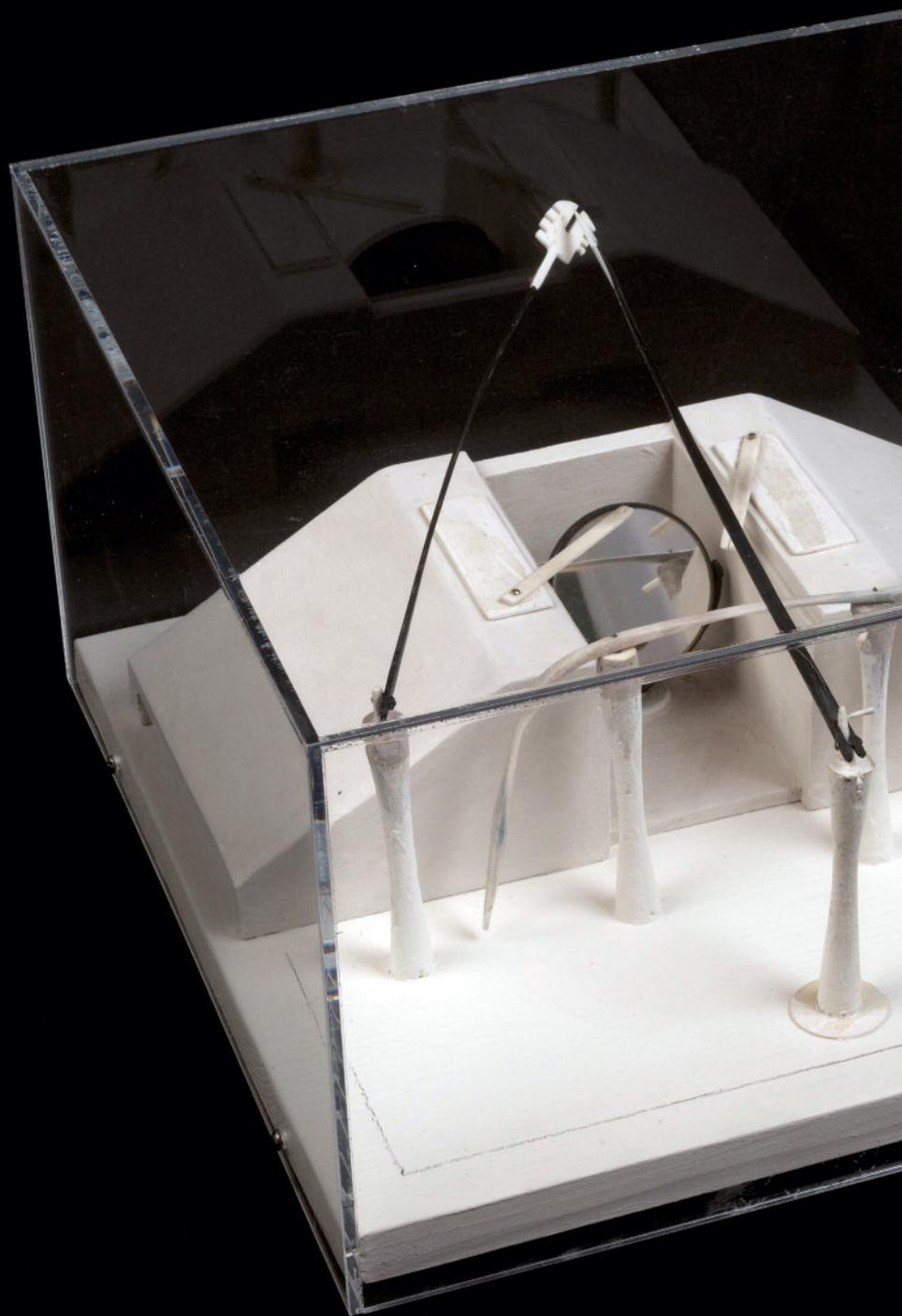
Natural Selection, 2013, mixed media construction with found objects, 74 × 58 cm

