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Press release

October 2014

‘New Art, New Nature’ - Art of the Natural World Displayed in New Exhibition

A new exhibition examining the role of nature in the work of Irish and International artists over the past seventy years will open to the public this weekend (Friday 10 October) at the Ulster Museum.

New Art, New Nature includes work by world-renowned figures including Henri Matisse, William Scott and Willie Doherty. Paintings by one of Northern Ireland’s most important artists of the last century, William McKeown, will also be displayed at the museum for the first time.

The exhibition showcases how artists have responded to the beauty and energy of the natural world over the past seventy years. The display opens with two splendid textiles by Henri Matisse - *Océanie, le ciel* (Oceania, the sky) and *Océanie, la mer* (Oceania, the sea) (1946/7) and continues through the 1950s and 1960s, featuring many artists who responded to nature in unexpected and innovative ways made possible by new media and artistic practices. The exhibition also contains the *Altnagelvin Mural* (1961) by William Scott and work by Willie Doherty: a video *Segura* (2010) and new photographs *Damage* (2014).

William Scott was commissioned in 1958 to produce the *Altnagelvin Mural* (*The Four Seasons*) for Altnagelvin in Derry/Londonderry; the first National Health hospital in the United Kingdom. The work was originally intended to represent the four seasons, but gradually Scott translated the cyclical rhythms of the seasons into pure abstract forms.

Recently acquired work by William McKeown – *Untitled* (2008), a large scale abstract oil painting secured with funding from the Art Fund - the first McKeown work to enter the Ulster Museum’s collection, will also be featured. This will be displayed alongside *Waiting for the Corncrake* – 30 watercolours on paper - which were donated by the William McKeown Foundation.

Anne Stewart, Curator of Fine Art, National Museums Northern Ireland, said the exhibition is about artists' responses to nature but not in an obvious way; "We titled the exhibition 'New Art, New Nature' to reflect the new and challenging ways in which Post-war and contemporary artists have used nature in their work. Irish and international highlights include work by Henri Matisse, Francis Bacon, Siobhan Hapaska, Paul Seawright, Willie Doherty and William Scott."

Anne Stewart added, "William McKeown's work 'Untitled' is an important acquisition for the Ulster Museum and will be on display for the first time. The painting has great resonance and presence, and will sit very well with the Ulster Museum collection of post-war and contemporary painting".

Stephen Deuchar, director of the Art Fund, said: "This is the first time that the Art Fund has supported a William McKeown acquisition, and we were struck by the sheer physical presence of his painting, which we can see will have great impact once on public display. McKeown's time in Ulster played an important role in his development as an artist, so we're glad to support the Ulster Museum in acquiring his work for the first time."

New Art, New Nature will be supported by a programme of talks which will allow various themes reflected in the exhibition to be explored. The first gallery talk on William McKeown will be delivered by Caroline Hancock, independent curator and representative of the William McKeown Foundation at the Ulster Museum on Thursday 30 October at 11am.

Caroline Hancock commented "The entry of this first major painting by William McKeown in the national collection of the Ulster Museum is of great significance for the legacy of the artists' work locally and on an international level. The William McKeown Foundation is delighted to support this acquisition with a donation of a set of watercolours, first shown in his exhibition at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin in 2008."

The exhibition runs until August 2015 and admission for both the exhibition and talk programme is free. For further information, visit www.nmni.com/um

Ends

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Notes to the editor:

William McKeown

McKeown's practice involves installation and a highly sensitive form of abstract painting that is deeply embedded in his early experiences of nature and landscape on his family's farm in County Tyrone. During the mid-1990s he worked as a weaver on a residency at the Ulster Folk & Transport Museum and he has spoken eloquently about how these experiences affected his development as a painter. McKeown studied at Central/St Martin's School of Art & Design, London, Glasgow School of Art and the University of Ulster at Belfast and for a number of years lived and worked in Dublin and then Edinburgh.

His work engages with the more delicate, indefinable qualities of nature, in particular the sky and the air above and around us, often with an emphasis on the emergence of daylight as experienced in the morning hours. His paintings are built up from thin washes of paint applied to meticulously prepared supports, allowing such variables as the drying time of different layers to affect the subtle range of minimal incident on the finished painting.

In a lecture delivered at the Irish Museum of Modern Art on 9 December in 2008, William McKeown said: *"Many aspects of the craft of my painting come from textiles. I originally studied textiles and my father's grandfather grew flax for the huge Northern Irish linen industry of the 19th century. As a small boy I sat on the little wall that dammed the stream to create the flax hole, where originally flax was retted in order to get at the linen core, and watch newts and frogs plop in and out of the water. Years later when I was weaving linen on a damask handloom at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum busloads of lively kids from inner Belfast would pour into the weavers cottage block out any natural light from the two small windows (the cottage has no electricity) hang precariously over the wooden barrier that separated me from them and chirpily ask "What are ye knitting". But weaving, an exquisite, laborious and meditative process becomes like life. When I would press my foot down on the pedal, the warp threads (would) lift and create a space. This space, which constantly moves forward in front of you, is the present. It is open, expectant, positive, formless and opaque. I would throw the shuttle across and weave the weft thread in; suddenly it was form, structure, the past, history. This space is the contemporary and it is in this space that we move forward as a collective humanity. This is the space I try to paint, which, of course, you can't really do, that's what makes it so interesting. The length of cloth is a life and when it is finished and there is no possibility left, even though it may be very beautiful, it is dead."*

(Unpublished extract. Copyright William McKeown Foundation)

William McKeown died in 2011 at the age of 49.

The Art Fund

The Art Fund is the national fundraising charity for art, helping museums to buy and show great art for everyone. Over the past 5 years we've given over £26m to help museums and galleries acquire works of art for their collections and placed hundreds of gifts and bequests, from ancient sculpture and treasure hoards to Old Master paintings and contemporary commissions, with 25% of grants going towards works by living artists. We also help museums share their collections with wider audiences through supporting a range of tours and exhibitions, including the national tour of the Artist Rooms collection and the 2014 tour of Jeremy Deller's English Magic, the British Council commission for the 2013 Venice Biennale. Our support for museums extends to the Art Guide app – the comprehensive guide to seeing art across the UK, promoting a network of nearly 700 museums and galleries throughout the country, and the £100,000 Art Fund Prize for Museum of the Year – an annual celebration of the best of UK museums, won in 2014 by Yorkshire Sculpture Park in Wakefield. We are independently funded, the majority of our income coming from over 105,000 members who, through the National Art Pass, enjoy free entry to over 220 museums, galleries and historic houses across the UK, as well as 50% off entry to major exhibitions.

Find out more about the Art Fund and the National Art Pass at www.artfund.org.

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