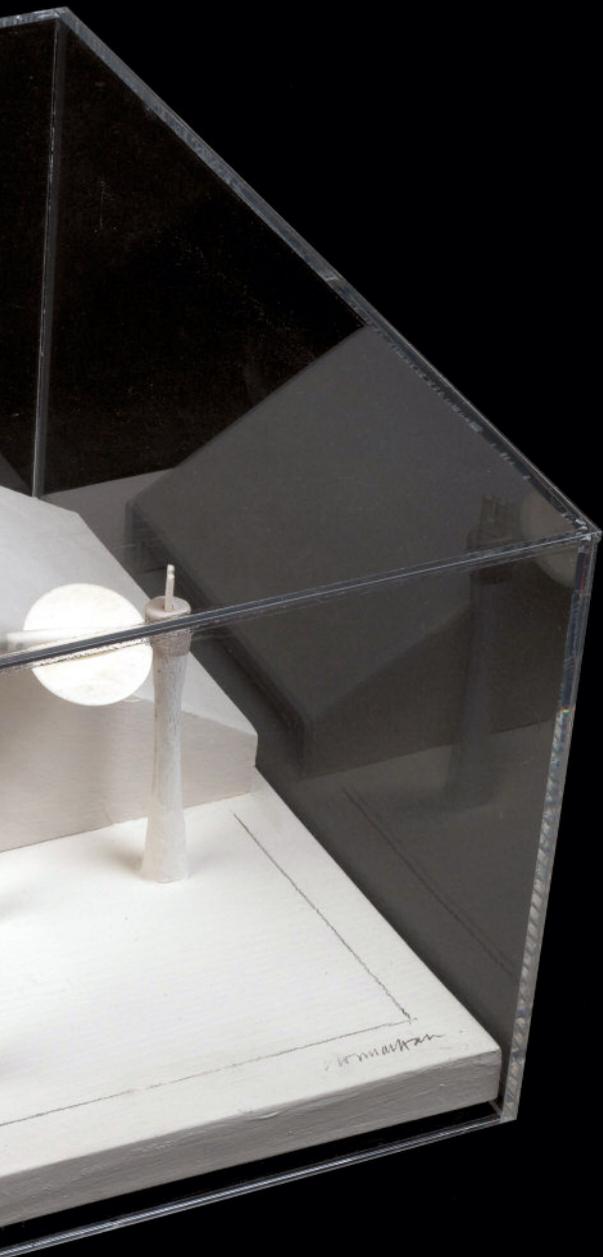


Memory Board, 2012

mixed media and found materials, 109 x 24 x 6 cm. (Shown fully on facing page and detail shown above)





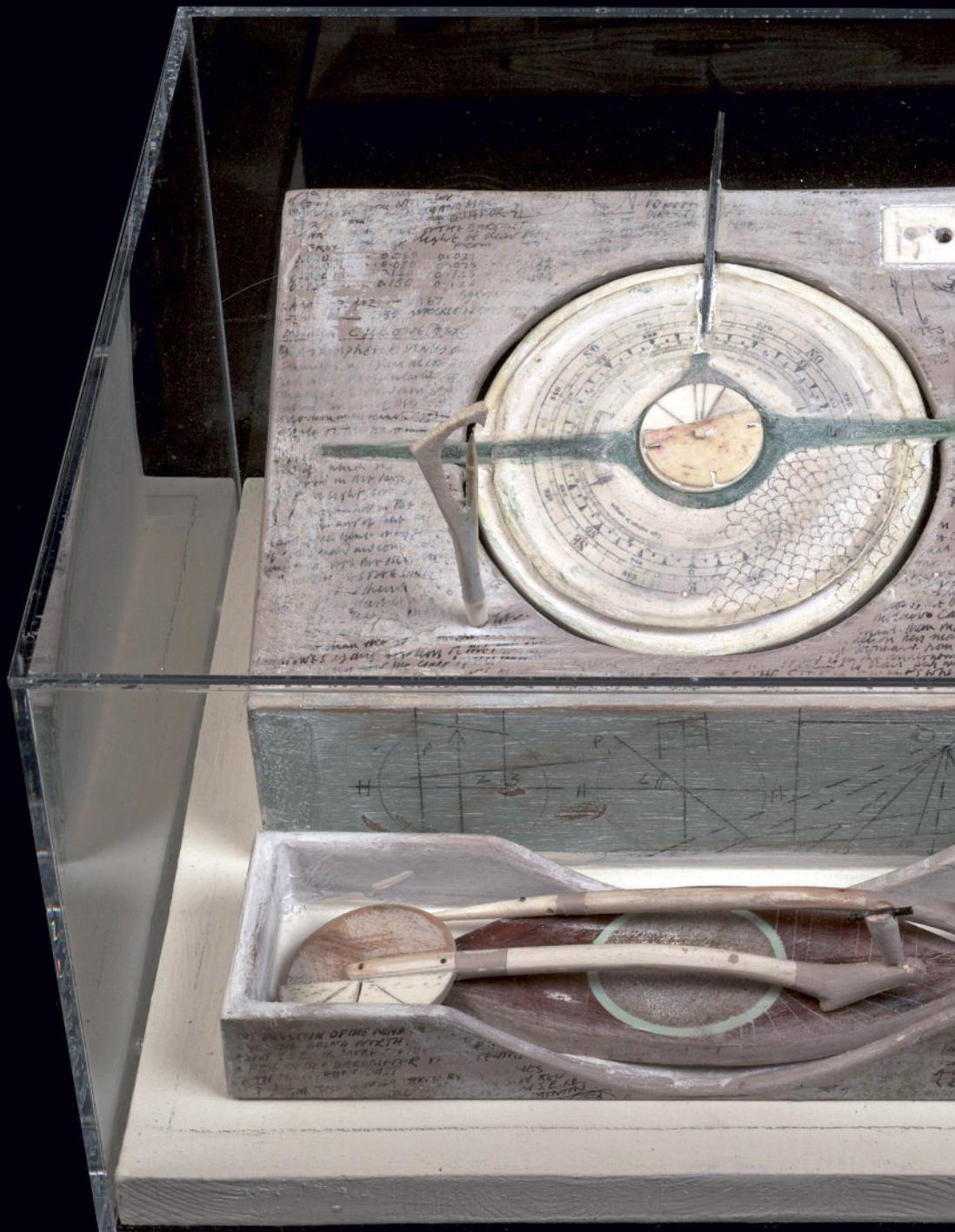


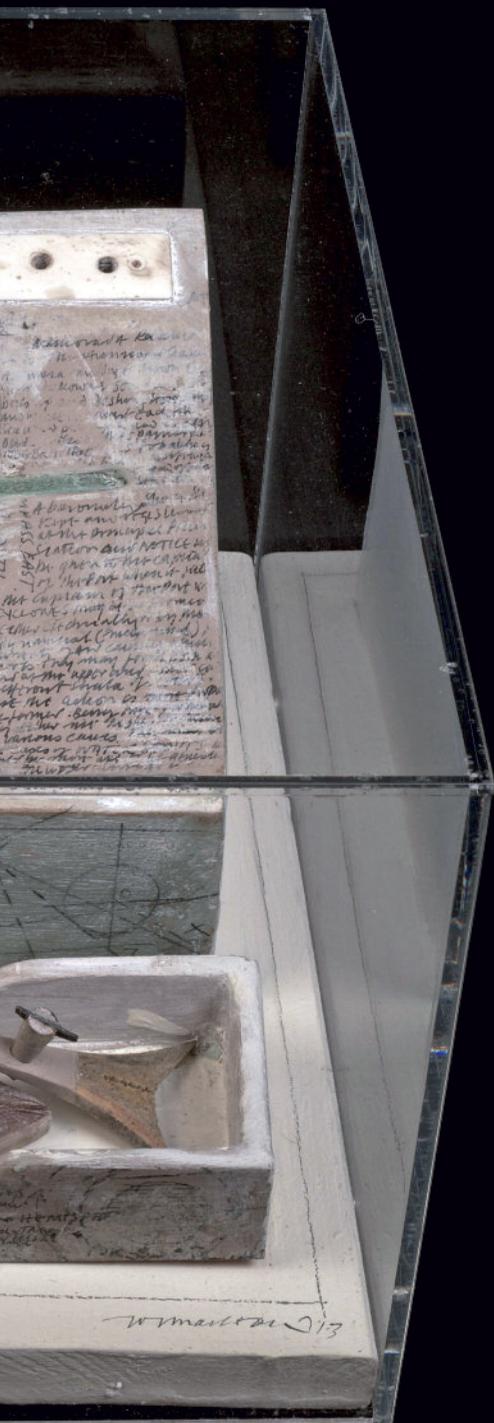
Mariner's Museum No. 1

Fictitious Sun, 2013

mixed media sculpture

30 x 30 x 20 cm





Mariner's Museum No.2

Polar Azimuth, 2013

mixed media sculpture

30 x 30 x 20 cm



Raptor Sky, 2013

mixed media on board, 32 x 26 x 7 cm



Crottle Box, 2014, acrylic and graphite on wood, 45 x 38 x 7 cm



Thoughts of Time, 2013

found objects and mixed media, 53 x 53 x 5 cm



Three Totems, 2014
graphite on gesso on paper, 57 × 75 cm



The Sacrament Allegory, 2014

graphite on gesso on paper, 56 x 77 cm



First Contact Badentarbert, 2013,
graphite on paper, 56 × 75 cm

Will Maclean Gleaned and Gathered

8th October–8th November 2014

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6-000 0.050
0-150 0.150

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